# Student Retention in Online Education

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## INTRODUCTION

Successful program completion in an online education context is a combination of learner attributes, the university's focus on meeting the needs of the students, and providing a quality educational product. This article focuses on the needs of the online student and how a program can provide the educational services that promote student retention. By recognizing distance education student needs and putting strategies into place to best meet those needs, programs can have a high course and program completion rate to meet accreditation standards and provide financial stability for the institution.

## BACKGROUND

The primary role of a student is to learn. This requires attention to planning, the ability to analyze and solve problems, and the inner drive to persist with the learning. These tasks can easily be challenged when barriers to successful learning are presented. Add the element of online education, and the process of student learning can become even more complex, sometimes leading to unsuccessful course and program completion. With efforts to offer quality, learner-centered education, institutions need to have certain strategies in place to promote student success via learning and degree completion. This article will examine the literature to determine the demographics and attributes of successful distance education students in the online environment and the barriers that may prevent success. A variety of strategies that are suggested by researchers will be discussed. Several gaps in the current literature discovered in studying student retention issues will be summarized, and the need for

a strategic plan to address student attrition will be presented.

This article will discuss student retention as it relates to education programs that offer curriculum content completely by Internet-based delivery mechanisms. Online education utilizes the Internet to transmit course material and communication between the teacher and students. Augmented by textbooks and study guides, online students frequently participate in synchronous and asynchronous communication to build concepts, share ideas, and analyze problems. With online programs, all learning activities are completed at a distance, meaning that little or no face-to-face contact is utilized during the delivery of the program curriculum.

Retention can be defined in a variety of ways. Martinez (2003) describes it as "the number of learners or students who progress from one part of an educational program to the next" (p. 3). It can be defined by some academic institutions to be relevant to program completion (Kerka, 1988). For others, retention is successful when students are able to retain information learned in a course. Kerka (1995) reports that retention is "to keep learners in programs until they achieve their goals" (p. 1).

Attrition is the opposite of retention. Student attrition is the falling off or stoppage of coursework and degree progression that results in a decrease in the number of learners or students engaged in some course of study. This is the student that, for some reason, decides to drop out of a degree program, does not persist in a course, or withdraws from a university.

Retention of adult students in online programs is a persistent and perplexing problem for providers of adult education. *With online learning, there is a greater likelihood that a student will not complete courses and stay enrolled in an online program than in an on-campus course* (Palloff &

Pratt, 2001). *Student dropout rates in online courses are as high as 35% to 50%, as compared to traditional classes* (Lynch, 2001). With poor retention rates, there are financial implications, accreditation concerns, and the negative impact on reputation. Institutions spend significant resources in attracting and admitting students. When these students leave the institution without completing a degree, this could be considered a loss in an investment by a college or university. Successfully reducing the dropout rate and stabilizing enrollments allows for better allocation of delivery resources, as well as providing improved return on investment (Martinez, 2003). There is a financial loss also to the student who does not complete a degree program, but at the same time incurs tuition costs for courses but minimum long-term financial gain in the way of a higher salary, the common result of degree attainment.

Accreditation bodies place considerable emphasis on accountability regarding the quality of education (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2000). One standard that accrediting bodies frequently track is the rate of course and program completion. A low rate of student retention can be a red flag signaling poor quality education that is not meeting the needs of the student. With poor completion rates, institutions are at risk of losing accreditation or being placed on probation. This act would again have financial implications, considering that many federal student loan programs are tied to maintaining a good accreditation rating.

Efforts to provide courses to a broader number of students are seen as a way to be more competitive in the market for new students, and offers increased financial security for universities losing governmental appropriations (Scott, 1999). In this drive for increased use of technology to deliver course materials, efforts to recognize the needs of the student have not always been in the forefront of planning. With limited research in the elements of quality online education, there were initial concerns with the low retention rates in distance education courses. Administrators and faculty were left wondering: 1) Who are the distance education students and what problems do they face? 2) What do they need in order to be successful? and 3) How can institutions offer an educational product that is satisfying and leads to student success? Over the last 15 years,

research results have started to answer these questions. With a focus on online course delivery, more attention is being placed on learner-centered approaches that can help to retain students (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). One way to be more focused on the learner is to first examine their attributes and the challenges they face as students

## Who Are Distance Education Learners and What Barriers Do They Face?

Many distance education learners are older, and have jobs and families (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright & Zvacek, 2003). They must be able to coordinate the various aspects of their lives in order to have dedicated time for studying (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Role conflict, time management, family problems, and economic concerns can all be barriers to online learning. An adult learner may underestimate the commitment required to completing a degree or not properly anticipate the level of student responsibilities needed to be successful.

The accelerated pace of online learning can require assignments due every week, and burnout could become a problem. It would be easy for a student to take a break from coursework and then never return. A student that procrastinates is particularly vulnerable and quickly overwhelmed as assignment dates come and go with little progress toward completion.

Many learners returning to school are doing so for career-related reasons (Fjortoft, 1995). Their goal is to increase their earning potential, gain more career satisfaction, or seek a promotion. Some take courses to broaden their education but are not really interested in completing a degree. This voluntary participation can influence the effort one puts toward course or degree completion (Salih, 2003). A student that is not able to maintain motivation and strong attention to the goals being sought is going to have a difficult time focusing on school work, especially in light of the competing responsibilities of work and family.

Many have been away from formal education and studying for a length of time. They may be unsure of themselves and the ability to perform academically (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). This lack of confidence may be from bad previous experiences or a significant number of years away from

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