Chapter XXXVIII
Understanding the Online Learner

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of distance education programs has allowed institutions of higher education to be successful in their collective mission to make educational programs more accessible to adults who normally would not have that access. Indeed, online learning has brought education to the people. Access to school is now as simple as logging on to the Internet in the privacy of one's own home. Who are these students taking courses online? Why are they in online courses versus traditional classrooms? What is different about them, about their situations, and their expectations? Why are some online learners successful and others not? Why do some online learners continue to work through programs while others drop out? For online learning programs to be successful in the long term, it is important to have a thorough understanding of the online learner. This chapter examines the adult online learner in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Providing access to educational programs has been touted as a main reason for the expansion of distance education programs at all levels. A study conducted by Allen and Seaman (2006) surveyed chief academic officers at institutes of higher education, and found "an overwhelming level of agreement" (p. 10) with the statement "Online education reaches students not served by face-to-face programs" (p. 10). A National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) report detailed reasons why institutions of higher learning offered distance education programs. Almost 70 percent of institutions surveyed indicated that increasing student access (in a variety of ways) was an important goal of their distance education programs (NCES, 2002). That access was in the form of (in order of most popular response) making courses available at convenient locations, reducing time constraints for course taking, and making educational opportunities more afford-

able for students. That same NCES report notes that in 2001, 55 percent of all two- and four-year college-level credit-granting institutions offered distance education courses either at the undergraduate or graduate/professional level. At the time the study was completed, another 12 percent of all institutions surveyed were planning to start offering distance education options within the next three years (NCES, 2002). Institutions of higher education have been successful in their collective mission to make educational programs more accessible, and planned expansions in online options will continue to increase the availability of these educational opportunities.

Online learning has brought education to the people. But who are the people? Access to school is now as simple as logging on to the Internet in the privacy of one's own home. Courses, and even entire degree programs can be completed without the student ever having set foot on campus. Who are these students taking courses online? Why are they in online courses versus traditional classrooms? What is different about them, their situations, and their expectations? Why are some online learners successful and others not? Why do some online learners continue to work through programs while others drop out? In order for online learning programs to be successful from the standpoint of both the learner and the educational institution, it is important to have a thorough understanding of the online learner.

This chapter examines the adult online learner, focusing specifically on adult online learners in higher education. It draws from a variety of research reports and scholarly works, as well as from raw data collected by the author. Because an effective way to understand these learners is by hearing their voices, qualitative data gathered from online learners themselves will be presented. Their thoughts, conclusions, and beliefs have been woven through the chapter. Just as there is no single way to describe all adult learners, there is no single way to describe all adult online learn-

ers. However, there are some commonalities and similarities that will be presented here, along with differences and contradictions. In presenting all of the aforementioned, it is hoped that a general portrait of the online learner emerges.

BACKGROUND

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that in the 1999-2000 school year, eight percent of all undergraduate students participated in distance education, and of that number, almost one third were enrolled in entirely online programs (NCES, 2002). "Moderately or highly nontraditional students were more likely than either traditional students or minimally nontraditional students both to participate in distance education and to be in programs available entirely through distance education" (NCES, 2002, p. 10). A more recent study conducted by The Sloan Consortium (2007) reported that approximately 3.5 million higher education students took at least one online course during the fall 2006 term. That number represents almost 20 percent of all U.S. higher education students, and is a 9.7 percent increase over the same time period in 2005. The study concludes that the number of online learners will continue to grow, although not at the strong pace seen in the past few years. The Consortium found that while almost all types of institutions of higher learning grew in terms of online student participation, the highest growth rates were found at two-year associate-degree institutions (The Sloan Consortium, 2007).

As noted previously, the providing of access is touted as a factor in the growth and expansion of online learning programs. Many times online students are also referred to as nontraditional students and it is true that the phrase "nontraditional student" is often associated with online learning. The NCES (no date) defines nontraditional students as follows:

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