Chapter 14
Strategies for Teaching Online Higher Education Courses With an Eye Towards Retention:
Choosing a Culturally Responsive Path

Annette Baron
William Paterson University, USA

Kelly McNeal
William Paterson University, USA

ABSTRACT

Online courses and programs have increased in enrollment across diverse demographics due to their accessibility and flexibility. Faculty roles currently include a commitment to meeting the learning needs of a diverse online classroom in order to positively impact student outcomes and retention. Engagement and retention are fostered when online communities support culturally relevant pedagogy that includes multimedia learning and assessment, choice, and interactive, guided dialoguing where students can express their personal cultural discourse and integrate their learning with their own cultural stance.

INTRODUCTION

The number of online courses offered at institutions of higher education has grown as universities seek to attract and retain a larger pool of students (National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), 2014). It was reported in 2015 that more than one in four students (28%) were taking at least one online course. This amounted to nearly six million students nationwide who were involved in online learning, which represented an increase of more than 200,000 from the year before (Online Learning Consortium, 2015). Online courses and programs appeal to a wider demographic and, as a result, attract an increasingly larger pool of diverse students.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-7802-4.ch014

According to the NCES, the percentage of undergraduates taking distance education classes increased significantly from 2004 to 2012; 2003–2004 (16%), 2007–2008 (4%), and 2011 to 2012 (6%) (NCES, November 2015). A further analysis revealed that this increase in online offerings correlates with an increasing enrollment in online courses for a diverse pool of students across multiple ethnicities. From the 2003–2004 to the 2007–2008 school year, white student enrollment in online education increased from 16.2 to 21.9%, black student enrollment increased from 14.9 to 19.9%, Hispanic student enrollment increased from 13.4 to 16.5%, and Asian student enrollment increased from 14.0 to 18.1% (NCES, 2015).

Historically, there have been racial and ethnic disparities in higher education that have created both enrollment and earning gaps (Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development, 2016).

Online courses and programs are more accessible and therefore appeal to a wider demographic. As a result, online offerings play an important role in elevating student retention outcomes. However, as the growth in online learning continues, retention of students in online programs and courses needs to be critically examined. Of particular concern is the retention rate of students in online programs. Brown, Keppell, Hughes, Hard & Smith (2013) noted that while online learning in higher education continues to grow faster than rates for face to face courses, retention rates for online programs are lower than that of on-campus programs. Retaining a diverse pool of students is paramount to ensuring that students complete programs in a timely fashion.

Practicing culturally responsive pedagogy in online learning environments can positively impact students' learning as well as student retention. Ladson-Billings (1994) defined culturally relevant pedagogy as one "that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (pp. 16–17). Gay (2010) supports Ladson-Billings' definition and defined culturally responsive teaching as "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (p. 31). This chapter's objective is to discuss strategies for incorporating culturally relevant teaching practices in higher education online learning environments.

BACKGROUND

The purpose of this portion of the chapter is to have the reader further their understanding of the growth of online education at institutions of higher education in the United States. Distance learning in higher education can be traced back as far as 1892 when the University of Chicago as well as Pennsylvania State College both began offering correspondence courses through the mail (Dawson, 2017; Scott, 1999). Once the Internet was developed in the 1970s, distance education was transformed. Through the 1980s, Internet-based online courses and programs moved from being a research experiment to becoming globally available. The turn of the 21st Century has seen major universities adding online courses to curricula—and moving degree programs entirely online.

Distance learning continues to advance through technological and Internet advances. Technology-based distance learning methods, which utilize the Internet, include synchronous and asynchronous classrooms, open and closed broadcasts, cable, broadband, fiber optics, satellite, and wireless communications (Allen, 2017). The increase in distance learning opportunities is evident by the increase in popularity among those seeking a higher education (Sorensen & Donovan, 2017). In order to further understand the importance of culturally relevant pedagogical practices, it is important to look at the changing demographics of students taking online courses. Longitudinal NCES data (2015) in Table 1