

Chapter 11

Communication as a Retention Factor in Online Course Delivery

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ABSTRACT

Online courses have become an integrated aspect of course delivery for institutions of higher education. However, the attrition that occurs in online courses is substantially higher than in face-to-face courses. This chapter considers the influence of student communication factors in both course and degree program retention. An argument is presented related to the role of being intentional in planning and implementing communication strategies within courses and degree programs as a conduit for positively influencing completion. A second argument is that while all college/university personnel have a role in student attention, the role of faculty is significant and requires on-going professional development.

INTRODUCTION

Delivery of courses on-line is becoming commonplace for colleges and universities, partially driven by meeting the needs of many of today's college students who represent what was formally considered a non-traditional population. Rather than attending college right after high school, these students are older, working full-time, have family responsibilities, and need courses that fit into their lifestyle and time availability. These students tend to have a preference for the asynchronous world of distance education where course content is available at their convenience.

In a 2012 survey of chief academic leaders in higher education, 69.1 percent reported that offering courses online is critical to the long-term strategy of the institution (Allen & Seaman, 2013). A complicating factor is that some faculty and students are skeptical that courses offered online are high-quality, engaging, and effective instructionally. However, there is evidence that taking a course online is as effective and sometimes more effective, in meeting student learning outcomes, than face-to-face learning (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). A second complicating factor is that retention is one of the greatest challenges facing online educators and administrators (Lee & Choi, 2011). Retention rates for online courses are cited as being much lower than their face-to-face counterparts (Taylor, Dunn,

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& Winn, 2015). There has been considerable discussion in the literature about what students want in online programs and factors that contribute to and take-away from student retention; however, one area for which there is a paucity of research and discussion is the role communication plays within course infrastructure and delivery and related impact on student retention.

With attrition rates significantly higher in online courses versus face-to-face courses, the development of models to explain online retention is considered imperative (Boston, Diaz, Gibson, Ice, Richardson & Swan, 2009). The purpose of this chapter is to make an argument that on-going communication touchpoints with students can positively influence retention and that these touchpoints can be embedded in the infrastructure of not only individual courses but also in the infrastructure of online degree delivery.

BACKGROUND

“Lack of persistence in online education and its’ consequence of attrition, is an identified problem within the United States and internationally” (Hart, 2012, p. 19). Online learning, e-learning and distance education are each terms used for the process of delivering instruction in a venue other than a traditional brick and mortar setting, most often through a web-based learning management system. Simonson, Smaldino, Albright and Zvacek (2012) defined distance education as “institution based formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors” (p. 32). According to Allen and Seaman (2014), 35.5% of all students have taken at least one online course at an institution of higher education.

“For some institutions, web-based courses have been viewed as a way to attract new students, as well as to provide more convenient education options for students currently enrolled” (Lion, 2011, p. 49). Indeed, there has been an increasing demand (17%) for online courses over face-to-face courses; online program growth is considered a priority at over 80% of major institutions of higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Who are the online learners of today and what factors have been found to influence retention?

Online Learners

In the past “traditional” students were defined as those who attend college full-time immediately after high school and live on campus; however, this group of students represents only 15% of those now attending U.S. colleges; on the other hand, those students who used to be considered “non-traditional” (working parents, veterans and military personnel, and caregivers) represent 85% of U.S. college students (UPCEA, 2014). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2015), there is a “new normal” for students in higher education; 74% of all undergraduate students have at least one nontraditional characteristic. For example, 66% of college students transfer between institutions prior to degree completion; 62% work either full or part time; 43% attend college part-time; 28% have at least one dependent, 35% are enrolled in two-year colleges, and 63% are first generation students (NCES).

Although online courses can be seen as a delivery method offering greater accessibility to education, there is a price associated with this increased access. Students taking courses online may require additional support that may not be required of students in face-to-face classrooms. Student failure can lead to less chance of enrolling in future courses, whereas student success increases these chances (Simonson et

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