

Chapter 1.25

Assessing Satisfaction and Academic Locus of Control of Dropout Students in Online Learning Courses

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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies have been conducted related to dropouts from on-campus and distance education courses. However, no clear definition of dropout from academic courses was provided. Additionally, literature suggest that students attending e-learning courses dropout at substantially higher rates than their counterparts in on-campus courses. However, little attention has been given in literature for key constructs related to this difference. This chapter explores two main constructs (students' satisfaction and academic locus of control) with online learning. Results show that students' satisfaction with e-learning is a key indicator in students' decision to dropout from online learning courses. Additionally, completer students reported to have significantly higher satisfaction with online learning than students who dropped

out from the same courses. Moreover, results suggest that the academic locus of control appears to have no significant impact on students' decision to drop from online learning courses.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The growing use of Internet as a mainstream vehicle for online courses enables some educational institutions to go "campusless" (Thor & Scarafioti, 2004). The staggering increase of e-learning courses in the past decade by traditional universities has also raised concerns about the dropout rates associated with such courses (Munro, 1987; Dirkx & Jha, 1994; Parker, 1999, 2003; Ariwa, 2002; Xenos, Pierrakeas, & Pintelas,

2002; Sikora & Carrol, 2002). Literature suggests that students attending e-learning courses dropout at a substantially higher rate than their counterparts in on-campus courses (Parker, 1999). Dropout rates from online learning courses were documented around 25% to 40% as compared to 10% to 20% in on-campus courses (Dirkx & Jha, 1994; Carter, 1996; Parker, 1999, 2003; McLaren, 2004). More dramatic results were reported for online training centers where more than 50% of learners dropped out compared to only 10% in standard on-site training (Zielinski, 2000). Moreover, even before the Internet became a major educational delivery vehicle, estimates of dropouts from distance and correspondence education range from 25% to 60% (Kember, 1989a, 1989b; Wilkinson & Sherman, 1989; Dirkx & Jha 1994). Nevertheless, little attention has been given in literature to the key factors associated with such substantial differences in dropout rate in the context of online learning (Parker, 1999). Fjortoft (1995) suggested that further research needs to expand beyond the current models of dropout and look at other factors and their interrelations as the nature of distance education is ever changing.

Several hypothetical explanations have been raised to indicate why the dropout rate in e-learning courses is higher. There is a clear consensus in literature that dropping out, especially in distance education, is a perplexing phenomenon. Kember (1989a, 1989b) developed a model based on Tinto's (1975) model of dropout from correspondence distance education courses. His model includes components such as demographics characteristics, students' motivation, academic abilities, and students' social factors. Fjortoft (1995) criticized Kember's (1989b, p. 199) model for failing to "take into consideration the job-related motivation of adults."

Several other scholars suggested that demographics characteristics have a minimal effect on dropouts from distance education courses (Williamson & Creamer, 1988; Volkwein & Lorang,

1995). While others suggested that demographics characteristics do have significant effect on dropouts from distance education courses (Dille & Mezack, 1991; Xenos, Pierrakeas, & Pintelas, 2002; McLaren, 2004). Dille and Mezack (1991) conducted a study comparing completer and dropout students attending television broadcasting (telelearning) courses. They concluded that completer students in telelearning courses are older, have higher grade point average, and have more college credits than dropout students (Dille & Mezack, 1991). Moreover, they suggested that locus of control is an important factor when investigating dropouts from distance education courses. Xenos, Pierrakeas, and Pintelas, (2002) conducted field interviews with dropout students in distance education courses. They claimed that dropout students were older and were employed more hours per week than completer students. Moreover, their results indicate that gender and students' family status were not found to play a key role as a predictor of dropout from distance education courses. McLaren (2004, p. 2) claimed that there is a conflict in reports of findings associated with demographics characteristics. She suggested future studies should measure demographics characteristics as it remains fruitful to continue exploring the effects of demographics characteristics on dropout and completion in online courses. Therefore, this study will measure and explore the impact of demographics characteristics on dropouts in online learning courses.

The locus of control was reported as a key factor in "understanding the nature of the learning process in various kinds of learning situations" (Whittington, 1995). Rotter (1966, 1989) introduced the instrument to measure the locus of control (LOC) individuals may perceive regarding outcomes of certain behavioral actions with two polar outcomes. The first is labeled as the *external control* that indicates ones' perceptions of outcomes that are due to chance, lack, fate, or actions of others; thus the notation *external*. Whereas the second is labeled as the *internal con-*

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