Chapter 3
Motivation for the Online Graduate Student:
Intrinsic and Extrinsic Factors to Consider

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ABSTRACT

The chapter discusses motivating and demotivating factors in online graduate education. Starting with relevant research in the field of human development from Freud to Erickson and including Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, a framework for constructive feedback, specific and timely suggestions for class, and programmatic structures are explored and compared to the latest in the research around graduate-level programs. The chapter also explores the factors surrounding the exponential growth of online graduate instruction. Success drivers based on field research are identified, and finally, programmatic changes are suggested. Changes that the online graduate student can make themselves are suggested as ways to keep motivation levels high.

INTRODUCTION

The chapter discusses motivating and demotivating factors in online graduate education. Starting with relevant research in human development from Freud to Erickson and including Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a framework for constructive feedback, specific and timely suggestions for class, and programmatic structures are explored and compared to the latest research related to graduate-level programs. The chapter also explores the factors involved in the exponential growth of online graduate instruction. Success drivers based on field research are identified, and programmatic changes are suggested. Finally, changes that online graduate students can make themselves are guided as ways to keep motivation levels high.

Five Success Drivers That Reduce Attrition Caused by Lack of Motivation in Online Graduate Programs

What did I do to myself? The desire to seek a graduate degree is multifaceted. Attempting to obtain that degree online adds complexity to an already arduous academic journey.

The benefits of online graduate programs, which have exploded in popularity in recent years, are evident to institutions and students. Online instruction minimizes the cost of maintaining a physical classroom space while mitigating the ancillary expenses of physical meetings, including maintenance of the space, the acquisition of material resources, and the attendance of students.

According to the Education Advisory Board, an organization dedicated to supporting higher educational institutions, online graduate programming increased by 63% from 2019 to 2020 (EAB, 2022). During the same time frame, hybrid programming, combining physical meetings and online components, increased by 102% (EAB, 2022). This figure represents a significant increase that demands a deeper exploration. It is noteworthy that 2019 through 2020 was a time of a global pandemic. However, many of the tools to increase online programming had already been developed to meet the needs of the graduate student concerning online coursework. Hence, the global pandemic merely forced institutions to come up with commonsense online coursework.

BACKGROUND

The History: The Rise of Online Graduate Programs

The global COVID-19 pandemic expedited the inevitable rise in online graduate programming. The average graduate student in the United States is 34 years old, with 22% of U.S. graduate students being over 40 years of age (Crimson, 2022). The impact of this fact means that most graduate students are established in their careers and hold down jobs that make it impossible to meet for class during the traditional school day.

Online graduate instruction, once seen as not as rigorous as face-to-face coursework, has become the norm for graduate students, according to DegreeQuery (n.d.). Additionally, DegreeQuery explains that online graduate work is now seen as more rigorous due to the lack of organic instruction and the isolation that can be felt by graduate students working in an online setting (n.d.). The multiple factors of online coursework being more difficult than coursework provided for in-person locations will be explored later in this chapter.

Benefits of Online Graduate Coursework

For higher education institutions, however, the rise of online graduate programming during the pandemic is easily quantifiable. The reach of any institution engaging in online coursework is multiplied. In the traditional, face-to-face model of graduate instruction, institutions could only draw from a particular geographical region that surrounded their physical campus. This situation created limited options for graduate students as they had to be able to attend schools within a certain driving distance from their homes or office. In a virtual setting, schools can enroll any student who meets the entrance requirements

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