Chapter 16
Like Someone You Know:
Scenario-Based Simulation to Improve Academic and Life Skills

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The director of a university tutoring center collaborates with an Instructional Design and Technology professor and his students to develop an interactive multimedia format that presents at-risk college students with stories of people like them dealing with academic, financial, and personal issues. The scenario-based simulations (SBS) prompt students in a study skills course to openly, but safely, discuss the often sub-optimal decisions made by characters in the scenarios. This case takes readers inside the process of developing the SBS format from scratch. Transcribed interview comments from both the client (the tutoring center director) and the designer (the IDT professor) reveal an iterative and negotiated process rather than a systematic ADDIE process. The case highlights: 1) adapting corporate-style "soft skills" computer-based training (CBT) to higher education, 2) the role of CBT in a blended course, 3) rapid development of multimedia products, and 4) use testing *of products with authentic learners.*

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INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND

State University is a public institution with an enrollment of approximately 20,000 students. The campus setting is rural, however, many of its students come from major metropolitan areas. State University has a long-standing legacy of opportunity; nearly half of undergraduates admitted are first-generation college students and approximately 35% are minority students. Many incoming freshmen lack adequate study skills and don't understand "what college is all about." Almost one-fourth of first-year students are conditionally admitted, meaning they did not meet the specified admissions criteria.

In addition to reflecting an institutional philosophy of opportunity, the revenue generated by expanding the pool of students helps support the university in a time of fiscal decline. State allocations to support State University that once averaged 52% of the total budget have dropped to 38% over the past decade. Increasing enrollment has, therefore, become a major emphasis. However, administrators, faculty, and staff all agree that they do not wish to damage students' futures by generating a great deal of debt through student loans without the students completing a degree. The university's vision of student success is formalized in a state-implemented system of performance-based funding in which the amount of state funding for colleges and universities depends on enrollment, retention, and completion of degrees.

Like a growing number of higher education institutions, State University has developed a University College program in which all incoming freshmen take a core curriculum and are guided in their growth as successful college students. The goals of increasing retention and graduation rates are challenging since State University typically loses approximately one-third of new students within their first year, and graduates less than half of its students within six years of initial enrollment.

As challenging as college is for under-prepared students, many of them avoid the very things that would help them succeed. For example, many of the students who need academic assistance do not take advantage of the free tutoring that is available for the most challenging first-year courses -- those with high DFW rates of students earning grades of D's, F's and Withdrawals. Typically, less than 25% of students enrolled in DFW courses attend the provided study sessions. Helping these students succeed, then, involves improving their awareness of support resources and attitudes about college as well as their academic skills (Hanger et al. 2012; Isaak et al., 2007; Phan, 2008).