

Retention Issues in Online Programs: A Review of the Literature

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No matter how a program is delivered, be it face-to-face or online, there are going to be students who, for one reason or another, cannot complete the course of study. However, the retention rates for online programs appear to be significantly lower than traditional face-to-face classes. While many of the reasons students drop-out of educational programs are common to both modes of delivery - such as pressures from home or work - there are some reasons and issues that are unique to the online environment. A review of the literature reveals that while fewer students complete online programs, there are some actions that the schools can take to increase the online retention rate, and allow more online students to graduate.

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1. Introduction

Online programs are growing dramatically, with enrollments increasing 33 percent per year, and forming the basis of a \$2 billion industry. More than 50 percent of Western universities offer a combined 17,000 online classes, and approximately 200 offer online graduate degrees (Boochi, Eastman & Swift, 2004). Martz, Reddy, and Sangermano (2004) expects that 90 percent of colleges will soon be offering some form of online program.

Online learning environments (OLE) have removed many of the physical and temporal barriers that have prevented students from pursuing a degree in a traditional classroom. OLEs have allowed schools to expand their reach to encompass the entire globe, regardless of time zones, allowing students to interact with faculty and other students, and participate in a collaborative educational environment. While distance education is thriving and is considered a success, the completion rates for online courses can be significantly lower than those of the traditional classroom. (Diaz, 2002; Lorenzetti, 2002; Murray, 2001) While there are numerous issues that prevent students from completing a course of study regardless of the delivery medium, why would the retention rate be lower in an OLE?

This paper will examine some issues that students in an OLE face while pursuing a higher education degree online. It will also examine some techniques that can be implemented to address those issues, which can increase the retention rate as well as increasing overall student satisfaction.

2. Retention Rates in Online Programs

Both Bauman (2002) and Lorenzetti (2002) find that drop out rates for online programs of 50 percent or more are not unusual. Diaz (2000) reports a more conservative online drop rate of 13.5 percent compared to 7.2 percent for traditional students. Murray (2001) reports that the Washington State Community College online program claims a retention rate of 70 percent for online students and 85 percent for traditional students. Kalher (2002) found the completion rates for Brevard Community College online courses were 74.5 percent, and traditional courses were 84.7 percent. Carr (2000) reports that Dallas Community College reports an 11 to 15 percent difference in the course complete rate, and a 14 percent difference at Tyler Community College.

While their does not yet appear to be any standardized national retention rate numbers available (Murray, 2001; Carr 2000), anecdotal evidence suggest that online courses average just 50 to 60 percent retention, while face-to-face classes are well above 60 percent. Murray (2001) also finds that many people disagree with the validity of these statistics, since retention rates for both online and traditional vary by intuition. Carr (2000) indicates that different institutions record these rates differently. Some institutions do not count students who drop classes during the first few weeks of the semester, while others do. Measuring the retention rate might be more useful at the local level, instead of a national level, since it can be affected by many factors.

3. Why do Students Dropout of Online Programs?

Kearsley (2002) indicates that online learning is not for everyone. Some students do not have the motivation or self-discipline, while others simply prefer the traditional classroom environments. Some faculty lack the technical skills required to run an online class. A successful online program is a delicate balance of student, faculty, program design, administrative support, and the OLE. Some of the major issues that appear to affect the retention rates include the feelings of isolation, poorly designed courses, communication difficulties, lack of program support and guidance, as well as difficulty with the technology.

Paloff and Pratt (2003) believes that feelings of isolation are not the inherent result of the OLE, but rather, the result of poor course design. Physical isolation can be overcome by focusing more on social interactions. Some

of the major factors that most course designers seem to ignore are not providing enough information to the student, unclear performance expectations, and the lack of the student's experience in the OLE. When students have problems in a normal classroom, they can turn to the other students, the teacher, or administration for almost immediate support and feedback. The asynchronous nature of many OLEs, combined with unusual study patterns, and global time zones, means that students may not receive the support they need in a timely fashion, reinforcing their feelings of isolation.

Lorenzetti (2002) reports that some schools rely on faculty to develop the online courses. Preparing an online class, as well as designing the activities and assignments, and working with the delivery technology is a complex and time consuming task, which if not done properly, can lead to a negative experience for all involved. Not all schools compensate their instructors for course development, and not all faculty have the technical competency to use all the features of the OLE.

Some traditional schools that have developed online programs sometimes have two sets of faculty – online and face-to-face. While this can be appealing on some level - those who do not wish to teach in the OLE don't have to - this technique appears to have a negative impact on retention. Lorenzetti (2002) states that having the same faculty teaching in both environments can increase both graduation and retention rates.

Murray (2001) cites communication problems as major factor. Without regular communications, students can lose their focus. In addition, miscommunication and the lack of prompt, clear feedback from the instructor can contribute to the student's feelings of frustrations. Problems that could be solved in just a few minutes in the classroom, or on the phone, can take hours or even days to solve via email. Murray finds that communication is even more important than program content. Martz, et al. (2004) also finds that prompt and personalized communications with the faculty have a significant impact on student satisfaction.

In addition to getting the courses online, schools that offer DE programs also have to get the rest of the college online as well. Students in the DE program are going to require the same services as the traditional students. They need to enroll in class, apply for financial aid, check material out of the library, and purchase books. This critical infrastructure can be just as frustrating to the student as the actual classes. Schifter and Monolescu (2004) report that when the Temple University OnLine Learning Program was being developed, the program focused on the classes, and much of the critical infrastructure support was not developed for the next two years. The telephone based registration program used by the school could not differentiate between online and traditional classes, which lead to students signing up for the correct course, but in the wrong delivery format.

Palloff (2003) addresses some of the basic technological barriers to online environments. While it is easy to believe that all of the students will have high-speed Internet connectivity, many are still using dial-up connections. Multimedia and high-bandwidth content can discourage and frustrate users with slower network connections, causing them to fall behind in the class, and eventually drop the course. In addition, Lynch (2002) reports that many students spend as much time trying to resolve technical issues as they do focusing on the content of the class.

Murray (2001) also recognizes the possibility that students may lack the required skills to be successful in an OLE. Students not only require the technical skills to get online, but they also need to possess strong reading, writing and typing skills, since so much of the interaction in the OLE is typically text-based. Students with poor typing skills may find themselves frustrated, and unable to participate, especially if the course requires frequent use of synchronous "chat" programs as part of the learning process.

3. Techniques to Increase Retention

While there are many suggestions and recommendations in the literature that are offered to increase retention, the one that seems to be most favored is some sort of student orientation (Bauman, 2002; Murray, 2001; Scagnoli, 2001). Most traditional colleges have orientations sessions that help the students make a successful transition to college. Shouldn't online programs offer the same assistance in helping the students to adapt to the online environment?

While there are many issues involved in designing a orientation seminar – online or face-to-face; optional or mandatory; format and length – most reports seem to indicate that this activity allows students to meet other students and faculty, learn the technology, overcome their fears and concerns about the program, and develop relationships that can combat the physical isolation issues (Scagnoli, 2001). Bauman (2002) reports that after offering a required, weeklong orientation "bootcamp", the student's confidence levels increased, most felt ready for their first online class, and it reduced the number of technical problems that students were previously having. It also allowed faculty to focus more on course content, instead of being distracted and spending class time on the proper operation of the OLE.

The orientation period can also serve as the basis of community building. Scagnoli (2001) indicates that orientation for online courses can increase student-to-student interactions outside of the OLE. It also gives the student a sense of belonging to a virtual learning community that they can turn to when they need help. In

addition, this the sense of community makes it easier if the students need to work in groups on various class projects. If face-to-face orientation is not available, there should be introductory exercises that allow students to learn about each other, establish commonalities, and identify potential group partners. In addition, this socialization means that students will have additional reasons to use the communication tools, and to become proficient in their use.

Another major issue is training faculty to use the OLE technology (Murray, 2001). Many schools offer a training session, as well as requiring a faculty member to participate in an online course before being allowed to teach in the OLE. Aside from just learning how to post notes and grade assignments, teachers also need to know how to communicate with their students. Some of the recommendations include 24-48 hour message turnarounds, welcome messages, monitoring students and contacting those who don't seem to be participating. Boochi, et al, (2001) suggests that faculty must be proactive in their communications with the students, solicit and provide frequent feedback, and be willing to adapt over the duration to the course to meet the needs of the students. All of these techniques can alleviate the student's feeling of isolation.

Bauman (2002) also indicates that advisors and faculty need to monitor student progress, and that the most critical time is during the student's first two classes. Bauman found that most students drop out before completing their third class. This is echoed by Reason (2003), who found most traditional students drop between the first and second year of college. These findings indicate that retention efforts need to be started early in the program, where they will have the greatest impact on retaining the student in the program.

Another major factor is providing sufficient technical support. Murray (2001) indicates that schools need to strengthen their help desk staff to deal with students at a distance. They should provide tutorials, create frequently asked questions (FAQs) lists, and expand their hours of operation. It is not just enough to offer technical support; the students need to know how to access it. With so many departments and organizations on campus offering different kinds of support, Lorenzetti (2002) recommends providing a single point of contact for all of the online students needs – from registration to technical support. It is important that students know whom they are supposed to contact, and have an easy way to contact them.

4. Conclusion

There will always be students who dropout of programs, whether online or face-to-face. It is unlikely that schools will ever be able to achieve a 100 percent retention rate. Despite online courses being offered for over 20 years, it is still a new concept to many students, and is a different enough experience that it requires all the participants - faculty, students, and support staff - to adapt in order to make the experience a success. There are some relatively simple processes that can be implemented, that can help the online student have a more positive experience, and, in turn, increase the retention rate of the online program.

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