Killing the “Quit Point”: Constructivist Instructor Collaboration to Increase Student Retention

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to find a solution for one of the largest causes of student attrition: writing in general, and more specifically, research writing. The population of freshman, transfer, and non-traditional students that can be found in freshman composition classes is an at-risk group that deserves special attention, and this article offers ways to improve the attrition numbers both through the use of technology as well as changing the way we view student improvement and progression regarding their writing ability. Colleges and Universities need to do more to help students be successful as college students, and this paper presents suggestions to do just that.

INTRODUCTION

There are many things that might stop freshman students in their academic tracks, but one of the largest is writing. In short, freshman and transfer students are often weak when it comes to their writing, and in particular, research-based writing can be thought of as a “quit point,” something that makes students feel that they have no choice but to quit the class, and in some cases, college. However, this does not have to be the case; as technology continues to advance, there are many opportunities that any college or university has to increase student retention, and collaboration both within a department and throughout a campus will allow virtual instructors to be the first line of defense against student attrition and withdrawal.

First, it must be established what the problem is. Students dropping classes and even quitting school in their earliest semesters are not new
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problems, and this concern can be found at both face-to-face and online institutions. Student attrition and retention are some of the newest metrics that schools must address as they look to improve student performance and success. Information released in 2011 by the United States Department of Education showed that retention numbers at all colleges, regardless of the delivery method, are much lower than anyone would prefer: almost 30% of first year students will not finish their degree at that institution, and for part-time students, the picture is much more bleak: almost 60% of all first-time students across institutions will not complete their degree, either (United States Department of Education, p. 11). While the numbers are not broken down between online and face-to-face delivery methods, there is no doubt that the percentages are lower than Universities would like them to be.

Determining the reasons for these low percentages is essential. For instance, in some cases, the reason that students do not complete a degree can be as simple as the conflict between school and work and family commitments (Johnson, Rochkind, & Public, 2009, p. 5). In other words, some students simply are not ready for college, whether because of their lack of preparation or their previous time constraints. A closer examination identifies a wide variety of reasons to explain why students fail, whether financial or academic (Pleskac et al., 2011). These authors, however, make an essential point about the students who are not successful: academic reasons are the ones most within the control of the institution. Higher education, therefore, must decide to do more.

Additional research exists to demonstrate that the primary causes for student failure are now understood to be something much more distinct. Dr. Susan Hughes (2009) narrowed the problem to student coursework, and more specifically, to writing: revising, documentation, and research skills (p. 71). Despite how easy it is for students to find research material in our digital age, students report that it is harder than ever to write using research now, in part because there are so many places where good material can be found (Head & Eisenberg, 2009, p.13). Put another way,

... students reported being challenged, confused, and frustrated by the research process, despite the convenience, relative ease, or ubiquity of the Internet....frustrations included the effects of information overload and being inundated with resources, but more. Participants also reported having particular difficulty traversing a vast and ever-changing information landscape. (Head & Eisenberg, 2009, p.13)

Other work offers personal attention directed at the students most at risk to begin the process of helping students stay in school. A study sponsored by the Pell Institute identified some strategies to keep first year students in place for a longer period of time, and these included focusing information and attention on the first year of college, monitoring student progress, providing additional support for these first year students, and improving the culture that surrounds these students (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 25-26). It is worth noting that by including these ideas among the necessary improvements it suggests that they are missing from institutions at the moment.

The reasons that these beginning college students fail, then, can be said to come from a lack of individual attention, difficulty in writing (and research-based writing in particular) and many other smaller factors combined. This paper will seek to establish that a constructivist instructor and program perspective can successfully address student attrition and retention.
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