Chapter 8
Student Outcomes and Retention in Online Academic and Training Programs

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to examine online education in order to understand how to improve student outcomes and retention. On the surface, although it might appear that the term “online education” only applies to academic institutions, in this chapter, the use of this term also applies to online training programs in business and other organizational settings. Additionally, this chapter offers six specific recommendations that faculty, students, administrators, management, and support staff can undertake to assure that students and faculty will have the resources to successfully complete an online academic or training program. These recommendations are to improve students’ abilities to direct their own learning, to facilitate practices that keep students on track, to increase students’ abilities to identify with their groups; to enable student groups to achieve goals, to create opportunities for faculty to share best practices, and to implement a management system that tracks the effectiveness of the other recommendations and monitors retention rates.

BACKGROUND

Online education has received a lot of attention for many years, and even as early as 2001, “there were 986 distance-learning institutions in 107 countries” (Sprague, et al., 2007, p. 157), and by 2013 about 70% of all higher education institutions reported that online education “is critical to their long term strategy” (Allen & Seaman, 2013, p. 4). As a natural outgrowth of web-enhanced courses (Hermans, et al, 2009), or in an effort to increase enrollment, reduce the number of adjunct instructors, and offer flexible course schedules for students and faculty (Borstorf & Lowe, 2007), higher education institutions are now concerned about how to improve online education programs, even considering the possibilities of offering Massive Open Online Courses (Allen & Seaman, 2013). The growing trend cannot be ignored; students have also become very interested in the benefits
offered by online education, with almost seven million of them currently taking at least one online course, which represents approximately 32% of all students enrolled in institutions of higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2013). The literature on online education tends to be organized around the following topics:

1. Student demographics, student perceptions of online education, quality of online education, and the perceptions related to that quality (Cao & Sakchutchawan, 2011);
2. Course availability, program quality, length, cost, and courses in the curriculum (Rydzewski, et al, 2010); and, Student learning outcomes, student characteristics, and professor pedagogy (Fillion et al, 2007).

When considering the quality of online education, there is a tendency to make comparisons with traditional, face-to-face instruction. However, this tendency is inherently flawed because of “limitations in the research design itself, differences in student demographics, and inconsistent methods of calculating and reporting completion” (Howell, et al, 2004, p. 244). In essence, it is like comparing apples to oranges (Howell, et al, 2004).

The main advantage of online courses is that they are non-linear, so students can return to previously covered material without worrying about interrupting the natural flow of a class (Borstorff & Lowe, 2007). In addition, online courses allow institutions to have “a higher level of consistency” in the training students receive (Borstorff & Lowe, 2007, p.14), and online education eliminates the two most common barriers to students seeking higher education—time and distance (Tanner, et al, 2003; Tanner, et al, 2009; Brown, 2001).

Retention and Retention Rates

There is a common perception that retention is more difficult for online vs. traditional programs (Allen & Seaman, 2011), and because, in general, there is a tendency to compare retention rates for traditional vs. online education, it is essential to have a consistent definition of “retention” complemented with actual figures to substantiate any claims about student retention. However, a review of the literature reveals that while it is easy to find definitions of retention, it is quite difficult to find specific confirmations of retention rates.

One definition of student retention is that it is the percentage derived by comparing the number of students who start an academic program vs. the number who actually complete the program. Using this definition, there are claims that retention rates for online education at four-year colleges and universities can be as low as 40-50% and can go as high as 80% (Howell, et al, 2004; Snarski, 2008). In addition, student retention can also be defined as the percentage of online freshmen (first year university students) who complete their freshman year and return for their sophomore (second) year. However, institution-reported retention rates from 133 universities show that this definition of retention rate can yield a range from 12% to 95% (Degree Jungle, 2013). When evaluating retention at two-year colleges, there are indications that a 68% retention rate is applicable (Krueger, 2008) even though identifying true retention rates for two-colleges would be impossible, because of the varying reasons for student enrollment and their own expectations about completing a program (Vieira, 2005).

What is needed is a consistent definition and a broad-based data set which could be used to accurately measure and compare the retention rates of individual programs within institutions and the retention rates experienced by institutions as a whole. Concerning student retention as it applies to the number of undergraduate students who complete a bachelor’s degree, DeAngelo, et al (2011) provide the rare instance of actual retention rates based on actual numbers. Based on their work on the CIRP Freshman Survey (a national survey which captures a wide range of student characteristics), and information gained
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