Chapter 3
The Pivotal Role of Faculty in Online Student Engagement and Retention

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ABSTRACT
The premise of this chapter is that higher education online faculty have a pivotal role in student retention; faculty participation is key to student engagement and engaged students tend to complete courses in which they are enrolled. However, frequently faculty members are unaware of the impact their active participation and visibility has on student engagement and retention. In addition, online courses are an important source of revenue for many institutions of higher education and attrition results in loss of revenue. Given that faculty have a pivotal role in retention, institutions of higher education can benefit fiscally from guiding and supporting online faculty in strategies of student engagement and retention. Faculty support is needed during the process of change inherent in faculty adapting to teaching online, through providing ongoing faculty professional development and by creating a teaching culture inclusive of informal scholarly investigations related to instructional effectiveness in online course delivery.

INTRODUCTION
The offering of online courses is a viable delivery mode for institutions of higher education and can be more effective than face-to-face learning (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). In the past ten years, the offering of online courses has grown significantly in higher education; an increasingly larger portion of degree requirements are being offered online. Institutions of higher education are finding themselves in a situation where it is fiscally necessary to respond to consumer demand. To some degree, students are customers who expect their needs be anticipated and met (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2007). For example, increasingly, college and university students want course delivery modes that fit with their busy lives; accessibility to coursework anytime and anywhere has become a criteria for selecting a degree program (Johnson, Smith, Willis, Levine & Haywood, 2011). In a 2012 survey of chief academic leaders in higher education, 69.1 percent reported that offering courses

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online is critical to the long-term strategy of the
institute (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Therefore,
meeting consumer need has become an important
consideration.

“For some institutions, web-based courses
have been viewed as a way to attract new students,
as well as to provide more convenient education
options for students currently enrolled” (Lion,
2011, p. 49). At the same time as institutions of
higher education are attempting to increase online
course offerings to meet student demands, there
is also recognition that in today’s environment
where higher education institutions are facing
increasing budget cuts, retaining students is par-
ticularly important. Yet, attrition rates for online
courses are of particular concern in the academic
community (Allen & Seaman, 2013); online attri-
tion rates are higher for online students than for
students taking courses face-to-face (Angelino,
Williams, & Navtig, 2007). High attrition rates
result in a noticeable loss of income for institu-
tion of higher education. Even a small increase
in student retention can result in a significant
increase in institution revenue.

Faculty must be recognized as critical stake-
holders in the process of moving courses from
the brick and mortar classroom to the online
classroom, not only because faculty are develop-
ing the courses to be delivered online but also
because of the nature of faculty relationships with
students. While faculty are known to build close
relationships with students in an advising capacity,
the potential for a similar relationship can unfold
during course delivery that invites high student
and faculty engagement. In face-to-face classes,
it is common knowledge that faculty engagement
has a direct impact on student engagement and
retention.

The increase in online course offerings has
stimulated discussions about teaching pedagogy,
the quality of online course delivery, and skills
to teach online. Faculty expertise and dedication
have been cited as the most important factors
contributing to quality online courses; however,
many faculty report feeling unprepared to teach
online; teaching in a traditional classroom environ-
ment is the area for which they’ve been prepared
(Varvel, 2007). If students want courses offered
online and faculty teaching these courses have
influential contact with students and engaged
students tend to continue in their studies and
online course offerings offer a needed revenue
stream for universities, then it follows that college
and universities would benefit by having highly
trained faculty to teach online.

The purpose of this chapter is to: a) provide
background on the relationship between student
engagement and retention, b) consider course
infrastructure that supports student engagement
and retention, c) examine teaching strategies to
engage and retain students in the online classroom,
d) discuss the process of faculty development to
teach online, including viewing teaching online
as a scholarly endeavor.

BACKGROUND

There is a direct relationship between student
engagement, student retention, and the role
that faculty have in teaching an online course.
Mandernach (2009) posits that student engagement
depends on a number of factors, including faculty
personal connections with students and the faculty
creation of an active online environment. Engaged
students tend to complete a course. Thus, faculty
have a key role not only in retaining students in
courses, but also in continued enrollment toward
degree completion.

Student Engagement and Retention

The study of factors related to a student’s suc-
cessful integration into a collegiate environment
has been considered for many years, originating
with a focus on face-to-face. Recent interest in
retention of college students has included students
taking courses online. Patterson and McFadden
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