Chapter 13
Maximizing Retention and Progression to Graduation in Online Programs: A Case Study in “Designing With the End in Mind”

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ABSTRACT
This chapter uses the literature on student retention in online programs as a foundation to present a case study illustrating how a well-designed, affordable and high-quality online program substantially increased access, retention rates, and progression to graduation. The case study covers how, by using the principles of designing with the end in mind, the University of Texas at Arlington College of Nursing and Health Innovation (CONHI) developed and implemented a highly successful, award-winning online Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) completion program for registered nurses (RN) who had entered the profession through an associate degree program. This RN-to-BSN program was specifically designed to overcome issues known to impact enrollment and completion in nursing programs by leveraging technology and the best practices for online education. The case study also explores how best practices in online education were incorporated into the development of the RN-to-BSN program.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter uses the literature on student retention in online programs as a foundation to present a case study illustrating how a well-designed, affordable and high-quality online program substantially increased access, retention rates, and progression to graduation. The University of Texas at Arlington College of Nursing and Health Innovation (CONHI) developed and implemented a highly successful, award-winning online Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) completion program for registered nurses (RN) who had entered the profession through an associate degree program. This RN-to-BSN program was specifically designed to overcome issues known to impact enrollment and completion in nursing programs by leveraging technology and best practices for online education. In 2008, responding to the national demand for a more highly educated nursing workforce, the CONHI initiated its accelerated online RN to BSN program and has since enrolled over 28,000 students, with progression to graduation rates of 80 to 90 percent. The case study explores how best practices in online education were incorporated into the development of the RN to BSN program.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The number of college students enrolled in at least one online course increased for the ninth straight year, according to the Babson Survey Research Group’s annual survey of more than 2,500 colleges and universities—including both nonprofit and for-profit institutions (Allen & Seaman, 2011). Over 6.7 million students were taking at least one online course during the fall 2011 term, an increase of over 6.1 million in 2010.

With increased enrollment in online programs comes a greater need for strategies to retain and progress successful students. Student retention is a complex and multifaceted problem with no single issue as a key component (Jeffreys, 2007). Retention strategies in online education have been attempted in many formats, but there are few empirical studies of effective retention methods. Despite the lack of empirical studies of retention strategies in online education, there is general consensus on effective practices. Hill (2017) outlined a set of commonly implemented strategies:

1. **An “Early Alert” Program:** A student receives an email from the instructor if s/he has not responded during the first few weeks of the course.
2. **An Online Tutoring Program:** Providing tutors, both phone and online, is presumed to increase student success.
3. **More Tutoring:** Provide tutoring above and beyond online tutoring, such as offering a distance learning success course.
4. **Student Success Course:** Provide a student orientation or a student success course that teaches learning skills to help students understand how to learn online.
5. **Learning Communities:** Have a cohort-type system whereby a group of cohorts move through a program together.
6. **Peer Tutoring:** Implement a system whereby students who are ahead of new students and who are successful in their programs tutor new students.
7. **Introduction to Distance Learning:** Provide a tutorial on online communication, such as how to use a discussion board.