ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between instructional interaction and student persistence among adult students in online courses. A survey research methodology was used to examine the frequency and the method of instructional interaction in online courses, student attitudes regarding instructional interaction, and the reasons online students provide for persisting in, or withdrawing from, online courses. The results indicate that student perceptions regarding the contribution of asynchronous, discussion forum use combined with frequent use of asynchronous discussion account for 26% of the variance in course persistence rates. Consistent with the literature on adult student dropout, the findings identify additional situational and institutional barriers to persistence among students in online courses. The findings suggest that strategies to facilitate student persistence in online courses should address online instructional techniques, faculty development, technology development, and program development.

Keywords: asynchronous education, asynchronous discussion, educational technology, electronic learning (e-learning), online classroom, online teaching, Web-based instruction, Web-based teaching

INTRODUCTION

The growth and popularity of the Internet and the World Wide Web among students and faculty at institutions of higher education across the country has coincided with the expansion of online distance education programs. As institutions of higher education expand online course offerings, it is important to identify strategies that promote student participation and success in online courses and programs. One obstacle to student success in online courses is student withdrawal or dropout, a failure of students to complete a course and/or program of study. Research suggests that online courses have significantly higher dropout rates than face-to-face courses (Carr, 2000; Levy, 2005; Simpson, 2004; Terry, 2001).

While a number of factors have been identified as contributors to student dropout, few research studies have examined the classroom factors contributing to a student’s decision to withdraw from, or persist in, a course or program of study (Barefoot, 2004; Simpson, 2004; Tinto, 2002). One factor that is consistently identified as contributing to student achievement, satisfaction, and persistence in face-to-face college classrooms is interaction. A significant body of research documents the role of student and faculty interaction in supporting positive learner outcomes on the traditional college campus.
More recently, researchers have identified a clear relationship between faculty interaction and student perceptions of learning and student satisfaction in online courses (Jiang & Ting, 2000; Roblyer & Wiencek, 2004; Shea, Frederickson, Pickett, Pelz, & Swan, 2001; Swan et al., 2000). This study examined the impact of instructional interaction on student persistence among adult students in online courses while also examining the reasons online students provide for persisting in, or withdrawing from, online courses. Specifically, this study examined the relationship of persistence to (a) the frequency of instructional interaction, (b) the method of instructional interaction, and (c) student attitudes regarding interaction and their online course experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relationship Between Interaction and Persistence

The importance of interaction between students and teacher in supporting positive learner outcomes among campus-based undergraduate students is well-documented (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 2002). Pascarella’s work distinguishes between formal (academic) interaction that occurs within the classroom and informal (social) interaction that occurs outside the classroom. Studies have found that the frequency and content of formal and informal interaction between instructors and undergraduate students in on-campus courses are correlated to gains in student achievement (Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), student persistence (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1980; Tinto, 1987), and degree completion (Tinto, 1987). Kuh and Hu found that as students progress from freshman to senior year, their frequency of interaction with faculty increases and shifts from social to academic or career-related interactions.

More recently, a number of researchers have examined the role of interaction in supporting positive learner outcomes among online students. Arbaugh (2005) found a strong, positive relationship between interaction in online courses and both perceived student learning and student satisfaction. Shea and his colleagues found that prompt instructor feedback and quality feedback (as reported by student respondents) are each positively related to levels of perceived student learning and satisfaction (2001). Hay, Hodgkinson, Peltier, and Drago (2004) found that instructor-to-student interaction and student-to-student interaction are each positively associated with student ratings of online course effectiveness.

Student persistence addresses a student’s commitment to complete a course and program of study. Persistence is considered a positive outcome measure as compared to dropout, which is the negative equivalent outcome (Cookson, 1988; Simpson, 2003). Much of the literature on persistence and dropout draws its theoretical framework from the research conducted by Vincent Tinto. Tinto’s model of college student dropout suggests that persistence is an outcome of the student’s academic and social integration into that institution’s community (Tinto, 1987). While Tinto’s research was conducted primarily on undergraduate students in residential four-year colleges and universities, later researchers applied a similar theoretical framework to different student groups including undergraduate commuter students, (Pascarella & Chapman, 1983), undergraduate students enrolled in correspondence courses (Sweet, 1986), distant learners enrolled in video-based college (Towles, Ellis, & Spencer, 1993), and online college students (Willging & Johnson, 2004). These studies suggest that Tinto’s model of college student dropout provides a framework for understanding the relationship between student-faculty interaction and student persistence in environments beyond those examined by Tinto himself.

Interaction in Online Education

The terms interaction and interactivity are sometimes used interchangeably in the distance education literature (Anderson & Garrison, 1998; Smith & Dillon, 1999); however, a close review of the literature suggests that interactiv-
Related Content

Management of Telecommunications Services: A Vital New Content Area and a Course Model for the College of Business
[www.igi-global.com/article/management-telecommunications-services/2269?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/management-telecommunications-services/2269?camid=4v1a)

Using Plug-Avatars “hhh” Technology Education as Service-Oriented Virtual Learning Environment in Sliding Mode
Vardan Mkrtchian, Mikhail Kataev, Wu-Yuin Hwang, Sarabjeet Singh Bedi and Anna Fedotova (2014). *Handbook of Research on Emerging Priorities and Trends in Distance Education: Communication, Pedagogy, and Technology* (pp. 43-55).
Effectiveness of International Distance Education in High School between Thailand and Japan
www.igi-global.com/chapter/effectiveness-international-distance-education-high/61246?camid=4v1a

Cloud Computing Based E-Learning System
www.igi-global.com/article/cloud-computing-based-learning-system/42095?camid=4v1a