Retention of Online Learners: 
The Importance of Support Services

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ABSTRACT

The most important word for contemporary global higher education institutions is retention. Although online education enrollment in these institutions has increased by approximately 40 percent in recent years, the dropout rates for online students is approximately 20-30 percent more than for face-to-face classes. Institutions have tried to address this issue, but the dropout rate continues to be a serious concern. The authors of this manuscript propose that the addition of online services for online students as a possible solution.

KEYWORDS
Higher Education, Online Learners, Online Learning, Online Support, Retention

1. INTRODUCTION

At one time, students left home to attend college and universities and the institutions were regarded as a destination, land-based institutions, where students attended classes in face-to-face settings (Lemoine, Jenkins, & Richardson, 2017; Şendurur, Bilgiç, & Şendurur, 2019). However, technology has disrupted the traditional, formal processes of higher education and there are choices beyond traditional brick and mortar physical spaces; the university is now a combination multi-dimensional education model: physical and online or totally online (Mense, Lemoine, Garretson, & Richardson, 2018; Ortague & Tanner, 2019).

Technology provides the means for a diverse student population looking for anywhere, anytime learning to enroll in distance learning online classes (Flavin, 2016). Allen and Seaman (2016) reported students who enroll in distance learning/online learning “may take distance courses from on campus” while noting “63% took online classes within 50 miles of their campus… with 87% taking courses in the same state as the campus” (p. 16). Online learning is attractive to learners who are balancing both home and careers for a number of reasons including financial issues, family issues and time constraints. Online classes are often not as expensive as face-to-face classes and online learning is preferred by students seeking ubiquitous access to higher education (Xu & Xu, 2019).

DOI: 10.4018/IJTESSS.2019070103
While overall higher education enrollments are not growing, there are growing numbers of students taking distance (online) courses with numbers moving from 50.3% in 2012 to 56.1% in 2016 (Allen & Seaman, 2017). Distance education enrollment has increased at both undergraduate and graduate levels with 5,253,997 undergraduate students and 1,105,124 graduate students taking online classes (Allen & Seaman, 2016). Public institutions command the largest portion of distance education students, with 67.8% of all distance students (Allen & Seaman, 2017).

2. WHAT IS ONLINE LEARNING?

According to the University of North Carolina, online (distance) education is “a coherent course of study in which the student is at a distance from the campus and the instructor may or may not be in the same place as the student” (Xu & Xu, 2019, p. 34). Xu and Xu also reported that the “Babson Survey Research Group and the Instructional Technology Council define online courses as those in which at least 80 percent of instruction is delivered online” (p. 34). Instruction can be synchronous (simultaneous) or asynchronous (at different times). Most global universities and colleges offer online options to more than 6.7 million students, and 31% of all higher education learners took at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2017); online education is a critical long-term business model for global higher education institutions (Lederman, 2018). Online learning has become a core educational delivery method at most institutions of higher education; in fact, 66% of chief academic leaders reported that online learning was critical to their long-term revenue growth (Allen & Seaman, 2015).

3. WHY IS ONLINE LEARNING IMPORTANT FOR STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES?

A power shift is occurring in global higher education, driven by two trends: (a) the increased freedom of learners to access, create, and re-create content; and (b) the opportunity for learners to interact with each other outside of a mediating agent, i.e., an instructor. Information access and dialogue, previously under control of the educator, can now be readily accessed by online learners (Hoffman, 2018).

Online learning allows potential students more accessibility to degree programs, courses, resources and faculty. Students can actively engage in course work and study online from virtually anywhere in the world, and at a time that is convenient to the student. Online learning also permits non-traditional students to communicate, collaborate, and study with peers (Lemoine, Hackett, & Richardson, 2016). This type of flexibility permits students to coordinate their academic schedule with their existing work and family schedules rather than having to take time away from work or family to attend brick and mortar facilities. Through online learning, students can facilitate their career options while pursuing work or other activities (Simpson, 2013a). With the prediction (Carnevale & Smith, 2013), that up to 60 percent of new jobs created in the global knowledge driven economy will require advanced education, colleges and universities have increased the numbers of students taking online classes (Richardson, Brinson, & Lemoine, 2018). In the online delivery mode, the learner, not the instructor, can control what they want to learn in terms of coursework, when they want to learn (face-to-face or online), and where they want to learn (traditional campus or online) (Torres, Evans, & Schneider, 2019).

Some students struggle with online courses due to a myriad of reasons. First, online learners need to be self-directed learners, must be able to access and use online courses; and they must be able to use computer technology (Alfonso & Garcia, 2016). Additionally, most online learners are working on their own. Online learners have to “learn course materials independently, manage time wisely, keep track of progress on course assignments, overcome technical difficulties and the feeling of isolation, and take the initiative to communicate with instructors and peers for questions and group assignments” (Chan, Mense, Crain-Dorough, Richardson, & Lane, 2013, p. 73). There is limited social interaction in online courses; while students may be joined in groups for work assignments,
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