

TROY eCampus 2011 eColloquium

Retention: You are the Key!
Instructor Strategies for Retaining Students
April 12-14, 2011




How Can I Improve Retention in My Online Class?



The Retention Problem


In a teleconference, PBS Adult Learning Services noted:

“Student attrition is one of the biggest obstacles to the credibility – and as a result, the success – of online learning...The issue is vital both in terms of students’ academic success and institutional viability.”




Online Education in the United States

- A 2010 Sloan survey concluded:
 - Over 5.6 million students were taking at least one online course during the fall 2009 term
 - An increase of nearly 1 million students over the number reported the previous year



Questions Related to Improving Retention


1. What are students' major expectations from an online course?
2. Can any student characteristics determine whether or not they will succeed in an online course?
3. What can online instructors do to improve the probability of retention and student success?
4. What characteristics identify an exemplary online educator?



1. What are Students' major expectations from an online course:


A study conducted at Texas A&M asked the open ended question, "What are your needs and expectations as an Internet student?" The top three answers were:

- Communication with the professor
- Instructor feedback in a timely manner
- Challenging online courses of the same quality as campus courses




Communication with the professor


- Reply to email on a timely basis
- Reply to discussion postings when needed
- Check Dropbox submissions
- Let students know if you will be out of town or will not have Internet access
- Research reports that there is an overwhelming feeling of being alone for many online students as illustrated by the following comments:



- “When I am not able to understand certain terms in the content or not able to work on an assignment, getting immediate help from the instructor is very, very important. Unfortunately that does not happen too often.”




- Another student said, “I am lost most of the time. I don’t really know if I have participated well, or if my contribution to the course is sufficient in the eyes of my instructor...The minute you post questions through email, and don’t get a reply after 5 minutes, 15 minutes, an hour or more, you’ll feel frustrated.”



Instructor feedback in a timely manner


- What is meant by a “timely manner”?
- For the instructor – 48 hours seems reasonable
- For the student – 24 hours or less (usually less)

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Challenging online courses of same quality as campus courses

- Courses with the same title and course number should have the same learning objectives, the same requirements, and the same tests as F2F courses
- More work should not be required of online students than on-campus students – only a different learning format
- Equal recognition with on-campus students – same student services (library, bookstore, advising)



2. Can any student characteristics determine success in online education?

- A study conducted in a western Michigan community college examined 13 student characteristics including:
 - Gender, age, previous courses completed online, ACT scores, GPA, computer literacy, previous withdrawal record, student status (full- or part-time), and attendance at an orientation session.



Results of this research

- Strongest connection to student success was grade point average
- Other strong factors
 - Online course orientation
 - College entrance exam scores
 - Computer literacy
 - Age of the student (overall non-traditional students had higher grades)
 - Adequate student support services




Are learning styles connected to student success?

- Results found:
 - Self-esteem and comprehension strategies were positively related to learning success
 - Both age and intrinsic motivation had a small significant correlation to learning success
 - Learning styles were not automatically related to learning success




Why do students fail?

- Research shows the top reason for failure is:
- Students get behind and cannot catch up
 - Poor time management skills
 - Underestimate requirements of an online course



Primary factors related to online student failure:

- Carrying a full course load
- Lack of experience in higher education in general
- Lack of experience with online courses
- Busy lives outside of school
- Lack of maturity
- Lack of easy access to computers




3. What can online instructors do to improve the probability of retention and student success?

- Provide early course information
- Sample assignments
- Clarified instructor expectations
- Anticipation of student questions
- Track students closely – especially the first 2-3 weeks
- Create learning communities




- Design online programs/course clusters for cohorts
- Use the same course management platform for all online courses



4. What characteristics identify an exemplary online educator?

- A study by Perry and Edwards noted three major themes resulting from a student survey that identified exemplary online educators
 - **Challengers**
 - **Affirmers**
 - **Influencers**



Students' comments

“My best learning moments often occurred as I was struggling to grasp a complex concept and the instructor provided clarity through the use of practical examples.”


“She (the instructor) would send you a little email just out of the blue to let you know you were on track.”

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Summary


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- When we look back at everything we have talked about this morning, I think you will see one common thread that runs through these major considerations
 - What students are expecting from an online course
 - Characteristics that show why students succeed or fail in online programs
 - What online instructors can do to make sure students succeed
 - Characteristics we see in exemplary or exceptional online instructors
- The one common thread is:



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We need to make sure we use technology not only to design challenging courses but also to answer the needs and expectations of our students so they can succeed in an online environment.




“Teachers can make online learning more valuable for students by understanding their needs rather than trying to find an innovative use of delivery systems.”

Cathleen A. Kennedy




Questions/Comments

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