Cultivating Supportive Learning Communities

to Increase Retention and Success in

Online Programs

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Abstract

As the number of online students increases, it is essential that colleges and universities offer support for those enrolled in online courses and programs leading to degree attainment. Online learning programs are prevalent and schools are concerned with maintaining student retention rates. Academic attrition, when students leave before not completing their education or fulfilling program completion requirements, is of particular concern. This study examines the methods of engagement that cultivate supportive online learning communities that lead to increased retention and success in online programs. The discussion emphasizes key findings and future possibilities for developing online learning communities, which support students in successfully completing their programs within the timeframes required for their degrees or certificates.

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Introduction

Enrollment in online college and university programs continues to grow. The modality is one that undeniably has been a paradigm shift for many allowing the continuance and pursuit of educational goals. The importance of retention strategies increases when online courses are considered. Colleges and universities diligently work to recruit students. Yet, once enrolled, programs often do not build a process and strategy for retention. Research to date on the efficacy of online versus in-person learning suggests that students tend to fare worse in online classes. Randomized studies, that assigned students to either in-person or online learning, have shown online learning to have negative impacts on course performance (Figlio et al., 2013; Alpert et al., 2016). Additional studies employing quasi-experimental methods find that online learning decreases course completion, final grade, and enrollment persistence, and increases course repetition (Bettinger et al. 2017; Hart et al., 2016; Xu & Jaggars, 2011, 2013).

study. In 2019, this jumped to 36 percent. In 2020, most likely due to COVID-19,

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researchers examined social interactions and engagement among students of a PhD cohort. Helping students overcome the sense of "alienation" and "the need for connectedness" that they often feel initially in an online course is of prime concern for those designing online curricula and spaces (Zembylas, 2008, p. 80).

Analysis

Online learning is nothing new; the format existed for years before the COVID pandemic, where we saw numbers soar as more people moved to online learning platforms, including the post-secondary population. The speed of this transition meant that most institutions focused on helping faculty adapt to new platforms. An unintended consequence was that the online learning environment rarely met all the needs of the students. Online courses offer significant advantages for students, including flexibility. In the past decade, there has been a 100 percent increase in student enrollment in online courses (Muljana & Luo, 2019). Theorists

students and one of the main benefits that draws them in. Offering such platforms may permit

more students to be able to continue their education yet the lack of a face-to-face connection and

support in online courses

building that are inherent in brick-and-mortar environments. Engaged students are more likely to overcome challenges, grasp concepts quickly, persevere to meet academic goals tend to get more out of courses, and are more likely to stay enrolled. The impact of technology and human connection, individually and interactively, within the online environment is one that institutions must consider. An analysis of the data collected from this study found that significant correlations exist that confirm the imperativeness of both technology and relationships in the learning success of students in online-based learning environments.

Universities contribute to the problem when they fail to establish effective processes and strategies for preparing students for the experience and expectations of online programs. As universities begin to recognize the importance of preparing students prior to beginning courses, they will find that prepared students become engaged faster and have a stronger sense of support in online learning. Distance learning brings inherent unknowns (Hartnett et al., 2018), which can evoke emotions and anxieties. Students may experience stress when needing additional support to navigate the online classroom or having content-related questions. However, they cannot ask them in the same manner as in a traditional setting. Distance education

Strayhorn (2018) suggests that various factors can influence students' sense of belonging. These include enrolling in the "right" academic major and aspects of the campus environment, such as inclusiveness of gender and gender identity, minority status, age, and physical and cognitive ability. Online programs are also influenced by these same factors. Meaningful interactions with faculty and peers, social support from peers, understanding program expectations, ease with technology and perceived classroom comfort also play a role in influencing a sense of belonging.

Universities are finding success in hosting online orientation sessions for students prior to the start of their first semester. These orientation sessions are designed to assist in connecting students to resources, acclimating them to the program, boosting students' confidence, familiarizing them with university platforms and connecting them with the university community. Students who complete orientation programs are more likely to complete their first semester (Wells, 2023). Once students complete the first semester and see that they can be successful there is a better chance they maintain enrollment.

Instructors can be creative in thinking of easy ways to help students feel less alienated and connected. The curriculum is designed and instructors are tasked with planning, creating activities, and facilitating learning. Faculty can set time aside and schedule live, synchronous sessions for highly interactive content that necessitates group problem-solving (Sandars et al., 2020). Encouraging peer discussions, hosting virtual meetings up and student-organized group texts support connectedness. Suggesting and providing activities that support mindfulness, journaling, and making similar resources available assists in ensuring student needs are met; this is critical to support and encourage self-care and student mental health. The instructor is the pivotal participant in the online learning experience, helping facilitate productive dialogue,

encouraging the exploration of new concepts, and providing timely feedback (Augustsson &

community should be the priority of colleges and universities. While creating stronger relationships and engagement through these supportive communities, they ultimately produce more enhanced and positive experiences for students. Through these efforts, the aim is to realize the overarching goal of creating and facilitating preferable online programs where students recognize and feel the effort of support and academic outcomes for all.

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