Student Retention in Online Education

Mac Adkins
Troy State University Montgomery, USA

Wanda B. Nitsch
University of St. Augustine for Health Services, USA

INTRODUCTION

Successful program completion in an online education context is a combination of learner attributes, the university's focus on meeting the needs of the students, and providing a quality educational product. This article focuses on the needs of the online student and how a program can provide the educational services that promote student retention. By recognizing distance education student needs and putting strategies into place to best meet those needs, programs can have a high course and program completion rate to meet accreditation standards and provide financial stability for the institution.

BACKGROUND

The primary role of a student is to learn. This requires attention to planning, the ability to analyze and solve problems, and the inner drive to persist with the learning. These tasks can easily be challenged when barriers to successful learning are presented. Add the element of online education, and the process of student learning can become even more complex, sometimes leading to unsuccessful course and program completion. With efforts to offer quality, learner-centered education, institutions need to have certain strategies in place to promote student success via learning and degree completion. This article will examine the literature to determine the demographics and attributes of successful distance education students in the online environment and the barriers that may prevent success. A variety of strategies that are suggested by researchers will be discussed. Several gaps in the current literature discovered in studying student retention issues will be summarized, and the need for a strategic plan to address student attrition will be presented.

This article will discuss student retention as it relates to education programs that offer curriculum content completely by Internet-based delivery mechanisms. Online education utilizes the Internet to transmit course material and communication between the teacher and students. Augmented by textbooks and study guides, online students frequently participate in synchronous and asynchronous communication to build concepts, share ideas, and analyze problems. With online programs, all learning activities are completed at a distance, meaning that little or no face-to-face contact is utilized during the delivery of the program curriculum.

Retention can be defined in a variety of ways. Martinez (2003) describes it as "the number of learners or students who progress from one part of an educational program to the next" (p. 3). It can be defined by some academic institutions to be relevant to program completion (Kerka, 1988). For others, retention is successful when students are able to retain information learned in a course. Kerka (1995) reports that retention is "to keep learners in programs until they achieve their goals" (p. 1).

Attrition is the opposite of retention. Student attrition is the falling off or stoppage of coursework and degree progression that results in a decrease in the number of learners or students engaged in some course of study. This is the student that, for some reason, decides to drop out of a degree program, does not persist in a course, or withdraws from a university.

Retention of adult students in online programs is a persistent and perplexing problem for providers of adult education. *With online learning, there is a greater likelihood that a student will not complete courses and stay enrolled in an online program than in an on-campus course* (Palloff &

Pratt, 2001). *Student dropout rates in online courses are as high as 35% to 50%, as compared to traditional classes* (Lynch, 2001). With poor retention rates, there are financial implications, accreditation concerns, and the negative impact on reputation. Institutions spend significant resources in attracting and admitting students. When these students leave the institution without completing a degree, this could be considered a loss in an investment by a college or university. Successfully reducing the dropout rate and stabilizing enrollments allows for better allocation of delivery resources, as well as providing improved return on investment (Martinez, 2003). There is a financial loss also to the student who does not complete a degree program, but at the same time incurs tuition costs for courses but minimum long-term financial gain in the way of a higher salary, the common result of degree attainment.

Accreditation bodies place considerable emphasis on accountability regarding the quality of education (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2000). One standard that accrediting bodies frequently track is the rate of course and program completion. A low rate of student retention can be a red flag signaling poor quality education that is not meeting the needs of the student. With poor completion rates, institutions are at risk of losing accreditation or being placed on probation. This act would again have financial implications, considering that many federal student loan programs are tied to maintaining a good accreditation rating.

Efforts to provide courses to a broader number of students are seen as a way to be more competitive in the market for new students, and offers increased financial security for universities losing governmental appropriations (Scott, 1999). In this drive for increased use of technology to deliver course materials, efforts to recognize the needs of the student have not always been in the forefront of planning. With limited research in the elements of quality online education, there were initial concerns with the low retention rates in distance education courses. Administrators and faculty were left wondering: 1) Who are the distance education students and what problems do they face? 2) What do they need in order to be successful? and 3) How can institutions offer an educational product that is satisfying and leads to student success? Over the last 15 years,

research results have started to answer these questions. With a focus on online course delivery, more attention is being placed on learner-centered approaches that can help to retain students (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). One way to be more focused on the learner is to first examine their attributes and the challenges they face as students

Who Are Distance Education Learners and What Barriers Do They Face?

Many distance education learners are older, and have jobs and families (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright & Zvacek, 2003). They must be able to coordinate the various aspects of their lives in order to have dedicated time for studying (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Role conflict, time management, family problems, and economic concerns can all be barriers to online learning. An adult learner may underestimate the commitment required to completing a degree or not properly anticipate the level of student responsibilities needed to be successful.

The accelerated pace of online learning can require assignments due every week, and burnout could become a problem. It would be easy for a student to take a break from coursework and then never return. A student that procrastinates is particularly vulnerable and quickly overwhelmed as assignment dates come and go with little progress toward completion.

Many learners returning to school are doing so for career-related reasons (Fjortoft, 1995). Their goal is to increase their earning potential, gain more career satisfaction, or seek a promotion. Some take courses to broaden their education but are not really interested in completing a degree. This voluntary participation can influence the effort one puts toward course or degree completion (Salih, 2003). A student that is not able to maintain motivation and strong attention to the goals being sought is going to have a difficult time focusing on school work, especially in light of the competing responsibilities of work and family.

Many have been away from formal education and studying for a length of time. They may be unsure of themselves and the ability to perform academically (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). This lack of confidence may be from bad previous experiences or a significant number of years away from

academic course work (Salih, 2003). They can also be unsure of how to learn via online education, for in most cases, this is a new type of learning method (Simonson et al., 2003). The more inexperience that is present with previous learning, the higher the anxiety a student may feel about meeting the expectations of the faculty (Palloff & Pratt, 2001).

Adult learners may also bring a communication style that may or may not be well suited for online learning. Communication apprehension is a problem that has been found in completion of telecourses (Pugliese, 1994). This apprehension is associated with real or anticipated communication with others. Traditional students with high communication apprehension tend to quietly sit in a large lecture room, having minimal interpersonal contact with the instructor or other students. In most online courses, all students are expected to participate in the discussions. There is no sitting in the back of the room. A student that is not willing to interact with a high level of interpersonal communication that includes sharing life, work, and educational experience may not feel comfortable in the online environment and chose to drop out of the program.

Many adult learners consider themselves to have limited technical abilities (Willis, 2003). They are not accustomed to using the computer, considering themselves incapable of handling the computer requirements (Lynch, 2001). Anything that prevents a student's ability to log onto a course such as an inadequate Internet service provider, faculty equipment, or poor knowledge of using the software can lead to frustration and be a barrier to learning.

The online learner is isolated from many of the social activities of learning (White & Weight, 2000). The online student lacks immediate support of peers and instructors, an important element of student success as described in Tinto's (1993) model of attrition. In this model, several factors that impact attrition are explained, with emphasis placed on the need for social integration as part of the learning process. Lonely people tend to be less involved in the learning process (Pugliese, 1994). With this lack of physical proximity, there is a decrease in the motivation to succeed in the online courses.

What Are the Attributes of the Successful Online Learner?

Web-based learning requires new skills for the student that are not always required in traditional classroom learning (Buchanan, 1999). Online students must be able to seek out information and reconstruct it independently. They must be able to present their ideas, argue perspectives, and incorporate experiences in a medium where all visual cues are eliminated and communication occurs over a week instead of a 50-minute lecture.

There are several personality factors that have been investigated in the literature, with mixed results concerning their influence on the success of distance education students. Dille and Mezack (1991) examined predictors of academic difficulty and attrition in relation to locus of control and learning style. An internal locus of control is characterized by the belief that personal achievement is due to ability and effort, as opposed to luck, fate, or situational factors. They found that older, married students with more internal locus of control and high grade point averages were the most likely to be unsuccessful. Correlating success with learning style and number of college credit hours taken at one time were not significant variables.

Intrinsic motivation is another important characteristic of a successful online student. Fjortoft (1995) found that students with high levels of perceived intrinsic benefits were more likely to persist in the program. Her study showed that "motivation stems from an internal desire for more satisfaction and challenge in one's career, rather than desires for enhanced salary and career mobility" (p. 6).

In the online environment, students no longer have to depend on the faculty member to direct the learning. The student is empowered to speak out and proceed with new learning as discussions and new information is presented. In their case study, Yang, Huang, and Hu (2001) describe field independence to be a strong indicator for students in a distance learning teacher program. It is this trait that will help students apply learning to a variety of situations. There is apparently a connection in one's

personality between independence and self-directedness. They believe this independence is necessary in order to allocate appropriate time management to make progress in Web-based distance education courses.

With the delivery of course content dependent on technology, it is important that students have access to a computer and are comfortable with the technology (Milton, 1998). A successful student should have the basic skills needed to effectively manage the course content, and this level could vary depending on the course and program requirements.

A final profile to consider for the successful student is the level of formal education achievement. Research by Coggins (1988) examined factors that account for a student's success or failure in distance education programs. No difference was found with gender, occupation, or marital status. Differences were found with educational level prior to enrollment, intention to earn a degree, and length of time since last college credit course. There appears to be more success for students that have achieved a previous degree. It is possible that these students have developed learning strategies over time that provide for academic success.

FUTURE STRATEGIES/TRENDS TO IMPROVE RETENTION

How does one develop and maintain an online program that supports successful online students? Given the research results of who is successful and the barriers commonly present for online students, proposals for strategies can be made that will overcome these barriers and lead even the "at-risk" student to success.

One area that is commonly discussed in literature is instructional design strategies that will improve retention. Instructors and course designers that are well attuned to the needs of the adult student should provide a well-constructed, interesting learning environment.

The instructor is a key factor in retention. They are the ones that are going to organize and bring life to the content material. Active, problem-solving, goal-oriented, and cooperative learning is the most successful teaching strategy (Conrad, 1993). Teachers need to tailor instruction to student needs, set the climate for learning, listen, and allow open discussion (Kerka, 1988). Instructors that facilitate the building of community will be the most successful in bringing sociability into an environment known to be void of human emotion (Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

Students need some form of socialization in order to feel like they are part of the institution. Even though they do not live on campus, they need strong ties to the academic culture and peer learners. Another way to assist students to be successful is to offer student orientation to better prepare the learner (Salih, 2003). Student orientation should include assessment of ability, self-esteem, learning style, motivations, and values (Kerka, 1988). Kerka believes that adult learners may get frustrated early by lack of progress or by not getting enough information before starting courses to know what to expect and what they must do to achieve it.

Offering good technical support is one way to overcome the frustration of inadequate technical competence. There should be telephone and e-mail contact with a human voice or online tutorials for quick response to questions in real time.

Mentorship and advisement should be available. Cookson (1990) suggests that "skilled diagnostic counseling" (p. 1) should be used to assist students in discovering their level of commitment, and relating this to academic goals and career achievement.

Part of a good advisement program is an early detection for those at risk. This could include those that had a previous bad experience with school, lack self-confidence, had employment and child care conflicts, had opposition to their continuing education from significant others, and suffered financial difficulties. Institutions need a program in place that will find out who the at-risk students are.

One tool that schools are using to identify students who are at risk of not succeeding in an online course is READI—Readiness for Education At a Distance Indicator. READI is a Web-based tool that assesses students' likelihood for succeeding in an online learning program. READI indicates the degree to which an individual student possesses attributes that contribute to success in online learning, including: self-motivation; time-management skills; self-discipline; reading comprehension; persistence; availability of time; and ability to use a laptop, printer, software, and the Internet. According to the provider:

READI does not rely on simple self-assessment questions with obvious 'right' and 'wrong' answers. Rather, through a sequence of activities measures the degree to which students possess the traits needed for success in studying at a distance. READI provides an immediate score and diagnostic interpretation of results to the student and to their school. (http://www.readi.info)

Overall, the ingredients for good student retention can be divided into three broad categories: 1) the personal attributes relating to cognitive, affective, and psychological behaviors that internally offer a student a better chance for success; 2) the teacher's role in developing an interactive course that promotes organized learning; and 3) an institution that offers a curriculum, student services, academic policies and procedures, and technological access that are learner focused.

CONCLUSION

Given the diversity of adult distance education students, there are many reasons why students become non-completers. They may present with one or two predisposing factors that make it difficult but are able to persist, and then one final challenge presents itself and the student can no longer continue in the course or program. *Because of the myriad of issues related to student retention, an institution should consider a wide variety of approaches to address this problem.*

According to Kirk and Bartelstein (1999), less than one-third of higher education institutions have a plan for distance learning on the Internet, despite offering such courses to students. This meager attempt at planning could lead to student dissatisfaction, high attrition rates, and restrict program development.

Seamless institutional support and services can determine the success or failure of an online learning program (Buchanan, 2000). While departments and instructors may be the frontline troops interacting with the student, there are other institutional mechanisms in place that may present more barriers than a student can comfortably maneuver. Poor course registration processes, difficulty accessing library materials, or poor communication between admissions and financial aid are just a few of the possible areas that may leave students caught in a quagmire of bureaucratic policies and procedures that can lead to student frustration and eventual dropout.

It appears that the research is adequate at examining the characteristics of the successful or unsuccessful student and in recognizing the barriers, but there is a paucity of research demonstrating effectiveness of online strategies that may impact the retention problem. Advice is offered, but very few of the ideas are supported by empirical evidence. Without subjecting these strategies to scientific critique, the use of these strategies merely becomes a trial-and-error approach to what works best and under what situations.

The use of online education has offered new opportunities for administrators, teachers, and students, but has required adjustments in how education is provided and the responsibilities of students. Despite multiple advantages of online education, there are many considerations educational institutions need to address in order to meet the needs of a diverse, adult learner population. Adult students have known attributes that will guide them to successful course and program completion. For students that enter online programs lacking one or more of these attributes, they need to be identified and remedial programs developed so they can overcome these difficulties. Combining positive student attributes with a program that administers quality educational products, a curriculum that is designed with specific outcomes, well-trained faculty, and support services that are easily accessible provides the optimum environment for student and institutional success. Learning needs may be enough to attract a student to a program, but it is not enough to retain them. Taking the time to accurately measure retention data and establishing a plan to address deficiencies in student retention is one way to promote student retention and better use of resources.

REFERENCES

Buchanan, E.A. (2000). Going the extra mile: Serving distance education students. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, 3*(Spring).

Retrieved February 18, 2002, from *http://www.westga.edu/~distance/buchanan31.html*

Buchanan, E.A. (1999). Assessment measures: Pretests for successful distance teaching and learning? *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, 2*(Winter). Retrieved February 18, 2002, from *http://www.westga.edu/~distance/buchanan24.html*

Coggins, C.C. (1988). Preferred learning styles and their impact on completion of external degree programs. *The American Journal of Distance Education, 2,* 25-37.

Conrad, J. (1993). Educating part-time adult learners in transition. *ERIC Digest*. Retrieved November 7, 2003, from *http://www.ericfacility.net/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed360946.html*

Cookson, P. (1990). Persistence in distance education. In M.G. Moore et al. (Eds.), *Contemporary issues in American distance education.* Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Cookson, P. (1990). Persistence in distance education. In M.G. Moore (Ed.), *Contemporary issues in American distance education.* Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Council for Higher Education Accreditation. (2002). *Accreditation and assuring quality in distance learning.* CHEA Institute for Research and Study of Accreditation and Quality Assurance. CHEA Monograph Series, Number 1.

DECADE Consulting. (2004). READI—Readiness for Education At a Distance Indicator. Retrieved August 3, 2004, from *http://www.readi.info*

Dille, B. & Mezack, M. (1991). Identifying predictors of high risk among community college telecourse students. *The American Journal of Distance Education, 5,* 24-35.

Fjortoft, N.F. (1995, October). Predicting persistence in distance learning programs. *Proceedings of the Mid-Western Educational Research Meeting,* Chicago, IL.

Kerka, S. (1988). Strategies for retaining adult students: The educationally disadvantages. *ERIC Digest,* (76). Retrieved November 7, 2003, from *www.ericfacility.net/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed299455.html*

Kerka, S. (1995). Adult learner retention revisited. *ERIC Digest,* (166). Retrieved November 7, 2003, from *http://www.ericfacility.net/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed389880.html*

Kirk, E. & Bartelstein, A. (1999). Libraries close in on distance education. *Library Journal*, *124,* 40-43.

Lynch, M.M. (2001). Effective student preparation for online learning. Retrieved November 3, 2003, from *http://www.elearning.unimass.my/Featured Site/archives/000036.html*

Martinez, M. (2003). High attrition rates in e-learning: Challenges, predictors, and solutions. *The E-Learning Developers Journal.* Retrieved October 30, 2003, from *http://www.elearningguild.com/pdf/2/071403MGT-L.pdf*

Milton, K. (1998, Spring). Self-direction and learner control: The successful distance learner. Retrieved December 10, 2003, from *http://seamonkey.ed.asu.edu/~winograd/emc703A/6/milton6.html*

Moore, M.G. & Kearsley, G. (1996). *Distance education: A systems review*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.

Palloff, R.M. & Pratt, K. (2003). *The virtual student*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Palloff, R.M. & Pratt, K. (2001). *Lessons from the cyberspace classroom.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Palloff, R.M. & Pratt, K. (1999). *Building learning communities in cyberspace.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Pugliese, R.R. (1994). Telecourse persistence and psychological variables. *The Journal of Distance Education,* 22-39.

Salih. (2003). Advantages of computer based educational technologies for adult learners. Retrieved December 9, 2003, from *http://www.tojet.sakarya.edu.tr/current%20articles/usun.htm*

Scott, S.V. (1999). The academic as service provider: Is the customer always right? *Journal of Higher Education Policy & Management, 21,* 193-203.

Simonson, M., Smaldino, S., Albright, M., & Zvacek, S. (2003). *Teaching and learning at a distance: Foundations of distance education*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice-Hall.

Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

White, K.W., & Weight, B.H. (2000). *The online teaching guide: A handbook of attitudes, strategies, and techniques for the virtual classroom.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Willis, B. (2003). Strategies for learning at a distance. Retrieved December 18, 2003, from *http://www.uidaho.edu/eo/dist8.html*

Yang, J.T., Huang, H.J., & Hu, P.Y. (2001). A case study of implementing a distance education program. Retrieved December 9, 2003, from *http://www.icce2001.org/cd/pdf/p08/TW106.pdf*

KEY TERMS

Attrition: The falling off or stoppage of coursework and degree progression that results in a decrease in the number of learners or students engaged in some course of study.

Communication Apprehension: Apprehension associated with real or anticipated communication with others. Traditional students with high communication apprehension tend to quietly sit in a large lecture room, having minimal interpersonal contact with the instructor or other students.

Internal Locus of Control: Characterized by the belief that personal achievement is due to ability and effort, as opposed to luck, fate, or situational factors.

Intrinsic Motivation: Motivation that stems from an internal desire for more satisfaction and challenge in one's career, rather than desires for enhanced salary and career mobility.

Persistence: Relating to the act of continuing toward an educational goal. Many institutions track this information to determine who completes their degree or certificate "on time" or within a stated period of time.

Retention: The number of learners or students who progress from one part of an educational program to the next.

Socialization: The adoption of the behavior patterns of the surrounding culture.