

Faculty and Administrator Perspectives on Online Course Retention: A Case Study

Christy D. Hawkins

Thomas Nelson Community College

Abstract

Community colleges currently provide the largest proportion of online courses in the U.S. and are the fastest growing segment of online higher education. Multiple empirical studies have examined student challenges and retention in this instructional environment. Despite this trend, few have addressed the perspectives of those responsible for administering, developing, and delivering online courses. This case study explored the perspectives of faculty and administrators toward challenges faced by students completing online courses through the use of administrator interviews, faculty focus groups, and observation of student advising sessions. Analysis revealed that faculty and administrators shared similar perspectives on challenges faced by students and proposed similar solutions to improve online course retention. Implications for community college distance-learning programs and directions for future research are provided.

Online learning removes barriers of time and place, allowing many who might not otherwise have access to higher education an opportunity to gain transferrable job and life skills. Institutions of higher education in the United States have experienced an explosion in online course enrollment over the past two decades. The National Center for Educational Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 2003) reported that distance education courses accounted for over 3 million enrollments and 127,000 courses at two- and four-year degree-granting institutions. More recent statistics from Allen and Seaman (2007) indicate that two-year institutions produce more than 50% of online course enrollments and are the fastest growing segment for online higher education.

While the popularity of online learning environments has increased, retention remains a significant challenge. Empirical studies demonstrate the broad discrepancy in online course retention rates. Diaz (2002) compared online and live versions of health education courses held at one college over three semesters. While achievement at the end of each semester revealed higher grades for the online students, drop rates were almost twice as high for online students

(13.5%) as for those in live courses (7.2%). In a case study of the early years of distance learning at a private university serving primarily working adults, Lynch (2001) found drop rates of 35–50% in online courses as compared to 14% for live courses. Thus, while the exact discrepancy in retention between course delivery methods varies, retention in online courses is consistently lower than that seen in live courses (Diaz, 2002; Lynch, 2001; Manchura, 2004; Nelson, 2006). One must complete individual courses in order to complete an entire degree or credential, making retention a critical link in the chain of educational attainment. Continued demand for online learning necessitates improved online course retention to facilitate the success of both students and communities.

Previous research has explored online retention from the perspectives of student performance (Ashkeboussi, 2001; Davies & Graff, 2005; Edmonds, 2006), student satisfaction (Barakzai & Fraser, 2005; Fearing & Riley, 2005; Simpson & Du, 2004), and specific interactive tools (Jin, 2005; Poole, 2000; Wang, 2007). Few, however, have explored faculty and administrator perspectives toward online course retention. It is critical that those responsible for developing, administering, and evaluating online courses recognize the barriers faced by online students so they can better prepare themselves and their students for this educational environment. Further, bringing faculty and administrator perspectives to the forefront provides an opportunity to propose solutions to the challenges faced by online learners.

As online course enrollments in community colleges continue to rise, practitioners must establish policies and practices to facilitate success for students, and it was the intent of this case study to encourage that process. Therefore, the purpose of this case study was to explore faculty and administrator perspectives on the challenges students face in completing online courses. To accomplish this purpose, the researcher (1) interviewed community college administrators whose organizational roles related directly to online learning, (2) conducted focus groups with faculty experienced in teaching online courses, and (3) observed faculty during advising sessions with students to answer the following research questions: What do faculty and administrators identify as challenges faced by students in completing online courses? What solutions do faculty and administrators recommend to overcome identified challenges to online course completion?