

Proper Support Improves Online Student Success

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ABSTRACT

To ensure success of students enrolled in distance learning courses factors such as training for instructors, allocation of resources, administrative support, perceived relevance of content to the student's career or personal interests, degree of student support, amount and nature of feedback and amount of time/effort required as well as establishment of learning communities are critical. Unfortunately, these services are not always in place when colleges first begin to venture into distance education. In addition, faculty members are often reluctant to develop courses in the absence of sufficient support from administrators and technical staff, not only for themselves, but their students as well. This article will discuss these issues and why they are important for student success.

Keywords: Student Success, Distance Learning Support, Empathy, Learning Communities, Teaching On-line

SUCCESS FACTORS

Distance learning presents a unique way to teach a traditional course. However, many colleges and universities do not start with a well thought out plan to ensure student success for this mode of instruction. Traditional courses are taken and placed into a web-based format using programs such as Blackboard or WebCT and distance learning is born. This approach causes problems for the student. Creating an effective distance learning program requires a lot of planning, thought and change in the curriculum as well as allocation of resources.

Taking distance learning courses is not for all students. Hardy and Boaz [1] found that "compared to most face-to-face learning environments, distance learning requires students to be more focused, better time managers, and to be able to work independently and with group members". Many distance education students are working full time or stay-at-home child caregivers.

To be successful, the distance learning program must create an environment in which students can learn effectively. Students invest of their time and money and need to feel it is well spent; therefore, developing a course that will enhance their learning as well as provide a learning community helps to ensure success of the distance learning student.

Moore [2] stated there were various factors for student success:

1. perceived relevance of the content to their career or personal interests;
2. amount of time/effort required;
3. degree of student support available;
4. nature of the media used for course delivery and interaction;

5. nature of the pacing or scheduling involved;
6. amount and nature of feedback received from instructors on assignments and on course progress; and
7. amount and nature of interaction with instructor and other students.

◆ Perceived Relevance

Often students enroll in an on-line course because it is required for their major or because they believe it will be easy – no class to attend, just work on their computer and complete assignments -- only to find the reverse is the case. If the course is of no relevance to their career goals, they are more likely to drop the course.

◆ Amount of Time/Effort

Finding a course too difficult, too time consuming, or requiring too much effort will cause students to become frustrated. At the beginning of the course, or before the student signs up, counseling should be done detailing how much work a distance education course is going to take and why. It is imperative that students understand they must read their textbook, complete assignments, quizzes or tests without the aid of other students and/or instructor in a classroom to help them.

◆ Degree of Student Support Available

This area covers a wide range of support services from technical help to feedback from the instructor, or course guide. If a student encounters difficulty with logging in, navigation through the course, or limited or no feedback, their frustration level will cause them to often drop the course or become "lurkers" or "witness learners" – not participating in the course, just reading the materials posted by the instructor and fellow classmates.

◆ Nature of Media Used

Students should be aware that they need to have an Internet Service Provider (ISP) account to complete courses through distance education via computers. If the course requires a certain type of software, this also needs to be explained. Having a resource for students to receive help with technical equipment or problems is essential for success. Often students feel afloat in a sea of computer problems with no rescue in site. Instructors are often able to help with minor computer problems, but technology staff also needs to be available to answer questions of a more technical nature.

◆ Nature of Pacing or Scheduling

If the course has deadlines when content modules open and close, the student needs to be aware of these dates. Examination dates as well as assignment dates need to be stipulated in the course in the form of a calendar that the student can print out. Students also need to be informed not to wait until the last minute to complete assignments due to technical difficulties that might arise at the last moment. Students also need to be aware of what the consequences are for failure to complete assignments and assessments on time. These need to be carefully laid out and told to the student at the beginning of the course.

◆ Amount and Nature of Feedback

This is perhaps one of the most critical areas in terms of student success. Having empathy for students is very important and can be accomplished through course mail or discussions. Three levels of interaction – learner-content interaction, learner-instructor interaction, and learner-learner interaction (Moore, 1996) – need to be practiced by distance education teachers to ensure success of the student. Motivating and maintaining the student's interest in the course are essential keys to success and can be accomplished through activities, feedback, encouragement and support.

Learner-content interaction usually takes the form of the textbook. The instructor needs to consider the textbook used in a distance education course—it cannot be above the student's readability level and must be able to engage the student's interest and career objectives.

Learner-instructor interaction is highly desirable by students and is often lacking in a distance education course. After the content is presented, the student will be responding to assignments and need to receive feedback on their assignments. Indicating how well they completed the assignment, whether they met the objectives or not needs to be given to the student in order for them to feel encouraged and ready to move on to the next part of the course. Failure on the student's part to submit assignments should send up a red flag to the instructor. This usually indicates that something is happening – an illness in the family, overburdened with overtime work or excessive course load or other problems that the instructor needs to react to. Students come into a distance learning class as a “whole” person with a family life, work life, and personal life. Often a student feels there is no one on the other end and starts slacking off without realizing the consequences cannot be corrected and end up failing the course

Learner-learner interaction promotes learning communities inside the course and is desirable for pedagogical reasons. Learner-learner interaction helps students to think through assignments with the aid of other students. Often older, working students take courses along with traditional age college students. Learning takes place through the life experiences of the older adults to the younger students. This type of interaction encourages development of critical and deductive thinking as well as strengthens the students' teamwork skills.

TRAINING FOR INSTRUCTORS

Often it is assumed that teaching distance learning courses are the same as teaching in the classroom and that a good classroom

teacher will make a good distance learning instructor. However, teaching distance learning courses involves changing the way the instructor teaches. The pedagogy of the course is different from a traditional seated class. "Without a sound pedagogical approach to instructional design, an on-line course is little more than linked text." [3] The instructor is no longer the “sage on the stage” but the “guide on the side”. The course becomes learner-centered and instructors need training in how to transfer a traditional seated class into a course for the autonomous learner. Instructors also need to feel comfortable in this new role in terms of the course structure, the software used as well as use of the hardware. Faculty who can adapt their teaching style to technology will be successful and those who cannot, will not. To ensure long-term success, faculty development and support are essential.

ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES

This area is often overlooked when developing distance learning courses, after all the student is the one who needs the computer equipment to complete the course. However, the institution needs to consider how they are going to present the course, what type of media is needed, as well as human resources needed to provide support for the students and the instructor.

Equipment problems and hardware malfunctions can also be a great detriment to the student's success. Frequent equipment failure on the student side results in an inability to maintain a flow of the class as well as hinder their learning process.

TECHNICAL SUPPORT

Another factor often overlooked is the role of the technician to the distance education program. Instructors and technicians need to be able to communicate to work out problems encountered in the course offering. In a 1995 study, Olenski et al., found that technicians could indirectly influence the learning environment by “orientating participants to the technology, reducing the anxiety of the participants” (including the instructor), “and by advising the instructor on instructional techniques” [4].

Students often do not know how to set up their accounts so it is important to have orientation sessions at the beginning of the course to familiarize the student with log in and log out procedures, navigation within the course as well as checking their equipment for compatibility.

Providing on-line tutorials and/or documents on how students operate their hardware and software will alleviate problems and reduce some of the demands on the technical support staff and resources. Adding self-help tools will enable a student to research simple technical problems. This will allow a lot of students to solve their own problems and alleviate the technician's load.

If technical support is not available, faculty becomes the *de facto* providers to the student which is far from an ideal situation. Often the faculty member themselves do not understand how to solve the problems student encounter.

According to the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecourses [5], there are two approaches to providing technical

support which are necessary for a distance education program to be effective:

1. Prepare the student to handle as many of their own technical support issues as possible by giving them information, as well as the means, to do so.
2. Establish a Help Desk that offers help with technical questions that is accessible at off-hours as well as during regular business hours. Provide information on how to contact the Help Desk prominently on the Web site as well as response time. The Help Desk can be an e-mail address or a phone number.

There will be times during a distance education course when the network must be down for maintenance. Be sure to post ahead of schedule the dates and times to help students plan accordingly.

ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

Having a mission and a vision as well as goals for providing distance education courses/programs as well as providing the available resources should be considered first. However, “a surprising number of administrators seem to think that faculty can simply add teaching at a distance to their existing workload” [1]. Purchasing the appropriate equipment to support a distance learning program, allocating human resources for course development, media specialists and technicians is also essential. Faculty are often reluctant to teach distance learning courses without extra compensation and/or support from the technical and support staff.

Administrative support entails providing the online student with the same materials, treatment and support structure that students who have enrolled in face-to-face courses receive, such as orientation for taking online courses, institutional fees and policies, logistics, and academic policies. The online students who do not receive this information feel that they do not belong to the institution.

INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

Research studies have stated there are several factors which predict the probable completion of an on-line course. Among them are:

- ◆ Intent to complete.
- ◆ Early, or punctual, submission of assignments.
- ◆ Completion of other online courses.

Using the above factors, an instructor can predict the students at-risk that may need additional support to complete the course. Support for students is often underdeveloped at most institutions either due to a lack of funds for additional personnel or improper training. There are several features that can be added that will aid the students with their learning with relative little cost.

- ◆ Develop learning communities within the course. These communities provide students with help on assignments, how to navigate through the course, how to find resources required, how to send coursework and encouragement. This has been very successful to students in completing their course(s). In addition to

helping the student, the learning communities provide student-to-student interaction that is so often missing in an online class.

- ◆ Provide empathy through feedback to students on assignments, how well they are doing, why their work is not up to par and how to improve. This is especially important during the first few weeks and needs to be continued throughout the semester. Lack of relevant feedback is one of the most common sources of dissatisfaction and frustration for students. This takes a lot of time, but the success of the students will climb as a result.
- ◆ Add after hour support by providing a telephone number that students can call for emergencies encountered with server problems or the software being used.
- ◆ Provide a hyperlink from the WebCT pages to the library that affords student access to the Library’s databases that can be used as resources for course assignments. Another link called “Ask a Librarian” can be added to the content pages that allow students to seek help in locating resources or ask questions of the librarians. This author’s students have used this resource and found the librarians to provide quick response time to their questions. The students have also found it very beneficial for obtaining access to subject related journals and publications.
- ◆ Provide grading rubrics as well as sample assignments. This will help the student to understand how their assignments are graded as well as what the instructor is looking for in an A, B, C, and D paper.
- ◆ Add a statement to the course syllabus dealing with student responsibility which informs students they are responsible for maintaining their own computers and internet access. It should also state that students should understand that they must address their own technical problems immediately because having such problems does not constitute a valid reason for falling behind in a class.
- ◆ Add a section known as FAQs where students can find answers to the most commonly asked questions. This often helps the student to solve their problem and continue in their progress to complete the course.
- ◆ Add a hyperlink on the college’s homepage called “Distance Learning” that provides information for students (e.g., how to obtain usernames and passwords, what type of browser is required, how to check the browser to ensure that Java and JavaScript have been enabled, what the student needs to know about computers in order to register for an online class, the system requirements as well as software requirements, how to log out and why it is important).
- ◆ Add a Readiness Quiz to online courses that will ask questions dealing with the syllabus, protocols, schedule and other pertinent information about the course. The quiz not only gives the students practice

in taking a quiz/test online, but also informs the instructor that the student has read this information. The quiz has unlimited tries and demonstrates how to take a quiz online without the fear of achieving a certain score.

- ◆ Guide students through the new, challenging experience of discussions. Due to the nature of distance education courses, the students making comments in discussions are usually unknown to each other. It is similar to attending a party blindfolded while engaging in conversation. Distance education courses allow many opportunities to communicate and interact without seeing the faces of the other people participating in the discussion. The instructor needs to intervene cautiously into discussions, being the guide on the side. Instructors can play several roles to accomplish this task – starter, conceptual facilitator, reflective guide, personal muse, mediator, or role player. As the starter, the instructor helps to lay out some responses which will broaden the scope of the discussion. Being a conceptual facilitator will draw from the discussion abstractions. A reflective guide makes comments about the comments made by participants. Using the personal muse role, the instructor allows his/her own views to be critiqued by the students which helps to open up the discussion. The mediator steps in when disagreements cause tension to build and the role player allows the instructor to assume the role of another person to present alternative perspectives without direct confrontation with the other participants.
- ◆ Have a technician in an orientation session at the beginning of the course will help to alleviate problems that might occur in the future. The technician will be able to answer student questions dealing with hardware and software requirements to complete distance learning courses.

CONCLUSIONS

The key to student success is planning at the beginning of the process. Training faculty to use the technology as well as the proper pedagogy for the media, allocating appropriate resources to the program, having technical support available and especially support of the administration are crucial. “For whatever reasons, higher education administrators and politicians understand the need for technology. But, lacking the heart for distance education, they cannot bring themselves to support it with adequate personnel, simple supplies, and a reasonable operating budget”. Administrators need to carefully weigh their goals and objectives when taking on a distance education program. [6] The integral part to distance education played by the technician needs to be realized by the faculty. “Many times opinions and communication between the technician and the instructor are not shared either because the technician’s role is unclear, or there is a shared perception of a difference in status between the two” [4].

Despite the problems encountered in developing a program for distance learning, the future is very bright and greater numbers of students are enrolling in distance education courses. There is a need for “comprehensive and thoughtful evolution of distance

education if it is to become the educational model of the future” [7]. Acquiring the skills to bring success to students takes time and practice so taking the time to develop the distance education program correctly, will ensure the students do indeed succeed.

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