Student Empowerment In An Online Program

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ABSTRACT

Given that online higher education is a competitive marketplace, this paper discusses how to ensure online student success. Within the online learning environment, the following may create the vitality of the online institution: (a) The online learning environment; (b) The role of the instructor; (c) Learning Communities; (d) Computer-mediated Communication Technologies; and (e) Policy and practice. These factors may be managed by the institution of higher education, the faculty member, or the learner; however, a commitment is needed by all stakeholders in the program.

INTRODUCTION

iven today's availability of choice, higher education is a competitive marketplace. Students have the choice of attending traditional face-to-face programs, online programs, and even blended programs where both formats are provided. While each program has trials and tribulations, the online program has several factors that must be considered in order to assure student success. This focus of this paper is on how the educational institution will assure student success in the online learning environment.

Historically, the online university's reckoning can be traced to the correspondence school (Rumble, 2001) providing diplomas and certifications to students world-wide. But, the online programs of today's market are gaining considerable popularity among Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Echo Boomers seeking higher education (Bullen, 1998; Cannon, 2001; Deal, 2002; Furst-Bowe, 1997; Kearsley, 2002; King & Hildreth, 2001; Picciano, 2001; Schott Karr, 2002). It is estimated "between 2000 and 2015, California, Florida, New York, and Texas will experience some of this country's most explosive college-age population growth" (Miller, 2001). So, schools must learn not only how to attract, but also how to keep student populations. "The best [program] provides, both public and private, wanted to offer accessible educational opportunities, based on quality materials, leading to reputable qualifications" (Rumble, pg.2, 2001). The online program took control away from the facility and distributed it to the student. The student could now attend class anytime, anywhere, any day and continue to meet personal, family, and other professional obligations.

With the responsibly of an education now being bestowed upon the student, success of an online program could be more judiciously assessed. Typically, student success within a program has been measured with test scores, completion of the program, student-teacher professional relationship, referral of friends/colleagues into the program, and, finally, imparted knowledge. In an online program, while these factors are important, there may be additional variables that play an equally greater role in student success.

Within the context of the online learning environment, the following variables are importance in ensuring the vitality of the online institution. Specifically, the factors that may assure student success are: (a) The Online Learning Environment; (b) The role of the instructor; (c) Learning Communities; (d) Computer-mediated Communication Technologies; and (e) Policy and Practice.

See Figure 1 for a complete overview of the design module of a successful online program.

Factors That Assure Student Success

Figure 1: Design module of a successful online program.

THE ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The online learning environment is a concept broadly used in today's educational arena to refer to learning opportunities offered via the Internet (Furst-Bowe, 1997; Hedges & Mania-Farnell; 1999). Through the Internet both online students and instructors can access online courses from any place and whenever it is convenient to them.

The online learning environment is faced with challenges of educating online students in an ever-changing technological world. Some of the challenges are how to: (a) provide students with the academic, social and technical skills needed to function in this high-tech Information Age, and (b) teach them to be life-long learners. With today's technological advances, an array of platforms can be selected to deliver instruction and facilitate learning. Included among these technologies are asynchronous (later time) and synchronous (real time) video, audio, and text-based instructional tools. Thus, learning mediums are making online courses available to both graduate and undergraduate students of different social, economical and generational backgrounds. For example, during an asynchronous forum, online learners and instructors may post and respond to text-based messages, and there may be several responses and counter-responses to the same question creating a threaded discussion that is place and time independent.

Both methods, synchronous and asynchronous, of online communication are ideal for training programs. In corporate America, online training programs have been used to introduce a potential employee to the workplace and to provide a virtual experience of daily routines and job requirements. In the online or also known as cyber or

virtual classroom, learners may develop academic, corporate, business, personal, etc. skills through online communication forming learning communities.

Schreiber & Berge (1998) asserted--almost ten years ago--that there is an ever-increasing explosion of interest in video conferencing, electronic performance support systems, and online web-based courses by business and industry. The online learning environment welcomes learners of the Baby Boomer," Gen X, and the next largest generational group, second only to the Baby Boomer generation, the Echo Boomers. The "straight up" approach to education seems to have found its audience. Gogoi (2005) states "Given their adeptness with computers and their honed web-surfing skills the Echo Boomers have "grown up on the Internet". This makes them, an obvious marketing choice for future enrollments in an online program.

THE ROLE OF THE ONLINE INSTRUCTOR

Online instructors are not only experts in their field, but they are also skillful and practical in evaluation tools, assessment practices, teaching methodologies, and administrative policies. Additionally, the online instructor is adept in technology, online communication, and facilitation of learning communities. The success of the student depends on the quality and frequency of the instructor's feedback. Thus, the additional skills of technology, online communication, and facilitation of learning communities are vital to student success.

Existing research (Palloff and Pratt, 1999; Arbaugh, 2000; McFadzean, 2001; Overbaugh, 2002) has emphasized that teaching online requires instructors to take on two-fold intellectual and a social role. Specifically, online instructors build professional relationships and foster a sense of community among groups of learners in the online learning environment. The role of the instructor has been transformed into the role of a facilitator (Kochtanek, 2000; Youngblood and Trede and De Corpo, 2001) who "help ensure high levels of student interaction" (Vrasidas and McIsaac, 1999). Additionally, online instructors exercise a high level of "student engagement and motivation" (Dabbagh, 2003) and promote collaborative learning.

The multiple roles of the instructor in the online learning environment are:

- 1) Technical: According to Barker (1995) and Furst-Bowe (1997), the online instructor is familiar with the technology used and being able to ensure that the learners are comfortable with using the technology
- 2) Organizational: The online instructor plans the course content that may be synchronous or asynchronous in relationship to online activities (Swan, 2001)
- 3) Social: Eastman (2001), Kochtanek (2000), and Moore (2002) assert that the online instructor is making certain that online students are participating in the asynchronous and/or synchronous discourse in order to develop a cohesive online learning community by encouraging and helping learners to "build a sense of community" (Berge, 1995).
- 4) Intellectual: Flores and Flores (2003) assert that the online instructor develops meaningful and accurate course content as an expert consultant. Devi (2001) and Furst-Bowe (1997) assert that the instructor is encouraging deeper analysis of the course content by asking thought-provoking questions within the student discourse. The questions are asked in order to motivate and encourage online students to produce high quality academic work
- 5) Pedagogical: The online instructor guides, encourages, stimulates, and challenges online learners and facilitates communication leading to a more in-depth dialogue in a virtual classroom. The instructor provides opportunities to assist the learner master the curriculum (Arbaugh, 2000).
- 6) Teaching techniques: According to Easton (2003), the online instructor uses virtual management techniques to manage grading of assignments/projects/exams, make grades available online, and manage instructional space and time.

Tomlinson (2002) asserts that the multiple roles of the online instructor require time commitment and a great deal of written communication. Kocktanek (2000) reports asynchronous courses require approximately two to four times the amount of facilitative interaction as a face-to-face lectured course. This illustrates that although online instructors are faced with large workloads, they play an active and unique role in the educational process. They are

“academically well prepared” (Furst-Bowe, 1997; Barker, 1995), and polished in the design of online learner work and strive for student success and satisfaction with the online learning environment.

LEARNING ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Existing research has shown that communication is an important element fostering a sense of community (Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997; Whitney Gibson, Tesone, and Blackwell, 2001). Intertwined throughout the research on student success coupled with communication is the element of fostering communities in the online learning environment.

A community is a group of learners who are thrust into a class for a common interest. Online communities allow for social and collegial interaction among the learners. “The success of these [online] courses frequently depends upon the nature of this interaction...and in some cases require a certain amount of [student] participation” (Picciano, pg. 3, 2002).

Scholars recommend to online instructors to create a virtual community using pedagogical strategies in order to foster an online learning environment necessary for learners to thrive as electronic-students.

Pedagogy in the online learning environment includes teaching methods related to the engagement, reinforcement, and motivation of online learners, feedback, evaluation, curriculum integration, and organization of teaching tasks.

One of the first steps in building a professional learning community, according to DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker (2002) is to acknowledge collaboration. Similarly, DuFour et al. (2002) place great emphasis on community and even a greater responsibility for the instructor or educational leader to cultivate this type of environment.

According to Overbaugh (2002) telecommunications learners seem to benefit from a heightened sense of academic community resulting from being able to connect with peers. Rich (1997) asserts, facilitating electronic discussions among participants may offer rich and diverse information and knowledge. Thus, learners in electronic learning contexts are Information Science users who need interaction with other learners. Therefore, learner interaction is an important element of a successful online education (House, 1999) which supports both social and academic needs (Chou, 2001), improves critical thinking skills, and affects learning in online courses (Jiang and Ting, 1998; Moore, 1989). Since online learners represent themselves through text-based messages, interaction requires making one’s text clear, comprehensible, intelligent, approachable, meaningful, respectful, inviting, timely, and collaborative.

Online learning communities provide opportunities for deep learning experiences when the instructor and learners create a collegial environment. A collegial environment consists of posting to open-ended questions related to the instructional topic that share ideas and expertise, with frequent interactions. A learning community is what gives learners a sense of belonging and connectedness to their course (Havice and Chang, 2002). Crawford (2001) asserts learners must have the ability to collaborate with other learners and build a sense of community in order to retain a motivational level necessary to successfully complete an online course.

In the online learning environment, feelings of isolation, due to the lack of face-to-face interactivity between learners and instructors, and among learners, have been well cited as a detrimental factor impacting levels of student satisfaction (Pennington and Wilkinson and Vance, 2004; Bullen, 1998; Berman and Tinker, 1997; Daly and Kreiser, 1992; Bernard and Amundsen, 1989). To overcome feelings of isolation, the importance of establishing a sense of community among groups of learners within the online learning environment has become well recognized (Rovai, 2002; Dede, 1996). However, the success of the online learning environment and the learning communities is dependent upon computer-mediated communications technologies that facilitate almost all forms of communication in the online learning environment. Thus, giving the power back to the students in order to empower themselves and become better learners.

COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

Advances in computer-mediated communications technologies have improved online learning delivery methods for students, instructors, administrators, staff, and other stakeholders who communicate either asynchronously or synchronously. Computer-mediated communication technology tools have demonstrated the ability to overcome space, distance, and time and therefore ensuring access to education by learners who may be isolated by disability, poverty, geography, employment and family commitments. “Enrollment for online courses is projected to reach about 1.7 million U.S. students this year, more than three times those enrolled in 2002” (Scott, 2007).

One of the most significant contributions to the success of the online learner can also be related to the use of the technology. Computer-mediated communication technology tools “should be selected based on the needs and objectives of the online programs, and it must be user friendly, reliable, accessible and affordable” (Illinois Online Network, 2006). Thus, student success in the online learning environment may vary as a function of the policies and procedures implemented by the online education institution in terms of the usage of computer-mediated communication technologies and instructor qualities to create a successful teaching and learning environment. A 28% increase in completion of online class was experienced when one instructor changed to a more interactive Internet program” (Frankola, 2001).

With computer-mediated communication technology, online instructors can deliver lessons in synchronous discourse via videoconferencing and learners can archive and download lessons through asynchronous discourse. Online learners can participate in an interactive videoconference and provide typed responses and receive immediate feedback from their peers and the online instructor. The use of this technology has helped to create the global classroom within the confines of the student’s home. With availability of technology, many students who may at one time never thought of obtaining a degree are now achieving online programs. “Enrollment for online courses is projected to reach about 1.7 million U.S. students this year, more than three times those enrolled in 2002” (Scott, 2007).

Multimedia technologies (e.g., text, graphics, sound, audio, video, and animation) support online teaching, learning, and training. The use of multimedia stimulates discussions and can relay what may be lost in the lack of facial expressions, vocal intonations, and body language in online courses. Computer-mediated communication technologies promote “reflective and critical thinking” (Overbaugh, 2002) and deep and meaningful learning to occur in the online learning environment via email, forums, chat and videoconferencing. Thus, the acceleration of online learning is due to technological advances in both course software and hardware, and in increasing numbers of people with Internet access, and positive experiences of online learning. Furthermore, policy and practice are vital to the success of the online learner.

POLICY AND PRACTICE

Policy makers of the online education institution play a vital role in student success in the online learning environment. For policies and procedures to be effective, student success should be taken into consideration and faculty and staff need to be appraised in the new platforms as well as plans for attracting and retaining online student enrollment. Everyone from the advisors to the registrars to the faculty to the students needs to be conscious of the expectations of an online class. These factors can help contribute to student success.

Student success is clearly a factor affecting the online learning environment and ultimately the vitality of the online education or training organization. Policy makers may wish to take into consideration these factors (see figure 1).

Policy makers should design and implement online courses (design, curriculum, and delivery methods) by considering these factors, the policies may improve online enrollment and retention. The policy makers of the online institution need to appreciate that learners can succeed online. While the flexibility is certainly a selling point, learners, themselves, need to put forth just as much effort in an online class as they would in a face-to-face

class, if not more. “[Online] Schools are experiencing dropout rates between 20 to 50% for distance learners (Frankola, 2001), and online dropout rates usually are 10 to 20 percentage points higher than in face-to-face classes” (p. 1).

With support and clear expectations, learners become satisfied, engaged and committed. Consequently, when students are considered in the policies and practices of an online program, retention is nearly guaranteed and future enrollment is highly probable.

Policy makers need to support faculty in order to enhance their teaching effectiveness. Effective teaching methods can be improved when candid conversations with the administrator and the instructor are coupled with sincerity and mutual respect. By encouraging and supporting frequent and meaningful interactions with faculty members, administrators can achieve greater enrollment and retention rates in online programs, and thereby allowing the online student to experience academic success in a technologically-based setting.

CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the roles of student success in an online program, and the necessary roles of the instructor, learner, facility, and administrator. While they encompass a range of concepts/ideas the unifying factor for all education is the student. When the students’ needs are supported, met, and challenged the educational process is seamless. Refer to figure 1 for the reiteration of a successful online module.

While there are many variables to help assure student success in an online program, many –if not all of these variables can be controlled by either by the governing institution, the faculty member, or the student, themselves. Thereby, by creating an open environment for students of all ethnic, racial, social, economical and generational backgrounds, the in the movie, “It’s a wonderful life” (Capra, 1947) Clarence, the angel, reminds George Bailey, “No man is a failure who has friends.” These words are also indicative of the successful online student, too.

INSTRUCTOR BIOGRAPHIES

Dr. Mary Brown is a Department Chair for the Graduate School of Education with Kaplan University. She assists with course development and teaches courses in the Master of Arts in Teaching & Learning program. Prior to Kaplan, she has taught at every level within the public school and has completed several writing assessment contracts with the state of Nevada. She decided to apply her passion for writing to children and earned a Masters of Education in Elementary Education and secondary certificates in English and writing as well as in administration. Additionally, Dr. Brown has professional experience as a speech writer, DJ, news writer/announcer, and a newspaper journalist. Dr. Brown’s formative college years focused on journalism, communications, and professional writing.

Dr. Peter Kiriakidis has consulting, teaching, training, and administrative experience at all academic levels. He has been teaching and developing online courses and programs for more than ten years. He has expertise in the integration of educational technologies, software development, research, curriculum design / implementation / development & assessment. He has developed and evaluated education courseware including print-based, online Internet delivery, and CD-ROM. He has also received numerous certificates of Appreciation, Recognition, and Excellence in Teaching.

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