

FACTORS THAT IMPACT PERSISTANCE AND COMPLETION OF ONLINE COURSES

This literature review will focus on the most critical factors that impact persistence and completion of online courses and degrees in higher education. We will examine what motivates students who are enrolled in online courses to complete their degrees, we will also look at retention rates, compare and contrast various studies, and draw conclusions on what critical factors impact the successful completion of online courses. Finally, this paper will also examine the factors that will address critical issues, such as; maintaining a high graduation rate in higher education courses and persistence. The main objective of this literature review as stated above is to examine those key factors that affects student completion and persistence rates of online courses.

According to a meta-analysis of 86 studies that compared online courses and traditional classroom instruction in K-12 and post-secondary school settings, in two thirds of the cases, high school students that are enrolled in online courses performed better than students that are enrolled in traditional classes. (Blazer & Miami-Dade County Public Schools 2009). Another study was conducted utilizing a nationally representative sample, the main focus of this particular study was to assess the degree completion rates of post-secondary students who are enrolled in online course in comparison to students who are not enrolled in online courses. The study concluded that those students enrolled in online courses early in their semesters have a lower graduation rates than students who didn't (Shea & Bidjerano 2014). However, studies have also shown that although online courses has been found to be very effective in learning, there are also several factors that impact student retention rates, persistence, and completion of online courses.

During the years 2003 to 2007, there was a major increase in student's enrollment in online college courses in the United States. The enrollment of students was between 1.98 million to 3.94 million (Moore & Fetzner 2009).

Moreover, from year 2000-2010 online courses has seen a significant increases in dropout rates ranging from 20 and 70 percent in secondary, undergraduate, continuing professional and graduate courses in the United States (Aversa & MacCall 2013).

Further studies conducted determined that the number of students who enroll in online college courses has been 10 -15 percent higher compared to that of students who enroll in face-to-face courses (Cochran, Campbell, Baker & Leeds 2014). Numerous studies have concluded that college students are more prone to withdraw from online courses due to technological issues, feelings of isolation or disconnectedness (Blazer & Miami-Dade County Public Schools 2009). Let's take a look at the factors that affect student's persistence and completion of an online course.

Before a student drops an online course, there are several factors that have influenced that decision, often times, it comes from lack of self confidence in the student's ability to complete the course, poor or inefficient technological skills, money, time, a lack of student readiness and misaligned course expectations these factors can range from money and time (Koehnke 2014). However, it is also important to examine the different attributes of students that enroll in online classes. Factors such as age differences in adults, their educational attainment as well as their economic, social and personal circumstances attributes to their persistence and completion rates while enrolling in online classes (McGivney 2004). Older Adults enrolled in online courses sometime face difficulties that are not common to younger adults.

(McGivney 2004) determined that adult's determination to complete an online course are intermittent and more varied. However, in a recent study conducted on students at Coastline Community College to determine what might help improve the persistence to complete an online degree, 59 percent of students reported that free tutoring; onsite or online, while 46 percent reported that online orientations will benefit them (Nash 2005). Online orientation is lacking in most virtual courses due to the lack of implementation or knowledge of its benefits. However, In another study conducted in China, it was determined that the factors that influence student completion rates are not only personal factors but also structural factors of the delivery system, internet access is also an issue, not many have access to the internet, students with internet access are more prone to completing an online course than students without internet access.

Students in third-world countries that are not quite developed might have low course completion rates if the courses were to be offered online. Due to the lack of internet access, situations might arise (Gaskell 2006). Lack of communication from students and teachers also affect retention rates, most students are familiar with receiving immediate feedback from their instructors but sometimes due to lack of communication, students can get frustrated (Nash 2005). Other factors such as the online course design, technical issues, student intellectual ability, poorly-trained instructors, cognitive overload and personal behavior all play a major key role in low student completion rates (Pittenger & Doering 2010). Furthermore, administrative policies related to online schools can have an effect on student completion rates as and retention.

According to Hawkin, Barbour (2010), there are two administrative policies that can influence student retention and completion rates, 1) the utilization of trial periods; which is the amount of time a student has to retain or drop a class during the early days of the semester, and 2) determination of students that are considered to have successfully completed a course. A recent

study conducted by the Sloan Foundation 2010, determined that there is a correlation in student's experiences with online courses, a student's previous success with an online course explains 13.2 percent of the variance in retention and 24.8 percent of the variation in online success (Hachey, Alyse, Wladis, Claire, Conway, Katherine 2012).

In order words, if a student has already enrolled in an online class before and successfully completed it, enrolling in another online class will not be much different than the first enrollment since that student is already familiar with the online course structure. Hachey, Alyse, Wladis, Claire, Conway, Conway, Katherine (2012) also suggests that there is a variation in students. College students that are still new to online course and have not had any experience in enrollment of online course have low retention rates of 68.6 percent compared to students who already have experiences with online courses. This further reiterates the points made above that retention rates are higher with students with previous distance learning experiences.

Moreover, it is estimated that around 40 percent of college students from low income families drop out of online courses each year while 66 percent of student from high income families have successful completion rates (Allen 2006). To further elaborate this factor, lack of money has a huge impact on learning. Research has shown that online classes are more expensive than face-to-face classes. With online class, in some institutions, you are charged a distance learning fee. While some can afford this, students from low income families will view this as a setback and decide to enroll in a face-to-face class instead.

Student attributes and family background also affect the initial level of commitment a student has towards an online course (Nash 2005). Those two issues can affect a student's performance, as well as the student's interaction, interaction with peers and faculty, this can make a student less motivated to complete an online course.

Now that we have reviewed the possible factors that impact resistance to and completion rate of online course, let's take a look at some of the important factors necessary to maintain a high graduation rate. When examining factors that are necessary to maintaining a large graduation and successful completion of online course, it is very important to look at various aspects. We have to take into consideration several factors that contribute to a successful completion rate. According to Hachey, Alyse, Wladis, Claire, Conway, Katherine (2012), the improvement of online learning management systems (LMS), structure, reliability and accessibility can help increase retention rates. McPhaul-Moore (2014) also suggests that institutions should implement programs and strategies that will increase course completion rate which will increase student retention.

(Koehnke 2014) stresses the importance of online orientation programs, according to a study that was geared towards college students who received an online orientation and students who did not receive an online orientation, retention rates were higher with students who completed an online orientation. A student's age and motivation also contributes to high retention rates, (McGivney 2004) states that older students in their mid-30's are more motivated compared to younger students for several reasons; high interest in the program or course, self-worth and the need for future employment purposes.

(McGivney 2004) also states that support plays a key role in high retention rates, a supportive family or "significant other" highly increases motivation and persistence in online courses. Financial support is also crucial; according to a study by the Institute for Employment Studies, high school and college students who are receiving financial support are more likely to complete a course than those with no financial support.

Moreover, college students that are actively involved in online learning communities such as discussion groups implemented in an online course seem to have higher retention rates than

students who are not involved in learning communities because it provides students a place where they can collaborate and share ideas which facilitates peer support. Santovec (2004).

Santovec (2004) suggests that online learning communities, such as threaded discussion groups, Q and A's sections, synchronous office hours and instant messaging can greatly influence student's persistence toward a degree completion. Furthermore, according to Santovec, new students feel welcomed in an online learning community since it provides a place to share ideas and experiences that relates to various aspects of online. New college students also require more interaction on campus with faculty, staff and peers within formal and informal settings. (Allen 2006). There are also other methods and strategies identified by researchers in improving retention rates.

Blazer, C., & Miami-Dade County Public Schools (2009) suggests that designing effective pedagogical approaches are the most significant determinants of learning outcomes. Furthermore, it is crucial that online learning courses are well-developed due to the impact on successful completion rates. In order for online courses to be very effective, several features must be implemented; problem-based learning, student-centered teaching, clear expectations, concrete deadlines with some flexibility, outlines of course requirements, tutorials, short mastery sequence lessons to prevent information overload, thorough assessment items, collaboration amongst students, authentic and meaningful activities away from the computer activities, and performance-based activities (Blazer & Miami-Dade County Public Schools 2009).

Moore & Fetzner (2009) also suggest that access to LMS systems, faculty satisfaction, learning effectiveness, scale (capacity enrollment achieved through cost effectiveness and institutional commitment), and student satisfaction all play a huge role in maintaining a high graduation rate. Mentoring is also crucial in maintaining a high retention rate. In a recent study

conducted in the U.K, college students who received mentoring achieved a high retention rate of 89 percent while students who did not receive any form of mentoring achieved a retention rate of 67 percent (Boyle, Jinhee, Ross & Simpson 2010).

Conclusion

We have reviewed the key factors that impact persistence and completion of online courses and degrees in higher education. To reiterate, those factors are: technological issues; feelings of isolation or disconnectedness; lack of self confidence in the student's ability to complete the course; poor or inefficient technological skills, money, time, lack of student readiness, or misaligned course expectations. Other factors such as the structure of the delivery system, technical issues, student intellectual ability, poorly-trained instructors, cognitive overload and personal behavior, also play a key role in students' persistence and completion of online courses.

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