Cultivating Supportive Learning Communities

to Increase Retention and Success in

Online Programs

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Abstract

As the number of online students increases, it is essential that colleges and universities offer support for those enrolled in online courses and programs leading to degree attainment. Online learning programs are prevalent and schools are concerned with maintaining student retention rates. Academic attrition, when students leave before not completing their education or fulfilling program completion requirements, is of particular concern. This study examines the methods of engagement that cultivate supportive online learning communities that lead to increased retention and success in online programs. The discussion emphasizes key findings and future possibilities for developing online learning communities, which support students in successfully completing their programs within the timeframes required for their degrees or certificates.

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Introduction

Enrollment in online college and university programs continues to grow. The modality is one that undeniably has been a paradigm shift for many allowing the continuance and pursuit of educational goals. The importance of retention strategies increases when online courses are considered. Colleges and universities diligently work to recruit students. Yet, once enrolled, programs often do not build a process and strategy for retention. Research to date on the efficacy of online versus in-person learning suggests that students tend to fare worse in online classes. Randomized studies, that assigned students to either in-person or online learning, have shown online learning to have negative impacts on course performance (Figlio et al., 2013; Alpert et al., 2016). Additional studies employing quasi-experimental methods find that online learning decreases course completion, final grade, and enrollment persistence, and increases course repetition (Bettinger et al. 2017; Hart et al., 2016; Xu & Jaggars, 2011, 2013).

There are numerous reasons why individuals opt for online programs. The pursuit of ease, convenience, and enjoyability are qualities that are needed, not only for in-person programs but desired amongst students to ensure they have a pleasant yet robust academic experience online. This paper concentrates on the lack of supportive online communities that engage degree-seeking students on their path to completing courses. The research examines the trends in deficient support in online learning communities that become barriers to students finding supportive programs, which ultimately lead to them not persisting or completing programs and degrees.

Background

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2017) fall enrollment data, 33 percent of college students (undergraduate and graduate) enrolled in online or partially online

study. In 2019, this jumped to 36 percent. In 2020, most likely due to COVID-19, 73 percent of students were considered online or partially online (fall enrollment). Online degree-granting programs, particularly at the graduate level, began growing significantly in the United States. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018), 31.7 percent of students enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions in 2016 were engaged in distance or online education, either partially or fully. For graduate students, this percentage increased to 36.8 percent. In 2017, 239 online leadership doctoral programs were offered in the United States, according to a website search of all 50 state departments of education. In 2022, over half of U.S. students, 53 percent, were enrolled in at least one online course, according to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2022). While we do not yet know the lasting impact on enrollment growth, it is clear that more students are turning to online programs.

Students entering online programs have a desire to reach and fulfill their academic goals and for many, their lifelong dreams. In lieu of seeking out more traditional, in-person programs, many students decide to enroll in online programs due to the benefits, especially the flexibility these programs offer. Once enrolled, students often find that the online experience is quite different from a traditional program they may have been expecting. In a number of cases, students abandon what they thought would be a flexible and supportive learning opportunity. Once they've had negative experiences, some may never return to finish their studies. On the contrary, some students still feel positive about continuing their education. This motivation is often intrinsic rather than from instructors. Perseverance and courage arise and the decision to try again is made because of something within them, perhaps the belief that they can still succeed and achieve their goals.

Another element that plays a part in creating and cultivating supportive online learning communities is the impact technology has on the success of a given program. Navigating the classroom efficiently and completing and submitting assignments is critical. Instructors have to be somewhat of an expert with technology. When facilitating instruction, there has to be an understanding of how to use, be comfortable using, and guide students as there is a heavy reliance on technology in the online classroom. Most of the time is spent in the classroom platform, thus instructors must have the wherewithal and capability to guide students in comprehending materials, resources, and tools. The instructor must be confident and readily available to answer questions and help students. Not having the ability or commitment to do so results in students not feeling supported and not being able to complete assignments, which ultimately leads to failure and possible withdrawal from a program.

A review of the literature highlights three aspects of technology-facilitated instruction: flexibility, usefulness, and ease of use (Bures et al. 2000). The shift in attitude and support is crucial, as it marks a transition from being independent to needing help and encouragement from instructors, as well as building a community among peers. Technology is also a factor and having the support for students through the program and with technology adds to the support they feel. When students feel more supported, their motivation increases.

A sense of belonging in online learning communities is a necessity to enhance the overall experience for students. Students crave relationships and connections with others. The ability to communicate openly and honestly, share ideas, and bounce thoughts off other individuals experiencing the same things and on a similar path while receiving ongoing guidance and feedback from instructors are all needed to succeed. Social Constructivism theory was utilized in a study by St. John's University as a framework to guide a formative experiment where

researchers examined social interactions and engagement among students of a PhD cohort. Helping students overcome the sense of "alienation" and "the need for connectedness" that they often feel initially in an online course is of prime concern for those designing online curricula and spaces (Zembylas, 2008, p. 80).

Analysis

Online learning is nothing new; the format existed for years before the COVID pandemic, where we saw numbers soar as more people moved to online learning platforms, including the post-secondary population. The speed of this transition meant that most institutions focused on helping faculty adapt to new platforms. An unintended consequence was that the online learning environment rarely met all the needs of the students. Online courses offer significant advantages for students, including flexibility. In the past decade, there has been a 100 percent increase in student enrollment in online courses (Muljana & Luo, 2019). Theorists have studied community in the traditional classroom setting and the online setting with both undergraduate and graduate students. Vincent Tinto, distinguished University Professor Emeritus at Syracuse University and noted theorist in the field of education, carried out one of the most significant studies attempting to explain how a sense of community influences student actions, perseverance, and perceptions of learning. Tinto (1997) postulated that classrooms, which are essentially small communities where social and intellectual interactions occur, are essential to the overall academic community of an institution. These same traditional classrooms and their characteristics are also essential in online learning. Asynchronous platforms allow students to work at their own pace, which is a huge advantage today since many students have various responsibilities, including demanding careers and families to care for. These platforms give students the opportunity to reflect, review, and generate material at times they find most convenient. This flexibility is paramount for online

students and one of the main benefits that draws them in. Offering such platforms may permit more students to be able to continue their education yet the lack of a face-to-face connection and support in online courses can be discouraging.

Implications

The growth of online courses and academic programs carries considerable implications for both students and universities. This shift requires universities to prioritize effectively serving students by creating and cultivating supportive learning communities that promote success and the goal of program completion. Any college or university program, especially online programs where most often studies are asynchronous, must self-reflect on current practices and assess institutional systems to adapt and create the most supportive environments possible.

To cultivate supportive learning communities that welcome all students, institutions must implement culturally responsive teaching strategies and best practices for engaging learners. Once these practices are established, it is imperative that practices are consistently maintained to ensure the institution remains attractive and conducive to student success, thereby driving an increase in program completion, including graduation rates. As highlighted by Clinefelter et al. (2019, p. 47), universities must adopt "forward-thinking strategies to effectively engage and leverage online learners, drawing from communication preferences and other data gathered, while students are enrolled." Understanding the key factors leading to low retention rates is essential for improvement (Tight, 2020). A comprehensive understanding of these factors can enhance both student and institutional success.

Analysis of Barriers

The lack of in-person connection with peers and instructors can lead to feelings of isolation. The scarcity of a physical presence often limits opportunities for organic relationship

building that are inherent in brick-and-mortar environments. Engaged students are more likely to overcome challenges, grasp concepts quickly, persevere to meet academic goals tend to get more out of courses, and are more likely to stay enrolled. The impact of technology and human connection, individually and interactively, within the online environment is one that institutions must consider. An analysis of the data collected from this study found that significant correlations exist that confirm the imperativeness of both technology and relationships in the learning success of students in online-based learning environments.

Universities contribute to the problem when they fail to establish effective processes and strategies for preparing students for the experience and expectations of online programs. As universities begin to recognize the importance of preparing students prior to beginning courses, they will find that prepared students become engaged faster and have a stronger sense of support in online learning. Distance learning brings inherent unknowns (Hartnett et al., 2018), which can evoke emotions and anxieties. Students may experience stress when needing additional support to navigate the online classroom or having content-related questions. However, they cannot ask them in the same manner as in a traditional setting. Distance education programs must purposefully develop support systems, such as the cohort model, that encourage connectedness and social integration (Kennedy et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2019). Administrators, faculty, and staff involved in distance education must be prepared to facilitate communication using technology, while committing to timely responses to students throughout all phases of the doctoral program (Gardner, 2009; c6). At every level, undergraduate or graduate, staff preparation is foremost to effectively supporting students.

A significant barrier to effective learning necessary for success is the fixed mindset, which posits that skills are static and unchangeable (Dweck, 2006). Supporting a growth mindset

starts with building a learning community where students are encouraged to put forth effort and are able to develop abilities and skills through dedicated practice while accepting that they may face challenges. Students with growth mindsets are often resilient, embrace feedback, and use it as an opportunity to learn. This happens when instructors support this mindset by talking about the concept, encouraging students to adopt this perspective, and promoting collaboration amongst peers.

Proposed Solutions

Despite technological advances that have provided innovative communication methods among students, faculty, and peers, the absence of in-person interaction remains a challenge (Cilliers et al., 2022; Stover et al., 2024; Zhang & He, 2022). Cultivating a supportive environment by building connections and stronger relationships is key to reducing barriers supporting students through obstacles and collaborating with peers to progress and achieve goals.

Active learning is all about getting students involved in the learning process, instead of just giving information. Prince (2004) suggests that methods like problem-based learning, group discussions, and peer teaching help students think critically and understand the material in a more comprehensive manner. This involves activities such as online check-ins, weekly discussion questions, and team projects that allow students to apply learned concepts to real-life scenarios. Institutions must critically think and create immersive and personalized learning experiences for students. A collaborative and stimulating learning environment is promoted by including networking, study groups, discussion boards, group chats, and student-created blogs for ideas and thoughtful sharing. Making learning relevant, enjoyable, and engaging improves understanding and also builds resilience.

Strayhorn (2018) suggests that various factors can influence students' sense of belonging. These include enrolling in the "right" academic major and aspects of the campus environment, such as inclusiveness of gender and gender identity, minority status, age, and physical and cognitive ability. Online programs are also influenced by these same factors. Meaningful interactions with faculty and peers, social support from peers, understanding program expectations, ease with technology and perceived classroom comfort also play a role in influencing a sense of belonging.

Universities are finding success in hosting online orientation sessions for students prior to the start of their first semester. These orientation sessions are designed to assist in connecting students to resources, acclimating them to the program, boosting students' confidence, familiarizing them with university platforms and connecting them with the university community. Students who complete orientation programs are more likely to complete their first semester (Wells, 2023). Once students complete the first semester and see that they can be successful there is a better chance they maintain enrollment.

Instructors can be creative in thinking of easy ways to help students feel less alienated and connected. The curriculum is designed and instructors are tasked with planning, creating activities, and facilitating learning. Faculty can set time aside and schedule live, synchronous sessions for highly interactive content that necessitates group problem-solving (Sandars et al., 2020). Encouraging peer discussions, hosting virtual meetings up and student-organized group texts support connectedness. Suggesting and providing activities that support mindfulness, journaling, and making similar resources available assists in ensuring student needs are met; this is critical to support and encourage self-care and student mental health. The instructor is the pivotal participant in the online learning experience, helping facilitate productive dialogue,

encouraging the exploration of new concepts, and providing timely feedback (Augustsson & Jaldemark, 2013; Kumar, 2014). Instructors who focus on student strengths and celebrate progress and growth, motivate students and encourage that growth mindset needed to make it to the finish line. There are significant differences between online classrooms and the traditional, in-person classroom. Barriers and obstacles will come and go when engaging in the online classroom; however, colleges and universities must strive to maximize strategies to provide supportive online communities.

Conclusions

Establishing a presence and connection within online learning communities is crucial. With the growing importance of the cultivation of solid, well-developed supportive online learning communities as a means to completing academic programs, educational institutions have to consider the key elements that have the most influence on attrition. Supportive communities where students feel they belong and are supported have a sound understanding of program requirements and expectations can easily navigate platforms and have a connection with peers and instructors are the type of communities needed for students to feel supported and be successful. The results from this study lead to the conclusion that supportive online communities predict learning success as perceived by students enrolled in online courses and programs. Cultivating supportive learning communities is key in navigating the growing enrollment in online courses. The goal is to provide programs where students feel a sense of community and support as they complete courses on their path to course and program completion and for many, graduation.

The ability to provide the most supportive environment, reduce withdrawals from courses and programs, and create settings where students truly feel part of a supportive learning

community should be the priority of colleges and universities. While creating stronger

relationships and engagement through these supportive communities, they ultimately produce

more enhanced and positive experiences for students. Through these efforts, the aim is to realize

the overarching goal of creating and facilitating preferable online programs where students

recognize and feel the effort of support and academic outcomes for all.

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