

Addressing Student Retention and Persistence Issue in Online Classes

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Abstract

Online education has proliferated over the last several years. Number of students enrolling into online courses continues to grow in higher education institutions. Using emerging digital technology higher education institutions are offering more courses in online delivery methods to attract students. Enrollment in online courses is growing significantly faster over the past years. However, with the exponential growth of online courses, student retention and persistence is an area of great concern and challenge in online education. Research findings show that it is harder to retain students in online courses than in traditional face-to-face courses. Online education method, which is not superior to or inferior to traditional face-to-face method, meets the educational needs of time- and location-bound students. So why student retention and persistence rate is significantly lower in online classes? According to a research finding, a total of 41% academic administrators of higher education institutions of all sizes agreed that retaining students is a greater problem for online courses than for face-to-face courses². Based on literature review this paper discusses the factors that affect student retention in online classes. The current literature suggests that a number of factors to consider and strategies to pursue in contemplating how to improve online student retention and persistence rate in higher education. A comprehensive model of retention in online courses focuses on three basic categories of factors: personal, institutional, and circumstantial. The purpose of this paper is to discuss all those factors associated with student retention and persistence issue in online courses. The paper will also suggest several recommended strategies found in the literature to address the online retention and persistence issue. The findings discussed in this paper are especially, highly relevant for the administrators of higher education institutions who want to address the student retention and persistence issue in their online courses or programs. The answer to the above question can help higher education institutions to improve online students' retention and persistence rate, which in turn, will lead to their academic success.

Introduction

Online education has proliferated over the last several years. With the advent of the Internet, and an increasing demand on lifelong education, online learning has been expanding rapidly¹². The number of students enrolling into online courses continues to grow in higher education institutions in USA. Using emerging digital technology and finding optimal ways of harnessing their benefits new online course delivery methods implemented to attract more students^{9,10}. The economic downturn prompted even more interest in online course offering. Enrollment in online courses is growing significantly faster over the past several years in higher education. Research found that

the number of undergraduate students taking at least one online course increased by over 570,000 to a new total of 6.7 million. The proportion of all undergraduate students taking at least one online course is at an all-time high of 32%¹.

Online Student Retention

The electronic delivery of course materials in online classes eliminate the time and location constraint in learning providing more freedom for learners. This freedom of time and location that represents the concept of anytime and anywhere access to educational materials is one of the main reason for popularity of online classes among a significant number of students. As a result, online education is continuously extending beyond the traditional instructional boundaries transferring knowledge via electronic communities with convenience and flexibility to study anytime and anywhere¹¹.

However, with the exponential growth of online courses, student retention and persistence is an area of great concern and challenge in online education. Research findings show that it is harder to retain students in online courses than in traditional face-to-face courses. Student dropout rate for online undergraduates ranges from 20% to 50%, which is 10% to 20% higher than traditional classroom environments^{1, 16}. Online education method, which is not superior to or inferior to traditional face-to-face method, meets the educational needs of time- and location-bound students. So why student retention and persistence rate is significantly lower in online classes than in traditional classes?

High drop-out rate in online classes has negative effect on both students and academic institutions¹⁶. In a research, a total of 41% academic administrators of higher education institutions of all sizes stated that retaining students is a greater problem for online classes than for face-to-face classes. Public small higher educational institutions e.g., two year colleges have higher online student dropout rate than either private nonprofit or private for-profit higher education institutions have. The greater level of dropout in public institutions may represent the different nature of their student population mix, drawing a larger proportion of “non-traditional” students who might be more likely to have individual issues that force them to withdraw from their online classes².

Factors Affect Student Retention

Student retention, especially in online classes is currently at the top of most college and universities’ checklists¹¹. A comprehensive review of the literature has shown that the factors most commonly cited as being important to students’ retention in online classes can be grouped into three main categories⁷:

Personal – demographics, individual characteristics, and prior educational experiences of online students.

Institutional – bureaucratic, academic, and social issues in academic institutions.

Circumstantial – institutional, and external to the institution.

Personal Factors

Demographics - Age, gender, race, income, marital status, etc. of online students can have effect on their academic life. It has been suggested that retention policies should be adjusted to the specificities of students who may be older, from minority backgrounds, attend school part-time, and work to support their families¹⁸.

Individual characteristics – Online students’ cognitive, academic skills, abilities, motivation, determination, self-discipline, self-efficacy, time-management, commitment, and locus of control or autonomy have impacts on their learning achievement.

Academic experiences – Students who have limited experience in higher education, lack of computer skills and ability to use Internet, less experience in online classes, low reading ability, and are carrying a large course-load, are more susceptible to drop out in online classes.

Institutional Factors

Bureaucratic – Academic institution’s mission, vision, procedures, and policies on online courses or programs have effect on students’ success in online classes.

Academic - Course structural system, learner-centered curriculum, e.g., instructors’ role in developing an interactive course can promote effective learning.

Social – Institution’s mechanisms for social integration e.g., offers student services, technological access, etc. can significantly impact online students’ successful learning.

Circumstantial Factors

Institutional - Academic interactions, organizational support, and technical support for online students can play crucial role in online students’ academic success.

External to the institution – students’ life situation, e.g., socio-economic issues, social interactions, family support, family and work obligations, time constraints, job loss or change, and personal transitions could also be important issue.

Although these factors are presented individually, but they do not necessarily always affect students independently. Each factor can be interrelated and may influence together on retention and success of enrolled online students¹⁵.

Strategies to address online student retention

To address the online students’ retention and persistence issue researchers have suggested several strategies intended to reduce attrition in online classes⁶. These strategies included various measures expected to affect the likelihood of student drop out, such as student engagement, offer student services, develop learning communities, and learner-centered environment. Together these strategies can offer a useful framework to improve student retention in online classes⁵.

Student advisement and orientation

Academic institutions need to ensure proactive advising for online Students. Institutions can enforce assessment to ensure students' preparedness to achieve learning objectives and competencies in online class³. Institutions can also use pre-admission screening tool to determine if student has necessary skills needed for good academic performance and persistence in online class. All these will also help students to make attainable or realistic goals. Institutions can use skilled diagnostic counseling to assist students to discover their level of commitment to achieve academic goal. Students should also be advised about how to overcome barriers. Finally, to better prepare students for online environment, institutions need to develop effective and comprehensive orientation program that focuses on students' ability, self-esteem, learning style, motivation, and value.

Institutional support

Institutions need to offer a full-range support services to online students that includes technical support, real time online tutoring, accessibility to resources such as online library materials and services, financial aid advising, and general counseling. Institutional response should be in a timely manner to ensure students receive adequate and ongoing support as needed.

Course design

Instructional design strategies need to ensure relevancy and accuracy of online course content. Integration of multimedia can enhance usefulness of course content and design, and increase the effectiveness of online learning with a variety of learning styles. Utilizing different learning styles and activities is important to maintain online students' interest¹⁴. The success of online learning is often a function of personal learning styles, individual learning preferences. Poorly designed course may not fulfill students' self-selecting content need. Course that is not stimulating or worth students' interest, time or effort leads to a higher drop-out rate. Therefore, institutions need to ensure flexible and learner-centered environment that offers students a control over their learning experience⁴.

Furthermore, Students' roles is also shifting due to the increased availability of online classes that give them more control over and more responsibility for their own⁸. Therefore, students should be required to take an active role in their learning process. Successful online students spend more time on task, communication, and participate in class discussions board more frequently. Well-designed online classes keep students engaged with their peers, with the instructor, and with the course material being covered, interacting with various interfaces in course website^{17, 14}. A study state that poor design of online courses is a major issue for students' failure in online classes. A poor course design gave students a feeling of being discomfort and badly treated in the system, consequently lead to failure in class⁹.

Develop online learning community

Instructor can create a student-centered learning environment using discussion board with open communication where students and instructor as well as peer students can freely discuss on class topics and ask questions. Instructors should encourage students to ask questions that pertains to whole class in discussion board rather than via e-mail because other students may have the same questions that a particular student has. Also, instructors should develop welcoming relationships with students so that they feel comfortable communicating and expressing themselves in their postings in discussion board and other online communication in class.

Faculty preparedness

Faculty preparedness for online classes is crucial for students' success. Especially, those instructors who are teaching online classes for the first time may need to acquire expertise both in technical and pedagogical perspective. Therefore, academic institutions need to ensure professional development opportunities for new, substandard or inexperienced online instructors to enhance their online instructional skill¹⁵.

Conclusion

The steady increase in the number of students' enrollment in online classes is significant in past years. The percentage of online courses increase indicate that online learning is a delivery method of choice for students as their numbers increase along with the larger number of online courses. However, with high level of student dropout rate, the student retention and persistence in online classes is a serious issue in higher education institutions. This paper examined the existing literature that focuses on the factors affecting student retention and persistence in online classes. The literature suggests that the factors affecting online student retention and persistence include a variety of issues. Such variability poses challenges in addressing the retention problem. A number of factors need to be considered and a variety of strategies should be pursued in contemplating the improvement of online student retention rate. A comprehensive model of retention and persistence in online classes focuses on three basic categories of factors: personal, institutional, circumstantial, affecting student retention in online classes. Adoption of strategies in the areas such as student advisement and orientation, course design, institutional support can address the retention issue.

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