

Why Do They Leave?

A report on a pilot study of online student attrition

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Background

Brookdale Community College has offered courses at a distance for 25 years, and has maintained a solid reputation across the state as a leader in distance education initiatives. Enrollment in all distance education modalities has increased dramatically. A total of 493 students were enrolled in online courses for the Fall 2002 and Spring 2003 terms. Enrollment continues to grow, and for FY 03-04, 734 online students enrolled.

Since the first online courses were offered at Brookdale in 1999, there has been a significant difference between the course completion rates of traditional courses and online courses. Early figures (1999-2003) indicated an average of 73.9% completion for traditional courses compared to 51.2% completion of online courses. Over the period Spring 2003 to Spring 2004 this improved so that 61.2% of the online students were completing their courses. Although an improvement, this figure still lags behind the 73.9% completion rate for traditional courses.

The typical approach to increasing online student retention is to offer online screening instruments to help students decide if they are good candidates for an online environment. There are any number of screening questionnaires that are offered to prospective online students to determine if they are “ready” for online courses. The greatest failing of the instruments is that none are research based and all seem to imply that there are some students who should never take online courses. The goal of this study was to try to find a research-based screening instrument for online course completion that would enable the student to assess core skills for online success and remediate required skills in order to become successful online students.

Research Design

A pilot test was conducted during the Spring and Summer of 2005 including the following.

- A sample of online students was obtained from Fall '04 and this list was divided into two groups – those who completed the course with a grade of “C” or higher and those who received a grade lower than “C” or who withdrew following the 10th day of class.
- Students were contacted by phone and those who consented to participate were asked to complete the online LASSI survey.

- Students were also asked to participate in a telephone interview regarding their online course experiences.
- Students were grouped by their earned grade average in online courses. Three groups were formed: 0-1.99 grade point average, 2.00-3.49 grade point average, and 3.5- 4.0 grade point average.

Instrument

The Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI) developed by Claire E. Weinstein and David R. Palmer, is a screening instrument that provides scores on 10 dimensions of study skills and learning strategies, including some that have been implicated in prior research as being important to online student success.

The 10 scales included in the LASSI are: anxiety, attitude, concentration, information processing, motivation, selecting main ideas, self testing, study aids, test strategies and time management. These are clustered by the authors of the LASSI into the 3 key components of skill, will and self-regulation.

The LASSI has undergone extensive development and revision and has established acceptable levels of reliability and validity and national norms have been developed to aid in interpreting scores.

Interview

The purpose of the interview was to gather information about how the students viewed their online experiences and what factors they identified as being influential in their success in the online course. Interviews were conducted via telephone and were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. A qualitative data analysis program, Atlas.ti, was used to organize and search the data.

Findings

One of the biggest revelations of this pilot study was that we had mis-identified our online students. We started with the assumption that students were either successful or unsuccessful in the online environment. What we found was that a student who had failed or dropped an online course in the Fall of 2004, may have already successfully completed as many as 5 courses online. Thus our assumption had to be revised and we began to look for the factors that determined success or failure for these students.

Analysis of the student interviews revealed 3 themes:

- Most students acknowledged that the online environment was more challenging than a traditional classroom and attributed much of their success to their own abilities to organize their work and discipline themselves to accomplish it.
- When asked why they were successful in some courses and not in others, students most often cited differences in course structure and instructor interaction.
- Health issues and changes in work assignments were the reasons given for withdrawing from a course after the drop/add period expired.

Analysis of LASSI Results

A one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine the effect of the three levels of success on the 10 dependent variables represented by the dimensions of the LASSI instrument. Significant differences were found between the lowest success level and the highest on the dimension of Motivation. $p < .05$.

Analysis of variances (ANOVA) was conducted as a follow-up test to the MANOVA. Using the Bonferroni method, the ANOVA was tested at the .025 level. The ANOVA on the Motivation score was not significant. $F(2, 17) = 4.390, p = .029$.

Post hoc analysis to the univariate ANOVA for the motivation scores consisted of conducting pairwise comparisons of the three grade groupings to determine which had the greatest effect on the Motivation score. The lowest two groups were not significantly different from one another, nor were the middle and the highest grade groups, but the highest grade group (grade point average > 3.5) was found to be significantly different from the lowest grade group (grade point average < 2.0).

Limitations of the Study

The greatest limitation of this pilot study is the low number of participants. This was due to difficulty in enticing students to participate. This will be addressed in the follow-up study by offering gift certificates to those who complete the study requirements.

Future Plans

Plans are underway to expand this pilot study during the Spring of '06.

For further information, contact us at:

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