Student Retention in Online Courses: University Role

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Abstract

As the growth in technology enables academic institutions to offer online courses to students globally, it is essential for universities to provide quality services to meet the needs and expectations of learners. Student retention in online courses is one of the challenges facing universities today. This is an important concern and should be addressed. The following research question was posed to a convenience sample of 84 students enrolled in online courses at an academic institution: What can the university do to help you to remain enrolled in online courses? The data generated from the research question were entered in Nvivo to identify themes and metathemes. The analysis identified twenty-four themes. As the analysis progressed, six metathemes emerged. The students proposed six areas for universities to address: costs, resources, the number of online courses and degrees offered, support services, faculty accountability, and policies. The metathemes identified in this study have implications for university administrators to focus on the learner when addressing retention in online courses.

Introduction

The number of students who were enrolled in at least one online course increased from 1.6 million in 2002 to 5.8 million in 2014 (Poulin & Straut, 2016). This is considered a triumphant endeavor in academia. However, despite this growth, retention in these courses is a challenge and needs to be addressed (Bawa, 2016). Students enrolled in online courses have a higher dropout rate when compared to students taking courses in the traditional classroom (Ali & Smith, 2015; Patterson & McFadden, 2009). For example, seventeen (17%) of students dropped out from an online course with 30 enrollees, compared to five (5%) of students in a campus-based course with 44 enrollees (Ali & Smith, 2015). Furthermore, 43% of students withdrew from an online MBA program compared to 11% of students in the face-face MBA program (Patterson & McFadden, 2009).

With online courses becoming an integral component of teaching and learning in institutions of higher learning (Poulin & Straut, 2016), it is paramount that universities look at how they can meet the needs and expectations of students. Several articles have reported on various retention strategies that could help prepare students for the online learning environment (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, & Santiague, 2017; Bawa, 2016; Eom & Ashill, 2016; Russo-Gleicher, 2014; Tyler-Smith, 2006; Nash, 2005; Roberson & Klotz, 2002). However, there is little research on what universities could do from the students' perspectives. Today, students' inquiries and recommendations are relevant and timely because they are the most important end users of online teaching and learning. "The student is the heart and soul of higher education"
(Kretovics, 2003, p. 8). This qualitative study aimed to make a phenomenological inquiry of students' perspectives about what the university could do to help them to remain enrolled in online courses.

Review of Literature

There is a phlethora of information about how to improve retention in online courses. Roberson & Klotz (2002) stated that academic leaders must adopt policies and practices that focus on interactivity with course content, instructor, and classmates. The authors recommended training opportunities to maximize online faculty members' use of instructional technology (Roberson & Klotz, 2002). "Re-educating instructors to continuously improve their skills and knowledge so that they can perform better as course designers, discussion/technology facilitators, and motivators is paramount" (Eom & Ashill, 2016, p. 204). " The primary responsibility for maintaining the quality of some categories such as technology and learner support lies with administrators" (Eom & Ashill, 2016, p. 204).

Effective listening and communication, as well as providing an environment where students can share ideas are factors associated with learner support (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, & Santiague, 2017). Furthemore, universities should "provide professional development for instructors, training for learners, and technical support for the content development and delivery of online courses to address the challenges in online education and enhance the effectiveness of online teaching and learning" (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, & Santiague, 2017, p. 21).

Other articles reported on how students should be prepared for the online environment. Tyler-Smith (2006) suggested an orientation session for online students for the purpose of minimizing misconceptions and anxieties related to online learning. Russo-Gleicher (2014) found that "student retention in online courses could be increased by making changes to the screening process for potential online students, improving the student orientation for online courses, the college administration providing additional support to faculty who do online teaching, and online faculty being more responsible to students" (p. 239). Moreover, Nash (2009) supported the use of pre-course orientation and online tutoring, The author stated that an orientation course should teach students how to succeed in online courses and contends that it is a popular strategy for students in courses with approximately 60 enrollees or greater (Nash, 2009). A study conducted by Gaytan (2015) revealed that program administrators could improve retention by providing institutional support services to students through "tutoring, financial aid counseling, online course registration, online training and orientation modules, and remediation for struggling students" (p. 64).

Jaggars, Edgecombe, & Stacey (2013) provided three suggestions to improve the effectiveness of online courses: student preparation and support, course quality and design, and faculty professional development. The authors described student preparation and support in the context of readiness activities, screening, early warning systems, technical support, and tutoring (Jaggers, Edgecombe, & Stacey, 2013). Course quality and design focuses on creating quality control systems to monitor online courses, ensuring engagement and interaction between faculty and students (Jaggers, Edgecombe, & Stacey, 2013). Faculty professional development deals with ongoing training in pedagogies and technology (Jaggers, Edgecombe, & Stacey, 2013).

Pappas (2015) reported on six strategies to improve learner retention in online courses: clearly define benefits and expectations; a well-structured support system; online collaboration with peers; self-study activities; cater to a wide range of learning needs, and breakdown e-learning courses into more manageable lessons or modules. The author claimed that if students know what is expected of them, they are more likely to remain engaged in the course (Pappas, 2015). For example, a well-structured support system provide opportunities for students to voiced their concerns about barriers that may impede their learning (Pappas, 2015). Online collaboration with peers facilitates interaction and engagement and caters to a wide range of learning needs (Pappas, 2015). A combination of strategies such as breaking down the course into smaller units or modules, and providing self-study activities to meet course obligations could help students achieve the learning outcomes (Pappas, 2015).

In summary, the literature offered many suggestions to keep students enrolled in online courses. The six main categories noted were:

1. Student preparation
2. Learner support services
3. Faculty accountability
4. Faculty professional development
5. Course quality and design
6. Well-structured support systems

Student preparation was described in the context of making changes to the screening process, improving the student orientation for online courses (Russo-Gleicher, 2014) and engaging students in readiness activities (Jaggers, Edgecombe, & Stacey, 2013). The literature suggested the use of grade point average (GPA) to improve the screening process, with mixed feelings and controversies (Russo-Gleicher, 2014). Some faculty members believed that GPA is an effective measurement for screening online students, and others were not sure that GPA is a good predictor of retention in online courses (Russo-Gleicher, 2014). Jaggers, Edgecombe, & Stacey, (2013) supports the use of a minimum GPA to succeed in the online environment.

A student orientation session should include information about course expectations, time management, and misconceptions about online courses (Russo-Gleicher, 2014). A study conducted by Nash (2009) revealed that students who failed or dropped out from online learning thought that the course work would be easier in the online environment. This pre-conceived notion could be addressed during student orientation. The body of knowledge supports the use of orientation to improve retention in online courses (Nash, 2009).

Jaggers, Edgecombe, & Stacey (2013) supports the use of readiness activities for students prior to or during online course registration. These activities should include information on technological requirements, skills and abilities to

succeed in the online environment, and the responsibilities and behaviors expected of students (Jaggers, Edgecombe, & Stacey, 2013). Readiness activities could help students to determine if online learning is suitable for them (Jaggers, Edgecombe, & Stacey, 2013).

Learner support services are essential and must be convenient and accessible to all students as they complete their online courses (Gaytan, 2015). A tutoring program is a learner support tool that is important to some online students, while others may neglect the opportunity to participate (Nash, 2009). One study found a tutoring program to be popular and effective among students who used them; however, the program did not attract enough students (Nash, 2009). This can be translated to mean that online students' expectations may differ or some of them may need the service but do not have adequate time to take advantage of the opportunities which are available (Nash, 2009).

Faculty accountability focused on effective communication, ensuring that online instructors have presence in their courses and are reaching out in a timely manner to students who are struggling academically (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, & Santiague, 2017). Instructor feedback should have meaning and depth to help students to improve their performances (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, & Santiague, 2017). Students are challenging online instructors to evaluate and develop facilitation, time management, and technological skills to guide them through the course content, provide a clear syllabus with textbook information, and make them feel as part of a learning community (Russo-Gleicher, 2014).

Professional development for online instructors should be a priority for universities (Jaggars. Edgecombe, & Stacey, 2013). Institutions of higher learning should consider requiring online instructors to complete two courses in online instruction, emphasizing instructor presence and student engagement, prior to receiving their credential to teach online (Jaggers, Edgecombe, & Stacey, 2013). Completing a faculty certification is not enough, unless it is complemented with continuous instructor training and support (Jaggers, Edgecombe, & Stacey, 2013). Bawa (2016) supports the idea of continuous professional development because the expectations for online courses and course designs are changing due to technological advances.

The quality and design of online courses are important. For example, course design on the components of faculty-student interaction, student-student interaction, and student-content interaction; as well as with engagement and evaluation (Eom & Ashill, 2016). A well- designed course can reassure students that they have the skills and abilities to succeed. Eom and Ashill (2016) found a strong association between course design, satisfaction, and learning outcomes among online students.

Well-structured support systems must be user friendly to help students achieve their educational goals. In the online classroom, students must interact with technology. It is likely that students will experience difficulty with the learning management system and other course technologies from time to time. Academic institutions must ensure that technical support is available for students' use (Jaggers, Edgecombe, & Stacey, 2013). If a 24-hour service is not a cost-effective approach for academic institutions, one other option would be to outsource this service (Jaggers, Edgecombe, & Stacey, 2013). Lack of a well-structured technical support systems in the online environment could result in frustration and unnecessary anxieties for students.

Methodology

Participants and Setting

During fall 2018, junior and senior undergraduate students (n = 84) enrolled in 16-week online 300 and 400 level Health Services Management courses at a University were invited to participate in the study. The University is a comprehensive urban institution. In fulfilling its mission, the University prepares its students to serve as leaders globally. One unique theme of the University's strategic plan is to improve students' retention. There are several perspectives by which to improve student retention. One of these is research usable data-driven information. A research study can uncover information that administration needs to make an appropriate decision for continuous improvements. The University offers a wide range of online degree programs and courses. Since students are stakeholders, an opportunity exists to determine their perspectives about retention in online courses, even though there are no actual problems or perceived issues.

The University uses the Blackboard Learning Management system for course delivery. The Office of Extended Learning (OEL) manages the Blackboard Learning Management System. OEL provides a faculty virtual resource center and an online student orientation portal in Blackboard. The faculty virtual resource center fosters faculty-student engagement, course design support, and encourages the integration of effective and appropriate technology tools to enhance online courses. The online student orientation portal contains modules that provide tutorials, collaboration with other online students, how to get started in an online course, and other support services related to

online learning.

All faculty members assigned to teach online courses at the University are required to complete a rigorous online certification training program. The training consists of awareness training, computer literacy, Blackboard basics, course design, instructional content, advanced Blackboard tools, virtual meetings, and the creation of a capstone course.

Data Collection and Analysis

An open-ended question guided the phenomenological inquiry: What can the University do to help you to remain enrolled in online courses. This question was posed in writing to a convenience sample of 84 students enrolled in online courses at a university. The students responded in writing to the question. This data were generated from the research question and entered as written in Nvivo (Nvivo, n.d.). The data were analyzed one sentence at a time to extract themes. These themes were categorized into metathemes and ranked by prevalence. The Institution Review Board granted permission to conduct the study.
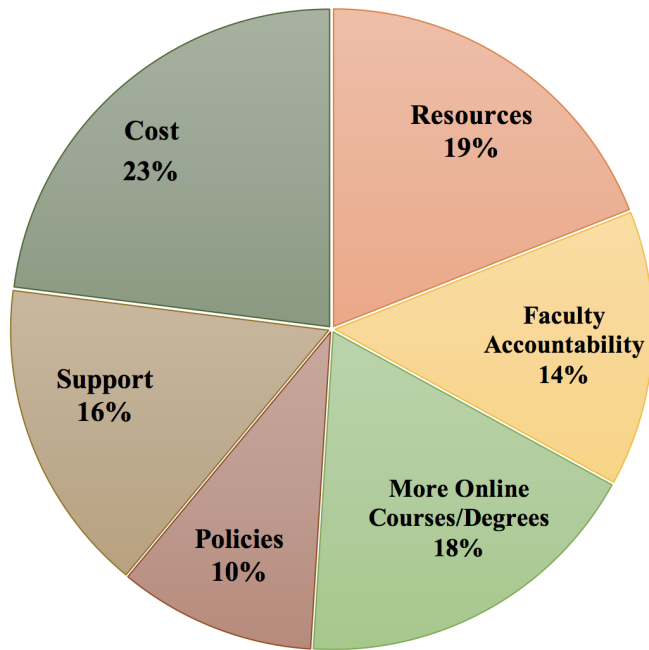
Findings

The study identified twenty-four themes. From these themes, six metathemes emerged across various retention issues and concerns that impacted students' retention in online courses. These metathemes were cost, resources, more online courses and degrees, support, faculty accountability, and policies. Table 1 displays the themes and metathemes by frequency of references. Figure 1 represents the percentages of metathemes across various retention issues and concerns.

Table 1: Metathemes and Themes

Themes	Metathemes	Frequency
E-Text Books		4
Faster Internet		3
Improved Library Hours	Resources	1
Supplemental Resources		9
Virtual Lectures		8
More Faculty Accountability		13
Tech Savvy Instructors	Faculty Accountability	2
Utilization of faculty evaluations		4
Promotion of Online Offerings		1
More Online Courses	More Online Course / Degrees	22
More Online Degrees		1
Standardized Grading Timeframes		1
Streamlined Online Registration		2
Revised Line-Out Policy	Policies	2
Standardized Course Quality		5
Standardized Syllabus		3
Better Tech Support		7
More Support Staff		2
Online Readiness Support	Support	4
Teacher Assistants Needed		2
Tutoring for Online Students		7
Reduced Cost for Online Courses		16
Reduced Cost for Online Students	Cost	14
Scholarships for Online Students		1

Figure 1: Percentages of Metathemes

The six metathemes further describe students' perspectives of what a university could do to keep them enroll in online courses.

Metatheme 1: Cost

Figure 2 represents the cost metatatheme. Cost was the most important factor that could affect their retention in online courses. Cost was described in the context of reducing the cost for online courses, reducing cost for online students, and providing scholarships for online students. Scholarship opportunities were considered an important determinant of student retention in institutions of higher learning (Robinson, 2015) but was not a significant factor for students in this study. Some participants made the following observations.

> One of the most important thing that a University can do is to make tuition more affordable.
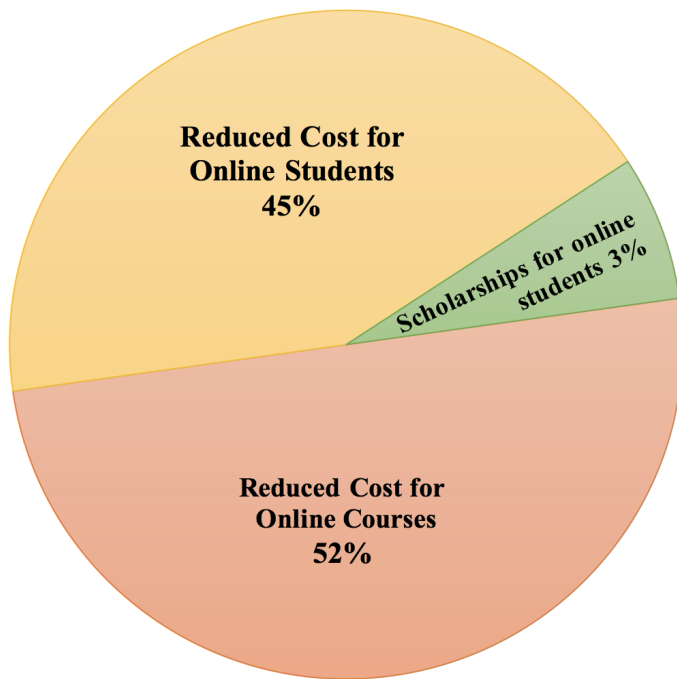
> Find a way to decrease online fees and offering online courses at a reduced cost.

> Include the cost of textbooks in the student's tuition.

One student noted:

> I feel that on-line courses should be billed at a lower rate than those sessions that are in-person. Students are not occupying a space at the university, not using the heat, water, lights, etc.

Figure 2. Cost metatheme.

Reduced Cost for Online Students 45%

Scholarships for online students 3%

Reduced Cost for Online Courses 52%

Metatheme 2: Resources

Figure 3 represents the resources metatheme. Resources ranked as the second most important factor affecting student retention in online courses. The students described resources in terms of providing e-text books, faster internet, more supplemental resources, more virtual lectures, and increasing library hours. One participant remarked:

> The university can improve the hours of the library. With most of the work being online we need an opportunity to go do work when we are free.

Another participant commented:

> The university should have the ebooks come with the course. It allows us to be able to do the work when classes start… the money for the ebook can later be charged to our account.
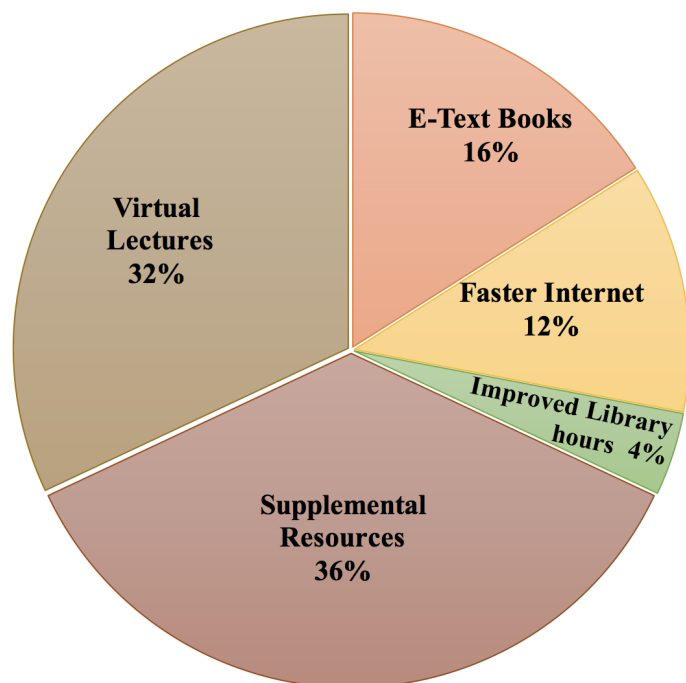
Other participants made the following recommendations:

> The university needs to improve the internet connection on campus … make sure that blackboard is up and running properly…

> Offer more virtual lectures so you can hear and see the instructor.

> Offer more supplemental resources on and off campus that may be accessible to students… outside websites like centage, mindtap.

Figure 3: Resources Metatheme

Metatheme 3: Online courses and degrees

Figure 4 represents the metatheme of online courses/degrees offered. The students ranked this metatheme as the third most important factor affecting student retention in online courses.They described online courses and degrees in the context of offering and promoting more online courses and degrees to meet students' needs and expectations. The researchers did not find any literature to support this recommendation as a means of improving retention. This implies that online students' needs and expectations are not always the same. In this study, the online students deemed this metatheme to be important. The recommendations from participants included:

I think the university should offer all classes online as well as in the classroom.

The university should offer more courses per major online.

Because many of the students enrolled have other responsibilities and being on campus is nearly impossible, offering more online courses would be ideal.

It would help if there were a wider range of major classes offered all year… there are certain online classes that can only be taken during a certain semester and that can cause the student to have to wait an unnecessary amount of time.
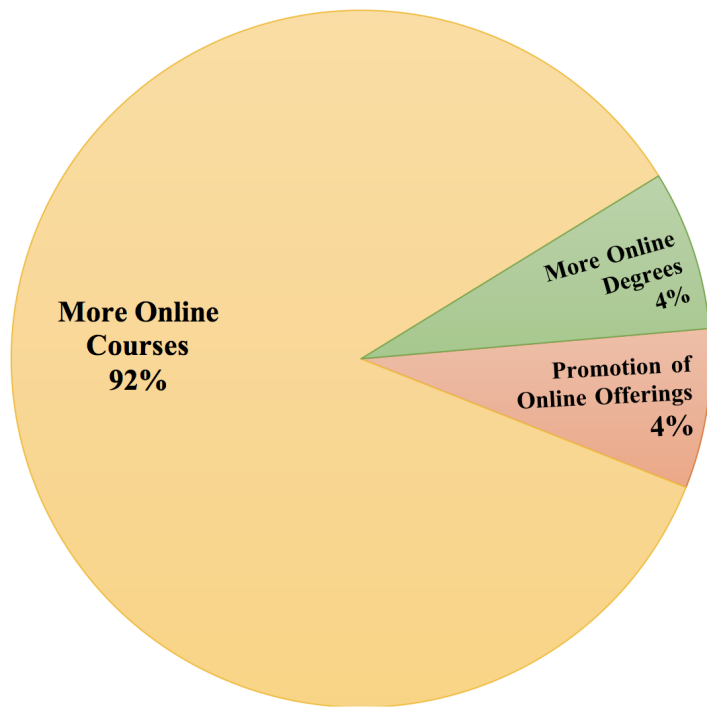
Continuing to offer online classes for the majority of the subjects is one way that I would stay enrolled. It helps students like myself who have a family and work to be able to take classes even with a busy personal life. I feel as if this is a big stress reliever… so if the university continues to keep this going; I will continue to attend online classes to help further my career.

Create additional on-line degrees and classes to ensure higher learning at the university and to increase enrollment.

Providing more online courses … for example, in science, reading and math would definitely be a plus.

The university can offer more online classes for summer session for major classes and not only general courses. This could help people stay enrolled because they have other options to complete classes other than spring and fall semester.

Figure 4: Online Courses/Degrees

Metatheme 4: Support

Figure 5 represents the support metatheme. The students ranked this metatheme as the fourth most important factor affecting student retention in online courses The students' viewpoints about support were in terms of providing better technical support services, along with enough staff to provide the service; online readiness services; tutoring; and adding teacher assistants to online courses. These findings support prior research (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, & Santiague, 2017; Gaytan 2015; Russo-Gleicher, 2014; Nash, 2009). Explaining why such viewpoints are necessary, participants commented that:

> Students must be provided with the proper technical support team … an improvement of technical support could reduce the number of incidents that students face when trying to submit assignments.

> A mentor or a buddy system for freshmen with guidance throughout their college year… it should be mandatory interaction for students who are failing.
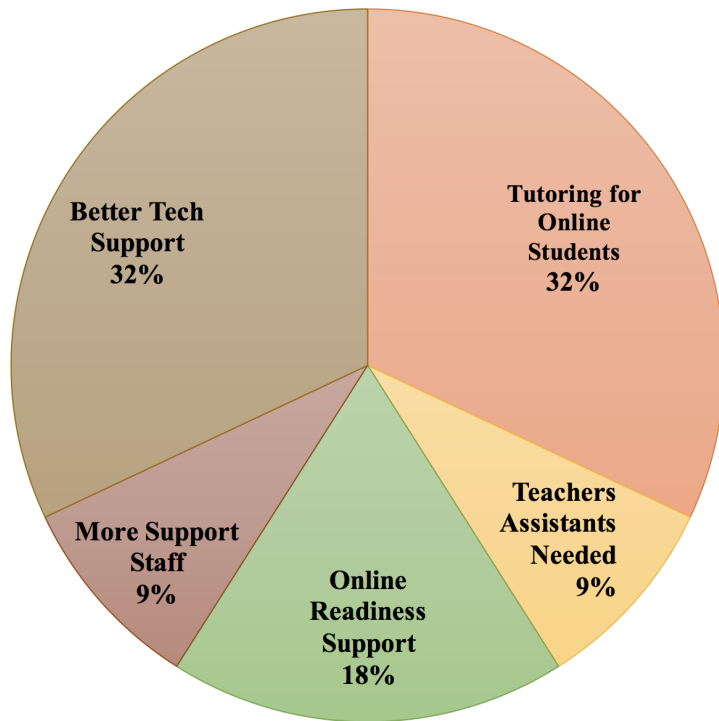
> The only thing that I would say could help me would be free online tutoring services that weren't limited in hours.

> The university should have an online orientation video or give tips on how to be successful in online classes… the university should require teachers to give struggling students tutoring sessions via online.

> Another major improvement that would benefit the students is to have coaching or tutoring systems built into the courses so there is always assistance available for students that have trouble learning something in a course.

> I feel that the professor should have a 24hr teacher's assistant that can help with all online classes especially when a professor is unavailable to respond to emails as quickly or to explain material better.

Figure 5: Support

Metatheme 5: Faculty Accountability

Figure 6 represents the faculty accountability metatheme. The students ranked this metatheme as the fifth most important factor affecting student retention in online courses The students described faculty accountability as paying more attention to online students, being more "tech savvy", and utilizing course evaluations for improvements. These findings are consistent with the literature (Eom & Ashill, 2016 ; Jaggers, Edgecombe, & Stacey, 2013). The participants explained how faculty accountability could influence retention in a positive manner.

> To remain enrolled in online classes, the university should hire amazing teachers and professors that better communicate through technology.
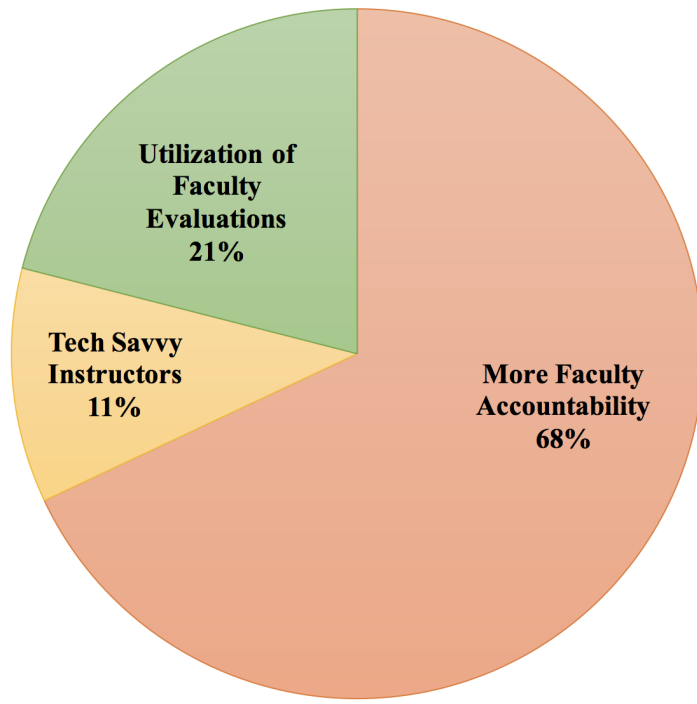
> The university could start by actually using the professor evaluations. I believe if they did that they would get all the information they needed in regards to the professors.

> More students may also be willing to to remain enrolled if all courses made assignments and material available further in advance.

> The university can change the dynamics of the delivery of online teaching to include a more virtual presence of the professors.

> I think it would help if the university had a link on its website where there is a campus wide professor rating system. This will give students an idea of certain professors teaching style, what to expect from them, and what to expect from us.

Figure 6: Faculty Accountability

Metatheme 6: Policies

Figure 7 represents the policies metatheme. The students ranked this metatheme as the sixth most important factor affecting student retention in online courses The students described policies in the context of developing standardized grading time frames, syllabi, and course quality; as well as streamlining online registration and revising the course line-out policy. Jaggers, Edgecombe, & Stacey (2013) supports the need for academic institutions to create a centralized control system to monitor course quality and design. The participants suggested:

> The university could require grades to be entered within a certain timeframe for all professors when an assignment is turned in … the university should encourage professors to keep the gradebook updated. I've had a few online classes where my grades have not been posted… leaving me to wonder if I am at a good standing in the class.
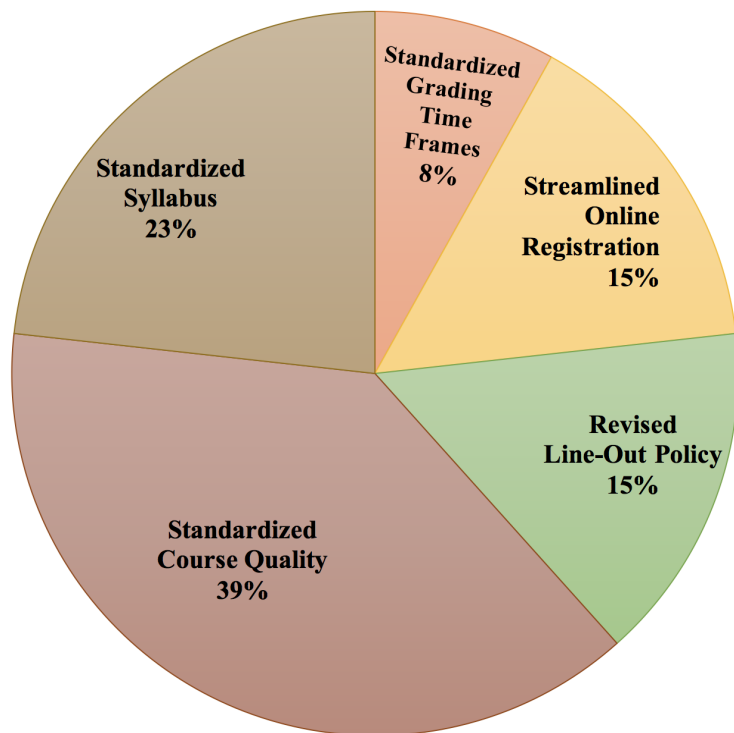>
> A standardized syllabus for all courses.
>
> I feel the university could change the way some students register for classes … to enroll into a class we have to make an appointment with our advisor.
>
> The university needs to improve class registration. It gets frustrating when your classes get cancelled because your financial aid hasn't kicked in. Then, you lose your classes and must register all over again, just to find out that the classes you originally picked are all full.
>
> Online courses are supposed to provide an experience for the student … that is an innovative approach in academic excellence. It is the job of the university to ensure students receive the same quality education online as they would in a traditional classroom.
>
> Besides the approaches used by the online instructors to keep students enrolled, the university should firstly ensure that online learning is of the highest quality possible.

Figure 7: Policies

Discussion, Study Limitations, and Further Research

The purpose of this qualitative study was to make a phenomenological inquiry of students' perspectives about what the university could do to help them to remain enrolled in online courses. The findings from the qualitative analysis demonstrated what is important to students. Their recommendations were as follows:

1. Reduce costs for online students
2. Provide more resources
3. Offer and promote more online courses and degrees
4. Provide more support for both students and faculty
5. Ensure faculty accountability to students
6. Develop policies for online courses

The study had multiple limitations. The data were restricted to a specific university and therefore, the results cannot be generalized to other institutions of higher learning. The sample size was small. The study population was a convenience sample of students taking online courses. Despite these limitations, the study broadened the scope of the literature about students' viewpoints regarding what they expect from the institution when taking online courses.

This study does not advocate that the aforementioned factors are the only strategies to improve retention in online courses; but rather described the viewpoints and insights of students about factors they deemed important to improve retention . Through various strategies, with the focus on the learner, the university can continue to create an online environment to help to improve students' retention. Future research studies with wider scope and depth, including mixed methods, are needed to determine how to improve students' retention.

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