Establishing a Mentoring Plan for Improving Retention in Online Graduate Degree Programs

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Abstract

As online distance education courses continue to increase in popularity for graduate programs it is becoming evident that retention issues are much greater in this format than in traditional face to face classes. Maintaining contact with students and overcoming feelings of isolation can be a major challenge for instructors and program coordinators. This paper describes an e-mentoring plan established for students in a Master's of Adult Education degree program with the purpose of maintaining enrollment while supporting students throughout their experience. The steps of the plan are described along with the rationale for each.

Introduction

Distance education is fast becoming the most effective form of instructional delivery for adults as the demand for programs and courses is growing at an enormous rate. This phenomenon is quickly changing the face of higher education as institutions are able to serve a yet untapped pool of potential students. Students are no longer limited to educational opportunities which are within driving distance of their home, but rather have unlimited opportunities to take courses and attain degrees from almost any institution in the country. Technology has changed the educational landscape in terms of how information is delivered and to whom, the speed of access to information, and in terms of the choice of options for courses, programs, and colleges and universities. One only needs to do a cursory search of the Internet for distance education programs to become astounded by the number and variety of programs. There are literally hundreds of programs and courses that range from cohort groups with some on campus requirements, to offerings that are completely online with no on-campus requirements. According to the Sloan Consortium Report (2006), 63% of schools offering undergraduate face-to- face courses also offer undergraduate courses online and of schools offering face- to- face master's programs 44 % offer courses online. Additionally, 62% of academic leaders believe that learning outcomes are equal if not superior to traditional face to face classroom learning.

Adults are attracted to online learning as the majority of the students are between the ages of 25 and 50 (Moore & Kearsey, 1996). Distance learning has a natural attraction for adult learners because they tend be highly self-directed with an accumulated wealth of knowledge who know what they want to learn and why (Lorenzetti, 2003). For many students learning through distance education may be their only choice in improving their educational attainment and many see learning in this m ann er as more efficient use of their time (Lorenzetti, 2005). And, as more individuals continue to work, especially those taking graduate courses, the convenience of

distance education will cause it to continue to flourish (Frey, Faul, & Yankelov, 2003).

However, there are some limitations to providing distance education for both the students and the institutions providing the service. Compared to face- to- face classroom education, distance education requires students to be more focused, become better time managers, and to have the ability to work alone and with others (Hardy & Boaz, 1997). Each must learn flexibility and learn to adapt to a world where they are unable to touch, see, or hear the people they are trying to communicate with (Palloff, 1999) .

Online students face more distractions from work and family responsibilities which may account for a higher attrition rate than is seen in regular face to face classrooms. Some believe that distance education courses require significantly more time and effort on the part of faculty (Thompson, 2002) while others have found that the amount of time required decreases with experience (Visser, 2000). It has been estimated that teaching an online course may take three times as long both in terms of preparation and in actual teaching time as opposed to a normal classroom.

Distance education implies a separation between the student and teacher with the learners having more autonomy and responsibility for the learning process (Olgren 2000) . Distance education is defined by the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) as "institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructor" (Schlosser & Simonson, 2002, p. 4). The challenge thus becomes how to create a cognitively stimulating and supportive environment in the virtual classroom (Wiesenberg 1999) . Therefore, distance education brings a whole new set of issues to both instructors and learners with retention being at the forefront of concerns.

Retention Issues

According to Serwatka (2005), retaining students is the number one priority of higher education and one way to improve retention is to reduce the number of withdrawals from online courses. Learning online can be a daunting task for many adult students because they must not only handle work, family, and community responsibilities but in addition must find time to study and learn online. For many adults who have been educated in the traditional classroom, learning online can be a lonely process as the student sits at a computer trying to connect with others and learn new content through a totally new mode of learning. For most adult students their only experience has been in the typical classroom where students attend class once per week and then leave only to return the next week for another class. In the distance learning environment interaction and participation can be a daily requirement and adjusting to these new demands can be stressful and overwhelming. Success of online courses, like any course, can be determined by looking at drop out rates which are often high for online courses. As many as 50 percent of students fail to complete their courses which is more than 20 percent higher than traditional courses (Carr, 2000; Lorenzetti, 2002). For example, records show that for students enrolled in fully online courses at The University of Georgia over a five semester period, approximately 30% dropped a course by the end of the semester (Morris, L., Finnegan, C., & Wu, S., 2005). Institutions are beginning to see that convincing students to stay in online courses is more of a challenge than trying to retain them in face-to-face classrooms (Gaide, 2004).

Gaide (2004) offers 10 suggestions for best practice to improve student retention in graduate

online programs. The program design should include synchronous sessions to lessen feelings of isolation among students, there should be a face to face orientation to establish a sense of belonging to the institution, and the use of a cohort or quasi-cohort model will serve as a support system for the students. Additionally she suggests using team building activities, matching students to the program, training faculty in the skills of online teaching, having access to support services, administrative staff, library resources, and finally making sure all information and links are updated and workable.

Additional findings suggest that there are ways to improve retention in the online learning environment by forming learning communities and establishing social networks (Wang, Sierra, & Folger, 2003) and that students are more successful when they have opportunities to interact with other students, the instructor, and course content (Mabrito, 2004). As mentioned earlier, it has been found that cohort-based programs positively affect retention (Lorenzetti, 2003) and Carnevale (2005) reports in the February 4, 2005 edition of the Chronicle of Higher Education that programs that offer entire degrees online are more successful than those that only offer a few courses.

Therefore, a conscious and systematic plan should be implemented in any distance education program that will overcome the issue poor retention in online courses.

Implementing a Mentoring Plan to Improve Retention

One concept that can assist in improving retention in online programs is through the implementation of a mentoring plan. The concept of mentoring is thought to have been derived from Homer, one of the ancient Greek story tellers, but in fact the concept more than likely comes from an 18 th century writer and educator Fenelon (Peer Resources, 2005; Rowley, 1999). "Mentoring is when a role model, or mentor, offers support to another person. A mentor has knowledge and experience in an area and shares it with the person being mentored" (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005). In graduate education, as in other arenas, mentoring is a way for faculty to guide students toward increased mastery of subject matter and increased self-directiveness by offering both support and challenge while sharing expert knowledge and encouragement. Mentoring is a way to forge a bond with students that makes the educational process more meaningful for both the student and the faculty member. Mentoring can be especially important when delivering courses and programs through distance education. Therefore, the information that follows is a description of a mentoring plan, the steps involved, and the rationale for each.

The Development of a Mentoring Plan at the University of Georgia

In September 2001 the Department of Adult Education at the University of Georgia launched the first and only degree program offered completely online at the university. The first step in developing the online program was to appoint a coordinator whose responsibility it would be to serve as the advisor and mentor to the students and to develop a plan of how to maintain contact with students. Therefore, it was the responsibility of the coordinator to set the design of the program and to implement the aspects of the mentoring plan. Two decisions that supported the actual structural design of the program and the rationale for each is explained below:

The Program is Offered Using Only Asynchronous Instruction

Although it has been suggested that synchronous instruction be combined with asynchronous instruction to establish a connection with students and that students meet for an on-campus orientation to feel more of a part of the institution (Gaide, 2004) both ideas were rejected for several reasons. Because adult students have busy professional lives and because there are many competing factors for their time, the program is offered through asynchronous instruction, with no "real time" online requirements as well as no on-campus requirements. This avoids time zone issues so that students from all over the United States and the world can participate in the program and so students can participate in their courses no matter their schedule.

The Program is Cohort Based

Several studies support the idea that building a sense of community is a necessity for online learning to succeed (Hill, 2002; Moller, 1998) because students report that they are more satisfied and motivated to participate (Rovai, 2002). Therefore, the adult education mater's degree program is cohort based and is limited to 20 students each fall semester. By limiting the number of students in each cohort, instructors have a greater opportunity to maintain personal contact with each student and are better able to monitor student progress throughout each course. Students take 11 courses or 33 credit hours of coursework and can complete the program in two years.

Next a plan was developed of how to mentor students in the program by building an openness of communication and by creating a sense of closeness between the students and faculty not usually found in online learning. The following guidelines were developed to achieve this goal:

Telephone Each Student Prior to the Beginning of the Program

In order to establish a personal connection with students a telephone call is initiated by the program coordinator before the program begins. During this conversation students are told what will be required of them in the program for the next two years. They are given examples of the benefits they will receive by obtaining a master's degree and asked about their future goals. Their motivation for being in the program is discussed and they are given some time management techniques they might find useful. They are also told by the program coordinator that she will be their advisor throughout the program and will be the one that follows their progress and will be available if at any time they have questions or issues that might arise. Having one contact person for the students throughout the program increases the connection and gives them a more identifiable relationship with the program and with the university. This option may not be feasible for very large online programs but because the size of this program is limited personal contact with each student is able to be made.

Use the Tools in WebCT to Establish an Instructional Relationship

The courses are delivered through WebCT which is an excellent online delivery platform and provides many tools that make the mentoring process much easier. As students begin their first course allow two days for them to explore the course content and familiarize themselves with WebCT. In the discussion area provide a link for them to introduce themselves to their classmates and get to know the other students and find commonalities among the group. Additionally, the coordinator gives program graduate volunteers access to the course and provides a Q&A section to answer the questions new students might have and to offer advice on how they themselves as graduates were able to structure their time in order to succeed in the

program. Allowing students the time to discuss the program with graduates shows new students that the program is doable and that they can meet the requirements of the program and manage their lives as well.

The Coordinator Should Teach One of the First Courses in the Program

The program coordinator teaches one of the first two courses in the program to maintain and build upon the initial conversation with the students and to learn more about each student's academic ability. As students proceed through the semester they are monitored through the tracking tool in WebCT and if at any time a student is not participating the coordinator calls that student to see what is going on and try to work around any difficulties they have encountered. Often students may have problems at work, a change in jobs, a sick child, or family death and they need to know that there are options available to them so that they do not have to drop out of the program. Also monthly meetings are scheduled with other faculty teaching in the program to monitor how students are doing in their other courses and to discuss any new innovative teaching techniques that would improve the student's experience.

Open a "Coffee Shop" In Each Course

As stated earlier, WebCT does provide many excellent tools for contacting and interacting with students. Because part of the goal in the program is to build a sense of community a "Coffee Shop" link is provided for conversation that is non-course related so that students can maintain a personal connection with other students. In this area they may share events that occur in their lives such as a new baby, a new job, or any other aspect that helps them build more rapport with each other.

Establish "Virtual" Office Hours

The chat room feature is a good tool to use for "virtual office hours". The program coordinator notifies students when she will be in the chat room at various times during the week and that any student who wishes may "drop by" may do so. This gives students the opportunity to discuss their work not only with the instructor but with the other students in a "real time" environment. Other than in the discussion area in the courses, contact with the students is done through the internal or external email systems. Email is a good vehicle to give students information about their courses, about registration, or about any other information they might need as they go through each semester.

Telephone Students Again Mid-Semester

About mid-point of the first semester, students may be contacted again by telephone to see how they are progressing in the program and to see if they have any questions or issues to discuss. Students really seem to appreciate this call and it does give them a "human" voice and a "real" person to talk to. Some course instructors like to do this as a mid-semester way to evaluate their course or the call may be made by the coordinator.

Conduct a Final Exit Interview

As a final requirement of the master's program students submit a final portfolio of their work in the program and an exit interview is scheduled by phone. Students select three faculty members

to serve on their exit interview committee and students are questioned about their experiences and are given the opportunity to share their thoughts about how the program might be improved. The coordinator collects the data from the interviews and makes changes to the program based on student suggestions. Overall students like the cohort aspect of the program as they are able to form friendships with other students and get support from others when needed. They also like the way the courses are structured and feel that course instructors are "available" to them when needed. Suggestions for improvement range from recommending that new students have access to high speed internet, providing print copies of power point slides since they are sometimes difficult to print from webct, limiting discussion group size to six students, and allowing more flexibility in deadline for assignments and discussions. Data collected from the exit interviews is considered very important in ensuring that the program meets the needs of the students and makes chances of success more likely.

Conclusion

The e-mentoring plan established for the online Master's of Adult Education degree program has produced some very positive results. Since the program began in the fall of 2001, 73 students have graduated from the program and there are another 55 students currently in the program. Only 24 students have dropped out of the program and these were usually during the first semester. None of these students expressed dissatisfaction with the program, but rather cited issues around trying to balance school with other responsibilities such as a new job, career responsibilities or family and/or personal illnesses. Every effort is made to work with students who encounter personal difficulties while trying to complete their courses. For example, several students have chosen to take

only one course per semester instead of the suggested two courses. Although it takes students longer to complete the program and it is necessary for them to move into other established cohorts this solution seems to work well for these students. Based on anecdotal comments by faculty, students in the online program may learn as much or more when compared to students in the face-to-face program because they interact with the material and each other every day and not just once per week in class.

With each new cohort students are much more advanced in their technological skills and many have already experienced some form of online learning. This may mean that in the future the mentoring plan may need to be adapted to a new kind of student or changed all together, but each step in the process is seen as important to the retention of the students in the program. Based on comments made during student exit interviews, students express a high level of satisfaction with the experience and are grateful for having a mentor and guide that encouraged them and supported them so that they were able to succeed. Additionally, having instituted a mentoring plan for students in the Adult Education Master's online program has resulted in closer relationships between faculty and students and among the students themselves as confidence levels grow and quality of work improves.

Although the ideas described above may not be appropriate for every online program it is important that a meaningful and well thought out mentoring plan be implemented to ensure that students have a positive experience and continue in the program until they obtain their degree.

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