

Persistence in Online Classes: A Study of Perceptions among Community College Stakeholders

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Abstract

Because online learning presents unique challenges for not only learners but faculty and administrators as well, those involved in these cyber-environments must think beyond the boundaries of the traditional classroom. This study examined the perceptions of online persistence factors, those characteristics which influence student retention, as seen by the three major stakeholders in community college distance education programs: administrators, faculty, and students. The purpose of the study was to determine which factors are most important among the three groups and where those perceptions converge since lack of convergence could be a factor resulting in high attrition rates of some online courses. While the results of this study indicated that the perceptions of administrators and faculty are more closely aligned than either is with the students' perceptions, they also show a recognition among all groups of stakeholders of online learning as an evolving phenomenon which requires attention to even the most minute details which are sometimes overlooked, not emphasized, or taken for granted. This recognition indicates a necessary paradigm shift, which will lead to improvements in online learning policy, design, and pedagogy, is in the making.

Keywords: online learning, retention, attrition, online learning communities, adult learners

Introduction

Online learning is an option which allows students greater flexibility in building a course schedule that caters to their lifestyles. This is especially beneficial to those adult community college students trying to successfully integrate educational pursuits into lives already busy with work and family responsibilities. Although online learning can provide an attractive option for these adult learners hoping to pursue higher education, it is not necessarily a panacea for every challenge confronting these learners. Despite astronomical growth in the past decade, distance education programs see many casualties when large numbers of students register for online courses with no concept of what the experience will entail (Bathe, 2001; Hill & Raven, 2000; Moore, Bartkovich, Fetzner, & Ison, 2002; O'Brien & Renner, 2002; Stover, 2005). Various studies which examined student retention in distance education programs (Dahl, 2004; Nesler, 1999; Valasek, 2001) agree that student attrition is a huge issue in online learning, and each study offers proactive measures from learning communities to technology awareness as methods to increase retention in online courses.

Online learning can resemble a virtual "field of dreams" where officials believe that "if you build, it they will come." Institutions take an aggressive stance toward building online programs by making available a large number of online courses to attract students into the college. Of the large numbers of students who register for online courses, many end up withdrawing from the course formally, or informally through lack of participation, or they may continue and receive less than desired results. As such, a huge investment is made in technology, but little in comparison is made in the human stock when lack of attention to traditional course management issues such as learning styles, individual differences of students,

selection of appropriate course activities and materials, and proper training for online faculty and students (Bass & Ritting, n. d.; Bates & Poole, 2003; Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; Franklin, 2001; O'Brien & Renner, 2002) fails to consider online pedagogy and the students who are to benefit. Retention rates, however, directly relate to how well the courses and facilitators meet the needs of the learners enrolled in these courses. Palloff and Pratt (2003) contend that online programs which are designed around the learner tend to offer more quality which, in turn, increases learner satisfaction. If learners are satisfied with the results of their online experience, they are more likely to stay in the course.

Online learning presents unique challenges for not only the learners but the faculty and administrators as well. Those responsible for making decisions regarding, designing, facilitating, and even learning in these cyber-environments must stretch themselves to think beyond the limitations of the traditional classroom. The purpose of this study was to determine what factors community college administrators, faculty, and students perceive as important in influencing student persistence in community college online learning programs. The study was a descriptive one which compared the perceptions through these different lenses to reveal which perceptions are held in common among the stakeholder groups and where those perceptions diverge.

Review of the Literature

Persistence in a college or an individual course requires commitment on the part of the student; the student's level of commitment is directly influenced by a person-environment fit. Tinto's (1993) Student Integration Model describes student attrition as a result of the lack of social and academic integration into the college or university community. This idea reasonably suggests that when students feel comfortable within the social and academic milieu of the college, they are more likely to stay. Community colleges fall victim to overall student attrition at a higher rate than 4-year institutions (Tinto, 1993), and distance education courses see a larger number of students who fail to persist than traditional courses (Bathe, 2001; Moore et al., 2002; Stover, 2005). Online dropout rates have traditionally ranged from 30 to 50 percent (Hill & Raven, 2000; Moore et al., 2002; O'Brien & Renner, 2002). Reasons for this attrition coincide with those of traditional students who cite "personal problems, financial problems, changes in work schedule, and teacher-related concerns" (Moore et al., 2002, p. 6). Studies also indicate that a lack of personal interaction and support are major reasons for online student attrition (Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Moore et al., 2002). In addition, many students enroll in online courses with the misconception that these courses are less challenging than traditional courses or with other mistaken expectations such as the idea that working at one's own pace means due dates and deadlines are nonexistent (Burnett, 2001; Moore et al., 2002; Tait, 2004). The realities of virtual learning often overwhelm many of these students who ultimately become attrition statistics.

Online Learning Communities

Building community online is a crucial characteristic for influencing persistence. Palloff and Pratt (1999) characterize an online community as one which contains active interaction involving content and personal communication between students and the instructor. Students and faculty share ideas, information, and resources while at the same time they offer support and encouragement along with constructive critical evaluations of each other's work. Online learning communities can also provide a student-centered learning environment, develop critical thinking skills, and provide expanded connections to specialists, faculty, and students around the world, thus extending phenomenally the boundaries of the traditional classroom (Alexander, 1999; Milheim, 2001). Likewise, in the absence of a physical connection to an institution, virtual learning communities allow students an opportunity to make connections with the institution, other learners, and course content in a supportive environment. Persistence rates are higher for students who are involved in learning communities than for those who are not a part of such an environment (Santovec, 2004).

Access to an electronic learning environment, however, does not guarantee community. A learning community develops when the participants recognize their shared goals and responsibilities and commit to working toward realization of those goals (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Facilitators in online courses (just as in the traditional face-to-face course) must use a variety of methods and techniques to foster this sense of shared community in an environment in which the primary mode of communication is text-based. Lock (2003) asserts that establishing online learning communities encompasses more than the selection

and use of technology:

Attention ought to be directed to ways in which online learning environments accommodate the social and psychological needs of people who come together virtually to learn. Nurturing the creation of a learning community is not only about changing practices and routines; it is about changing how we empower learners within an online community. (p.1)

Therefore, educators need to re-examine learning styles theories and methods of assessments which will move the focus from teaching to the facilitation of learning (Hart, 2001). A shift in focus from the "technical to [the] social aspect" (Chen, 2004, Introduction) of online learning is also necessary as interaction is touted as a mainstay of meaningful learning.

A New Paradigm

A most important issue in online teaching and learning is shifting the paradigm from the traditional teacher-centered approaches which have dominated instructional practices of the past. Although the instructor is still the content expert in a virtual environment, students in an online community must assume responsibility for managing their own learning experiences (Bathe, 2001; Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). Many faculty, however, are reluctant to give up their control in the courses they teach, and many learners are reluctant to take a more independent role in their learning.

Role of the instructor.

For maximum effectiveness, the one-size-fits all approach should not reflect the online learning experience. Thus, online facilitators are faced with challenges unique to the online learning environment. Like the face-to-face instructors, they must establish relationships with their students, determine their needs, and develop a teaching style which fits those needs; however, they must do so without any face-to-face contact (Bass & Ritting, n. d.). In addition, online facilitators must be aware that their students are adult learners who bring with them a number of other issues requiring their time and attention. Recognition of and attention to these factors contributes to increased student satisfaction which, in turn, yields higher persistence rates.

Designing a course and implementing a program of study conducive to the online environment while providing meaningful learning experiences is a special challenge for the online instructor. Technical considerations, including skills of the instructor and the learner, availability and accessibility of technology, and the level of technical support available are issues which combine with content presentation, classroom interaction, and the time required to develop and facilitate such a course are all aspects which require attention. Conrad and Donaldson (2004) posit that designing an online course is much like designing a face-to-face one in that the main objective is to fulfill the learning outcome: "an activity that does not contribute to a learning outcome only adds confusion to the course and risks learner dissatisfaction at having to do an unnecessary activity" (p. 17). Posting of extensive lecture notes which mirror the textbook presentations, PowerPoint outlines used for classroom presentations, and "busy work" are all ill-advised techniques for retaining students in an online learning environment (O'Brien & Renner, 2002). Faculty in an online learning program must learn how to be effective instructors in this medium, and administrators must make available the necessary provisions to help these faculty (Inman, Kerwin, & Mayes, 1999).

Role of the learner.

Engaged learning is a prerequisite for an effective learning community. Engaged learning includes students establishing their own learning goals, working together in groups, and exploring appropriate resources to answer meaningful questions; tasks that are multidisciplinary and authentic, with connections to the real world; assessment that is ongoing and performance-based; and products that are shared with an audience beyond the classroom (Jones, Valdez, Nowakowski, & Rasmussen, 1994). Students are also expected to share in decision making and assessment and evaluation of themselves, the instructor, and the course. "When a student is engaged on an individual level and his/her ideas are validated before the group, the student is made to feel like a part of a community where his/her opinion is sought or valued" (Franklin, 2001, Designing Successful Communities section, para. 5). This method of engaged learning equips students to achieve a level of comfort in the online environment and ultimately to step out of their traditional passive roles and become active co-learners with fellow students and the

facilitator.

Social Constructivism

Many instructors adopt a learning-centered pedagogy using a social constructivist approach in which students learn new knowledge by assimilating information, relating it to existing knowledge, and reflecting on it. For constructivists, reflection and discussion are key activities through which knowledge is gained. The asynchronous nature of online classes allows for and encourages such reflection. The inherent anonymity and safety of the online learning platform combined with the ability to take time to ponder ideas and reflect before posting enables many online learners to contribute more readily than in the traditional learning environment (Chen, 2004; Howard, 2003).

Critical Reflection and Transformative Learning

Critical reflection can be defined as a process by which an individual carefully and objectively examines his or her behaviors in a given situation. Palloff and Pratt (1999) point out that the very nature of online learning presents disorienting dilemmas and psychic distortions which cause the participants to examine their pre-existing beliefs and behaviors. Although unaware of their transformation, they are approaching learning through a new medium which is very different from the traditional venue of classroom instruction. Becoming accustomed to new technology as a dominant means of communication and instruction presents another nontraditional aspect of their learning environment. Perhaps the most transforming component of their experience is the reliance upon self and other learners as opposed to the traditional view of the instructor as the authority or expert. Learners who are unable to reconcile themselves to this new medium become casualties of virtual learning environments; in contrast, those who are able to find an appropriate fit with their educational objectives and abilities persist.

Climate of the Online Learning Community

Learners are better able to form online communities when they feel comfortable within the learning environment. This comfort can result from a number of activities and sources including comfort with the technology, clear expectations established from the beginning, and an opportunity to share ideas in a non-threatening environment where every voice is important.

Students must feel free to take risks and challenge assumptions. Without this level of comfort . . . they will be reticent to dispute ideas and stretch their thinking. They will also find the learning experience very isolating and many will retreat to the comforts of a classroom setting or be lost to continuing education entirely. (O'Brien & Renner, 2002, para. 2)

Faculty who are sensitive to their online students can detect cues, such as "decreased activity level, diminished quality, and delayed responses" (O'Brien & Renner, 2002, Course Design section), which may indicate frustrations with the learning environment and other issues related to this type of learning. At this point, faculty should communicate with the student to determine a reason for the change in behavior and try to arrive at a resolution which may involve a behavior modification on the part of the student, the instructor, or both.

Students who become overwhelmed because of mounting issues which are unresolved tend to drop out of their online courses (Gaide, 2004). This is frequently the result of students entering the online learning environment without an accurate assessment of what the venture entails. Online students need clear expectations about course objectives, requirements, and policies communicated from the start (Gaide, 2004; Lorenzetti, 2005a; Lorenzetti, 2005b). Therefore, feedback from the instructor is an important retention factor by helping to develop a connection between the faculty and the student. Such feedback is automatically delayed in an asynchronous environment, but the instructor should make every effort to respond in a timely manner and in a tone which demonstrates warmth and caring (O'Brien & Renner, 2002). Effective online learning communities can be characterized by four critical components: interaction, communication, participation, and collaboration.

Interaction

Isolation or lack of connectedness has been cited (Bathe, 2001; Stark & Warren, 1999) as a major threat to student persistence in online courses. Students report feelings of not being a part of an institution or an attitude of "out-of-sight out-of-mind" which leads them to direct their attentions to more immediate and tangible concerns (Stark & Warren, 1999). The online instructor can even fall victim to the latter when

attentions are constantly divided among a variety of responsibilities: “a name without a face is easier to *not* get involved with” (Stark & Warren, 1999, p. 395). However, an ideal online learning environment is highly interactive with all participants consistently involved with content, the facilitator, and each other. Online facilitators who consider the students’ need for the human touch and the importance of an interactive course create learning environments which promote connectedness and meaningful learning thereby leading to higher student persistence rates.

Communication

Effective online communication is that in which faculty and students recognize that they are each a vital part of a learning community in which interaction is not only appropriate but necessary for the attainment of individual and shared goals. “Communication is the brick and mortar of virtual communities, and communities only exist as long as communication is available to participants” (Schweir, 2000, Whither Virtual section, para. 6). Effective communication includes thoughtful discussion and feedback among learners and the instructor/facilitator.

Participation

In order to promote interactivity and participation, it is important that the instructor is clear about how much time the course will require of both students and faculty in order to eliminate potential misunderstandings about course demands. The instructor also needs to teach students about online learning, be a good model of good participation by logging on often and contributing to the discussion and community formation, be willing to step in and set limits if participation wanes or if the conversation is headed in the wrong direction, and remember that there are people attached to the words on the screen (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). Palloff and Pratt further assert that facilitators should establish minimum posting requirements and monitor those for compliance, grade on participation, post grading rubrics that establish guidelines for acceptable participation and posting, and use collaborative assignments and evaluate them collaboratively.

Collaboration

Collaboration in an online course involves anything from threaded discussions, chat sessions, and paired activities to small group activities. Collaboration allows students to become more involved in the learning process, and this involvement leads to greater subject matter comprehension. Not only does this type of environment and activity mimic the type of group processes which will be found in the workplace, it also promotes desirable interpersonal skills and allows students to connect with each other (Burnett, 2001).

Barriers to Persistence

Many factors ranging from academic aptitude, pedagogy, and curriculum to financial factors, grade-point average, and family backgrounds influence student persistence in online courses (Stover, 2005). Clearly, students who opt to take online courses have issues beyond the actual learning environment which need attention. These include access to student support services such as advising, registration, counseling, financial aid, and bookstore and library services (Bathe, 2001; Dahl, 2004; Milheim, 2001). All these and other factors can be categorized into one of four major barriers to student persistence:

1. Situational barriers are those which occur as the result of changes in the social, economic, or personal life of the student. They include such issues as transportation, age, time constraints, family support, or family responsibilities over which the institution has no control (Cross, 1981; Lorenzetti, 2004).
2. Conversely, institutional barriers result from difficulties with college programs, policies, and procedures; these include issues with admissions, registration, class schedules, financial aid, and other support services over which the institution does have some control (Cross, 1981; Lorenzetti, 2004). Institutional barriers emphasize the need for an institutional support system that can be accessed online (Dahl, 2004).
3. Dispositional barriers result from an individual’s personal background, and which include issues such as attitude, motivation, learning styles, and self-confidence (Cross, 1981; Lorenzetti, 2004).
4. Epistemological barriers result from problems with academic or institutional matters such as course content, prerequisite knowledge, and expectations (Lorenzetti, 2004; Moore, et al, 2002).

Many of these barriers can be overcome by training for all persons involved. Faculty and administrators should be trained in effective design and implementation of online courses, and students should be trained in the concepts and ideology underlying online learning (Lorenzetti, 2004).

Student Motivation

Motivation is an extremely important characteristic for any student but particularly the online learner. These students must utilize a different level of initiative and self-discipline that students in traditional classes may not possess. Without this, many of them would be destined for failure because the impetus to log into the course, read, and submit assignments may not be forthcoming without that little nudge from the "authority" figure.

Since many community college learners are working adults who have families and who may not have attended college for many years, they may present with what Brookfield (1995) calls "imposter syndrome." They feel inadequate to do what is required of them, and they think that everyone else (but them) knows what they are supposed to be doing. These students want to avoid failure, and they need reassurance that they still can learn. "Adults are much less open to trial-and-error approaches than children are. Many adult learners will resist trying something new if it involves the risk of making an error and feeling foolish as a result" (Stilborne & Williams, 1996, Dispositional Barrier section). In an online environment, the syllabus and course outline should be supplemented with a detailed description of every task that must be completed. It is also important to make first assignments such that every student can be successful. Timely feedback on first assignment submissions is an essential retention tool. Such feedback gives students a glimpse of what to expect in future assessments and an opportunity to decide whether to persist or not (Tait, 2004).

This study examined the perceptions of online persistence factors as seen by the three major stakeholders in community college distance education programs. The purpose of the study was to determine which factors are most important among the three groups and where those perceptions converge since lack of convergence could be a factor resulting in high attrition rates of some online courses. Consensus of these indicators calls attention to those areas which should be emphasized in online teaching and learning. Likewise, a lack of convergence on major issues related to online learning reveals possible reasons for high attrition rates in distance education courses and provides significant insight into improving the quality of online learning and increasing retention rates among online learners.

Methodology

The research methodology was a modification of the Delphi technique, which is a consensus-reaching process designed for non-interacting expert groups whose geographical locations, status differences, or opposing viewpoints of the members make it difficult for the members to physically assemble (Andranovich, 1995). The modified Delphi used three separate groups of participants who represented the various levels of stakeholders in online learning to compose the panel. Although participants could respond to information originating within their respective groups, all participants remained anonymous to each other.

Potential panelists who met the criteria for participation volunteered for the study by completing an online questionnaire. Thirty-nine volunteers from 10 community colleges in Alabama met eligibility requirements to participate as a member of the administrator, faculty, or student Delphi group. All of the faculty and student panelists had completed at least one semester of instruction or learning, respectively, in an online course, and administrator panelists had at least one semester's experience of oversight in some aspect of online learning as self-reported on the Preliminary Questionnaire.

Design of the Study

The study was conducted over a 6-8 week period from July 2006 through September 2006 through a series of questionnaires communicated via an online survey website. The study included three rounds of data collection and a resolution round in which panelists were provided the results of the Round 3 responses. Panelists were notified by e-mail of the availability of each round's questionnaire. Each questionnaire was available for 10 days during which panelists had an opportunity to reflect, to evaluate their ideas and those of fellow panelists, formulate any new ideas, and share their views.

Results

The initial question was an open-ended one in which panelists were asked to list factors which they perceived to support student persistence in a community college online course. They were not asked to rank those items during Round 1. At the end of the 10-day period, the researcher compiled a comprehensive list for each group of all factors submitted by the panelists in that group.

Round 1 Results

Administrators generated 49 factors and statements pertaining to online student retention. Those 49 statements were reviewed, coded, and summarized into 20 themes. Faculty panelists generated 72 factors and statements which were summarized into 25 themes, and student panelists generated 44 factors and statements which were summarized into 16 themes. All themes generated during Round 1 are shown in Table 1. In order to establish consistency, when possible, themes from each group were matched as closely as possible to emerging themes developed from the administrators' responses. This was done only if no risk of compromising the integrity of the responses existed. These themes were then used to develop the Round 2 survey instrument. Although Table 1 shows the frequency with which each factor was mentioned during the Round 1 data collection, factors were presented in random order in Round 2.

Round 2 Results

During the second round, panelists were asked to rate those factors that they perceived most important in supporting persistence in a community college online course by using a five-point Likert-type scale: *1—Not Important, 2—Somewhat Important, 3—Important, 4—Very Important, 5—Neutral*. Those factors were identified by calculating the frequency with which each panelist rated a factor as *Very Important, Important, and Somewhat Important*. Administrators identified 11 of the 20 factors produced during Round 1 as important; faculty identified 10 of their 25, and students identified 10 of their 16 factors (see Table 2).

Round 3 Results

The third round questionnaire presented the lists of top 10 indicators and asked panelists to indicate their rank preferences. The factor receiving the highest rating in the Round 2 survey was placed in the number 1 position, and the factor receiving the lowest rating was placed in the number 10 position as shown in Table 2. Panelists were asked to rank each item from 1 to 10 to indicate the level of importance of each of the factors in contributing to student retention in online courses. The most important factor received a ranking of 1, and the least important factor was ranked 10.

In order to determine the rank order of factors in the Round 3 survey, the researcher tabulated only the top 5 totals for each factor. The frequency with which each factor received a particular ranking between 1 and 5 was tallied to determine how many panelists indicated that that factor should be listed among the top 5 of the 10 factors listed. Table 3 shows the rankings of each of the top ten factors as indicated by each group.

In the administrators' group, Time Management, Instructors, and Convenience/Flexibility received high rankings from those who ranked these factors as important at any level from 1 to 10; however, not all panelists ranked these factors as important at any level. Eight of the nine panelists ranked Time Management; 7 of the 9 panelists ranked Instructors as important, and 7 of the 9 panelists ranked Convenience/Flexibility as important using the 1 to 10 scale. Therefore, these factors were not ranked as high as those receiving a ranking from 100 percent of the panelists. User-Friendly Format received the lowest ranking and was dropped from the list.

Summary

Sixteen variant factors emerged from the responses of the three groups. Of those 16 factors, three appeared in all of the groups' top 10 lists. Six factors appeared in two of the groups' top 10 lists, and the remaining seven factors appeared in one group's top 10 list (see Table 4). Table 4 also indicates the ranking of each factor by group of stakeholders.

Table 1. *Themes Emerging from Round 1 Questionnaire*

Administrators	Faculty	Students
Convenience/Flexibility (8)	Student-teacher interaction/ Prompt feedback (15)	Convenience/Flexibility (12)
Responsiveness of Instructor/ Prompt Feedback (7)	User-friendly format (7)	Independent learning/ Responsibility (5)
Self-motivation (5)	Clearly-stated requirements (6)	Course design (4)
User-friendly format (4)	Discussion (6)	Discussion/Interaction (3)
Course design (3)	Self-motivation (4)	Time management (3)
Collaboration (3)	Course design (4)	Personal contact (3)
Time management (3)	Computer access (4)	User-friendly format (2)
Computer access (2)	Computer skills (3)	Clearly-stated requirements (2)
Self-discipline (2)	Discipline (3)	Technical support (2)
Instructors (2)	Subject-matter knowledge (2)	Personal issues (2)
Availability of courses (1)	Instructor (2)	Less class interaction (1)
Dedication (1)	Lack of personal contact (1)	Computer skills (1)
Basic computer skills (1)	Cheat-ability (1)	Accessibility (1)
Organization (1)	Textbook (1)	Less difficult coursework (1)
Clearly-stated requirements (1)	IQ (1)	Efficiency (1)
Value (1)	Perception of course difficulty level (1)	
Communication/ Writing skills (1)	Flexibility (1)	
Computer support tools (1)	Alternative means of contact (1)	
Difficulty level (1)	Reliable server and support network (1)	
	Outside assistance (1)	
	Control (1)	
	Value (1)	
	Time (1)	

Table 2. Round 2 Most Important Retention Factors

Administrators	Faculty	Students
Responsiveness of Instructor	Motivation	Convenience/Flexibility
Self-discipline	Student-teacher interaction/ Prompt feedback	Clearly-stated requirements
Time management	Clearly-stated requirements	Technical support
Clearly-stated requirements	User-friendly	Course design
Convenience/ Flexibility	Outside assistance	Independent learning/Responsibility
Self-motivation	Time	User-friendly format
Basic computer skills	Discipline	Accessibility
Reading ability	Reliable server & support network	Personal contact
User-friendly format	Computer skills	Discussion/Interaction

Table 3. Round 3 Top 10 Retention Factors

Rank	Administrators	Faculty	Students
1	Self-discipline	Self-motivation	Convenience/Flexibility
2	Responsiveness of instructor/Prompt feedback	Clearly-stated requirements	Time management
3	Self-motivation	Student-teacher interaction	Clearly-stated requirements
4	Computer access	Computer access	Independent learning/ Responsibility
5	Basic computer skills	User-friendly format	Technical support
6	Clearly-stated requirements	Discipline	Course design
7	Reading ability	Computer skills	Accessibility
8	Time management (-1)	Outside assistance	Personal contact
9	Instructors (-2)	Reliable server	Discussion/Interaction
10	Convenience/Flexibility	Time	User-friendly format

Table 4. Comparison of Stakeholders' Top 10 Factors

Factors	Administrators	Faculty	Students
Computer access/ Accessibility	X (4)	X (4)	X (7)
Clearly-stated requirements	X (6)	X (2)	X (3)
Time management	X (8)	X(10)	X (2)
Self-discipline	X (1)	X(6)	
Responsiveness of Instructor/ Prompt feedback/ Student-teacher interaction	X (2)	X (3)	
Self-motivation	X (3)	X (1)	
Basic computer skills	X (5)	X (7)	
Convenience/Flexibility	X(10)		X (1)
User-friendly format	X (5)	X (10)	
Reading ability	X (7)		
Instructors	X (8)		
Outside assistance		X (8)	
Reliable server		X (9)	
Independent learning/ Responsibility			X(4)
Technical support			X (5)
Course design			X (6)
Personal contact			X (8)

Discussion

This study focused on three questions concerning persistence factors for students in online courses.

Question 1: What indicators influence student persistence in a community college online course according to internal stakeholders, and what importance do the stakeholders place on each of the indicators?

The administrators' ranking of Self-Discipline as the most important factor along with Self-Motivation, Computer Access, and Basic Computer Skills as subsequent important factors suggests that administrators value highly the learner's role and responsibility in completing an online course. The top five factors for faculty suggest combined responsibility on the parts of the learner and the instructor for creating and maintaining a positive online learning experience. It is not surprising that Convenience/Flexibility and Time Management would be the most important factors in a learner's decision to enroll in and complete an online course. These factors represent foundational issues of the online learning phenomenon to make education more accessible for students who previously may not

have had such an opportunity and to expand those opportunities beyond the boundaries of the traditional classroom (Burnett, 2001; Milheim, 2001).

Question 2: What are the areas of consensus among the perceptions of the three stakeholder groups by role (administrators, faculty, and students) in identifying indicators that support student persistence?

Computer Access/Accessibility, Clearly-Stated Requirements, and Time Management are the factors which all three groups of stakeholders indicated important in supporting student persistence in online courses. These are all practical considerations which address the students' ability to access the course and fulfill the requirements necessary for successful course completion. Therefore, the absence of these factors can create situational and epistemological barriers (Cross, 1981; Lorenzetti, 2004; Moore, et al., 2002) to student persistence.

Question 3: What are the areas of difference among the perceptions of the three stakeholder groups by role (administrators, faculty, and students) in identifying indicators that support student persistence?

Eight factors appeared in only one group's Round 3 list of top ten factors. The ability of the students to read and comprehend adequately in a text-based medium and the need for instructors who are knowledgeable in their content and proficient with the technology were areas of concern for only the administrators. Likewise, only faculty expressed a need for students to have access to people outside of the class who can serve as resources for them. In addition, faculty emphasized the need for the institution to commit the financial, technological, and personnel resources to maintain a reliable network. This is different from the students' concern that adequate technical support be available to assist with technology questions and problems which arise. This is a natural concern for students who may feel alone and frustrated in cyberspace during non-business hours. It is surprising that faculty did not indicate this issue as a concern since they as course instructors are the primary recipients of technical questions and complaints. While a Reliable Server and Technical Support are not synonymous factors, they do reflect a valid concern for technological issues which directly impact students' ability to successfully participate in an online course. Where such difficulties exist, students are less likely to persist. Only the student group indicated Course Design as a factor influencing student persistence. This included primarily a concern for the number and types of activities and assignments included in the online courses. Also, only the students indicated a possible need for some type of personal contact (i.e., personal conference or telephone conference) with the instructor in an otherwise totally online environment.

Conclusion

Based on the results of this study, the administrators' and faculty's ideas about factors which influence student persistence in online courses are closely aligned while the students' factors present a different perspective. These are not surprising results since the ideas of the administrators and faculty develop from an institutional/instructional perspective, and those of the students emerge from a more personal perspective of convenience and practicality. Since students take online courses mainly for the sake of convenience instead of the academic experience alone, when situational barriers arise which affect their ability to successfully integrate educational pursuits with personal obligations, their priorities tend toward the personal.

From an instructional standpoint, each course offers a unique learning experience in which students are expected to participate at maximum level to derive maximum benefits. This means that self-discipline, self-motivation, adequate time, appropriate technology, and adequate technological skills are all required commitments to the learning process. Therefore, when a student enrolls in an online course, there is the presumption that such a commitment has been made. To the students, however, each course represents an advance toward an overall goal whether it be a degree, a career advancement, or other form of self-fulfillment. The online course is merely a vehicle of convenience which best fits with the students' lifestyles. While some students may strive to excel in their courses, other life challenges equal that of or take priority over academic coursework. When these differences in perspectives collide, persistence issues can result. Community colleges offer online courses with the understanding that convenience and flexibility are attractive drawing points. The level of flexibility, however, varies with each course, and rarely is a course designed around the convenience/flexibility factor. Students, on the other hand, enroll in online courses primarily because of the convenience/flexibility factor. When course activities and

requirements conflict with convenience and flexibility, students tend to neglect or leave the courses.

The same is true of other areas where the students' expectations or goals for the course conflict with those of the institution/faculty. Students who matriculate in online courses are less likely to inquire and follow up about institutional processes and technological concerns if they feel they will have to expend a great deal of time and effort to resolve issues. That process could be troublesome to the online student for a number of reasons. For one, the sense of immediacy may not be as prevalent with the online student as with the student who frequents the campus to initiate actions to resolve problems. Thus, prolonged procrastination ultimately leads to inevitable separation from the course or institution as the issues remain unresolved. Secondly, the anonymity which is so advantageous in the online course becomes a detriment as these students may feel isolated as faceless entities to college personnel who deal with them on an impersonal level. They may feel ignored or less important than the traditional students whose mere presence on campus commands attention. They may feel the only way to satisfactorily solve their problems is to visit the campus, which may be time and cost prohibitive. Thus, attrition becomes the solution.

Recommendations

The information collected from this study can be used by individual community college administrators, faculty, and staff as they develop new and strengthen existing online retention initiatives. Specific aspects of these initiatives could range from the allocation of funds for technology upgrades and technology support personnel to professional development programs for new and veteran online faculty. Training for college personnel should include attention to principles of adult learning and best practices for online learning. These would include course development strategies which emphasize the need for less rigid, more flexible scheduling options within the courses and careful selection of course activities to eliminate those events which constitute busy work and do not directly impact student learning. Institutions could also use this information as the impetus to ascertain that online students have the same access to resources and student services (i.e., library services, bookstores, financial aid, counseling, etc.) that on-campus students have and that these students are served efficiently.

Consideration could also be given to the establishment of student support strategies which offer face-to-face or online orientation programs for new online students. These programs could emphasize not only the technological concerns which confront students but also those strategies for learner success which are germane to online learning. Components might include a list of services available to the student, points of contact for issues which may arise, and guidelines for addressing or resolving issues expeditiously. Assessments for online learning readiness and aptitude could also be made available to prospective students prior to enrollment in an online course. If students know what to expect before they enroll in a course, attrition rates will likely fall, a result that can only benefit students, faculty, and institutions.

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Manuscript received 5 Nov 2007; revision received 2 Mar 2008.



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