Chapter 8
Administrators' Assessments of Online Courses and Student Retention in Higher Education:
Lessons Learned

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ABSTRACT

Criteria may vary across public, private, and for profit universities for online courses around the world, but despite differences, there seem to be some successful lessons that could be shared across universities with respect to certain factors that increased student online course completion rates among certain universities' courses. This study looked at an associate dean's search for strategic factors that could contribute to increased online course completion rates at his university and more effectively address problems on a timely basis to improve those course completion rates. The associate dean's collaboration with a researcher led to their conducting representative model research that revealed best practices and assessments from a number of universities and provided insights into which factors could be applied to online courses at his university. Future research could look at whether there was a substantial increase in student retention in the online courses implementing these factors to see if there may be best practices that could be generalized to other universities around the world.

INTRODUCTION

This study will address the educational, developmental, and assessment aspects of elearning in online courses. Administrators and deans, more than ever, must be informed of ongoing manage-

ment requirements, income and expenses, student enrollments, completion rates, and instructor assessments, as well as other operational needs. To be prepared for uncertain futures, they need to be equipped with strategic plans and ways to assess whether those plans are working, or at least headed in the right direction to meet strategic plan goals. This study looked at one associate dean's search for

factors that might positively affect online course completion rates at a western private university; it also looked at assessments of faculty who teach online courses at that university in the hopes that the best teachers could provide insights into why their teaching was so effective in getting students' attention and keeping that attention through to the completion of their online course.

The associate dean's research was conducted utilizing qualitative model research with a researcher from a private university who was also an online teacher; this collaborative research investigated best online course practices and looked at faculty and course assessments from a number of studies, including studies conducted in other countries, such as Brazil and Africa. The research provided insights into which factors could be applied to achieve the desired results of increased student retention in online courses at the associate dean's university. Recommendations for future research include parsing out each factor to see which may be more effective in the retention of students in online courses, and whether conducting assessments of both students and instructors could reveal additional insights into student retention in online courses.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study some terms will be used interchangeably, online learning and elearning, and other terms, such as distance education and Internet- or Web-based learning, are also used interchangeably throughout the research study.

- **Adult Student:** An adult student is generally considered to be a person at least 24 years of age up to 100+ years of age (Eastmond, Gannon-Cook, 2007).
- **Design and Development Research:** A systematic study of design, development and evaluation to establish an empirical basis for the organized delivery of instruc-

tional design and produces and "new or enhanced models that govern their development (Richey and Klein, 2007, p.156).

- **Formative Research:** A type of "developmental research…that is intended to improve design theory for designing instructional practices or processes" (Reigeluth & Frick, in Richey and Klein, 2007, p.157) that includes a number of qualitative methodologies.
- **Model Research:** "The study of the development, validation, and use of design and development models, leading primarily to generalized conclusions" (Richey and Klein, 2007, p.158).
- **Online Learning:** A term for the utilization of the Internet as the sole medium of instructional communication between professor and student with no concurrent presence of professor or student in a physical classroom (Boston, Ice, & Gibson, 2010).
- **Traditional Student:** According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2008a, 2008b, 2010, 2011) is considered to be a person enrolled in the university in the age range from 17-19 years old, who has graduated from high school, has gone straight to college and "completes their bachelor's degrees in four or five years at a young age of 22 or 23" (Center for Institutional Effectiveness, 2004, p.5).
- **Triangulation:** Is a "cross-checking of data using multiple data sources or multiple data-collection procedures" (Wallen & Fraenkel, 2001, in Richey and Klein, 2007, p.160).

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There were several research topics that were of particular relevance to this study: what did the research reveal about student retention in online

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