

Chapter 69

The Pivotal Role of Faculty in Online Student Engagement and Retention

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ABSTRACT

The premise of this chapter is that higher education online faculty have a pivotal role in student retention; faculty participation is key to student engagement and engaged students tend to complete courses in which they are enrolled. However, frequently faculty members are unaware of the impact their active participation and visibility has on student engagement and retention. In addition, online courses are an important source of revenue for many institutions of higher education and attrition results in loss of revenue. Given that faculty have a pivotal role in retention, institutions of higher education can benefit fiscally from guiding and supporting online faculty in strategies of student engagement and retention. Faculty support is needed during the process of change inherent in faculty adapting to teaching online, through providing on-going faculty professional development and by creating a teaching culture inclusive of informal scholarly investigations related to instructional effectiveness in online course delivery.

INTRODUCTION

The offering of online courses is a viable delivery mode for institutions of higher education and can be more effective than face-to-face learning (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). In the past ten years, the offering of online courses has grown significantly in higher education; an increasingly larger portion of degree requirements are being offered online. Institutions of higher education are finding themselves in a situation where it is fiscally necessary to respond to consumer demand. To some degree, students are customers who expect their needs be anticipated and met (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2007). For example, increasingly, college and university students want course delivery modes that fit with their busy lives; accessibility to coursework anytime and anywhere has become a criteria for selecting a degree program (Johnson, Smith, Willis, Levine & Haywood, 2011). In a 2012 survey of chief academic leaders in

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higher education, 69.1 percent reported that offering courses online is critical to the long-term strategy of the institution (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Therefore, meeting consumer need has become an important consideration.

“For some institutions, web-based courses have been viewed as a way to attract new students, as well as to provide more convenient education options for students currently enrolled” (Lion, 2011, p. 49). At the same time as institutions of higher education are attempting to increase online course offerings to meet student demands, there is also recognition that in today’s environment where higher education institutions are facing increasing budget cuts, retaining students is particularly important. Yet, attrition rates for online courses are of particular concern in the academic community (Allen & Seaman, 2013); online attrition rates are higher for online students than for students taking courses face-to-face (Angelino, Williams, & Navtig, 2007). High attrition rates result in a noticeable loss of income for institution of higher education. Even a small increase in student retention can result in a significant increase in institution revenue.

Faculty must be recognized as critical stakeholders in the process of moving courses from the brick and mortar classroom to the online classroom, not only because faculty are developing the courses to be delivered online but also because of the nature of faculty relationships with students. While faculty are known to build close relationships with students in an advising capacity, the potential for a similar relationship can unfold during course delivery that invites high student and faculty engagement. In face-to-face classes, it is common knowledge that faculty engagement has a direct impact on student engagement and retention.

The increase in online course offerings has stimulated discussions about teaching pedagogy, the quality of online course delivery, and skills to teach online. Faculty expertise and dedication have been cited as the most important factors contributing to quality online courses; however, many faculty report feeling unprepared to teach online; teaching in a traditional classroom environment is the area for which they’ve been prepared (Varvel, 2007). If students want courses offered online and faculty teaching these courses have influential contact with students and engaged students tend to continue in their studies and online course offerings offer a needed revenue stream for universities, then it follows that college and universities would benefit by having highly trained faculty to teach online.

The purpose of this chapter is to: a) provide background on the relationship between student engagement and retention, b) consider course infrastructure that supports student engagement and retention, c) examine teaching strategies to engage and retain students in the online classroom, d) discuss the process of faculty development to teach online, including viewing teaching online as a scholarly endeavor.

BACKGROUND

There is a direct relationship between student engagement, student retention, and the role that faculty have in teaching an online course. Mandernach (2009) posits that student engagement depends on a number of factors, including faculty personal connections with students and the faculty creation of an active online environment. Engaged students tend to complete a course. Thus, faculty have a key role not only in retaining students in courses, but also in continued enrollment toward degree completion.

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