

Chapter 17

Taming Procrastination: Origins, Manifestations, and Solutions for the Online Instructor

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ABSTRACT

Time management directly correlates to student success and persistence in all modalities, but particularly in distance learning. Teaching the study skills and time management tools students need to succeed in the challenging online environment builds confidence, improves success rates, and increases retention. Faculty must prepare students for success both in the classroom and in their future professional careers. Time management tools are necessary in any course, and faculty should teach time management tools along with course-specific content and outcomes; this will improve time management and maximize students' educational achievement while improving overall retention and persistence rates.

INTRODUCTION

If educators know one universal truth, they know that students miss deadlines--something often attributed to procrastination. Data show that at least one-fifth of all adults at various times and in multiple situations will procrastinate, but, more specifically, “as many as perhaps 70 to 90 percent of undergraduates are chronic putter-offers” (Whitbourne, 2012, para. 1). Studies indicate that even though procrastinators

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will claim that they “work best” when they face a deadline or work better under the pressure of having to complete work at the last minute, “the fact of the matter is that procrastination rarely pays off” (Whitbourne, 2012, para. 1). The effects of procrastination can be severe and sometimes devastating, especially in academics. Educators know the ramifications of missing deadlines or “cramming.” Students who procrastinate may be more likely to either perform poorly, not master course outcomes and skills, fail a college course, or drop out altogether due to procrastinating. Even if they remain in school, they will, like most procrastinators, suffer tremendously from both guilt and self-doubt (Steel, 2007). Any one of these factors can negatively impact student success and persistence.

Steel (2007) notes that student procrastinators likely procrastinate in other areas of their lives and concludes that, at some point, most people postpone a task, even if they know that doing so can result in various adverse consequences, including stress or anxiety. So, why, then, do students who may otherwise be successful and manage their time successfully to meet professional obligations, procrastinate in their college classes, especially if they are otherwise motivated to do well academically and know that their academic success is essential to future career success, and especially if they consistently experience stress and anxiety as a result of this behavior? More importantly, do missed deadlines always signal procrastination, or is procrastination a manifestation of larger issues with time management itself? What factors contribute to student procrastination and time management struggles? Finally, how can educators build tools and strategies into courses and teaching that help students overcome procrastination and other time management issues?

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Research about procrastination indicates that many who procrastinate choose to do so, particularly if they lack the motivation to complete tasks, but that is not always the case. Steel (2007) defines procrastination this way: “to voluntarily delay an intended course of action despite expecting to be worse-off for the delay” (p.66). This definition emphasizes the role of individual choice in the process of procrastinating and concludes that most people understand and accept the consequences of their choice to procrastinate. Steel also notes that individuals are more likely to procrastinate or delay a task if their desire or motivation for completing the task is low. Intrinsic motivation, Steel further concludes, is of particular relevance to the choice to procrastinate. Individuals with higher levels of intrinsic motivation tend to procrastinate less (2007). As Wolters et al. (2017) noted, though, lack of motivation is not the only driver for student procrastination. Many college students, especially at-risk students, simply do not have well-developed academic skills, and their procrastination behavior may not be a matter of voluntary choice or lack of motivation. Their delay in beginning and completing college work on time may simply be a manifestation of poor time-management strategies, failure to understand instructions, or reluctance to ask for help. The ability to manage time and tasks is key to being able to self-regulate behavior that would otherwise lead to procrastination.

As Rozental and Carlbring (2014) have noted, studies on the reasons for procrastination and other time management issues help illuminate the behavior. For example, Temporal Motivation Theory explains that choosing to commence or delay a task or action depends on several variables. Specifically, an “individual will engage in a commitment by considering its utility or benefit based on four different variables—the expectation of achieving an anticipated outcome, the value of that outcome, the timing of that outcome, and the sensitivity to delay” (Rozental & Carlbring, 2014, p. 1492). In other words,

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