

## Chapter 7

# A Graduate Education First Course Model in the Virtual For-Profit University

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### ABSTRACT

*A model for the initial course in a virtual graduate program to encourage skill development and retention is presented. The objective of the course is to deliver education that supports learners in their introduction to online graduate education in an innovative, engaging, and supportive manner that encourages retention and connection with the education institution. The elements of the course and learner support staff are described. The importance of beginning the development of a professional identity is discussed. Connecting with university services and supports such as the library is discussed. Elements for implementing the course are described. The chapter concludes with comments from those completing the course.*

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter will outline and provide evidence for a graduate education first course model that empowers distance education institutions to deliver education that supports learners in their introduction to online graduate education in an innovative, engaging, and supportive manner that encourages retention and connection with the education institution. The model presented in this chapter examines the purpose of First Course. Specifically, this chapter will examine how the presented model provides a unified approach for the key aspects of a successful First Course and

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-9098-0.ch007

successful learners. The model presented in this chapter will examine the purpose of First Course, establishing a team of faculty, teaching assistants, tutorial services and utilizing services of the institution, innovations like writing teams and writing labs for those who need the extra help, and the ability to let the learner learn about their discipline area before they start their studies.

This chapter also provides practical examples of innovative approaches that can be implemented at other institutions. The examples shared in this chapter demonstrate the benefits of First Course in supporting new learners starting the graduate experience. Innovations like special lab writing teams, connection with university resources, and tutorials for the students will be examined. Examples will be shared on how these innovations can result in improved student success.

## **BACKGROUND**

According to Stein and Glazer (2006), distance learning using computer-mediated instruction is a widely accepted way for adult learners to obtain higher education. They stated that 56 percent of all two-year and four-year degree-granting institutions eligible for Title IV offered distance education courses during the 2000–2001 academic year. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2003):

*Enrollment in graduate programs increased 39%, from 1.3 million in 1976 to nearly 1.9 million in 2000, while enrollment in first-professional programs increased 26%, from 244,000 to 307,000. In the next 10 years, enrollment at both graduate and first-professional programs is projected to continue to increase, with graduate enrollment at more than 2 million and first-professional enrollment close to 350,000 by 2012. (p. 7)*

In fact, this trend has continued. According to the United States Census Bureau:

*From October 2011 to October 2018, the total number of people enrolled at all levels of school declined by 2.2 million to 76.8 million people, according to recently released data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey School Enrollment Supplement. (2019, para. 1)*

*During the same period, the number of students in graduate and professional school increased by 307,000 to 4 million.*

*Among those in graduate school, 38% were in their first year and half were working full-time. (Schmidt, 2019, para. 3-4)*

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