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Kimberly Byrd
Liberty University, ktbyrd@liberty.edu

Wendy Achilles

Jaclyn Felder-Strauss

Paul Franklin

Joan Janowich

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Engaging Students through Communication and Contact: Outreach Can Positively Impact Your Students and You!

Wendy Achilles
Kaplan University
WAchilles@kaplan.edu

Kimberly Byrd
Kaplan University
kbyrd@kaplan.edu

Jaclyn Felder-Strauss
Kaplan University
JFelder-Strauss@kaplan.edu

Paul Franklin
Kaplan University
PFranklin@kaplan.edu

Joan Janowich
Kaplan University
JJanowich@kaplan.edu

Abstract

Student retention is a critical component to the success of any university, whether instruction is provided in a traditional or online setting. Creating an effective student retention program can positively impact student success and, ultimately, the reputation and the image of the institution. The implementation of a student retention program can be especially challenging in the online environment for both the instructors and the institution. Unlike a traditional university setting where students and instructors interact face-to-face, online programs need to rely on alternative methods to engage students. When online instructors take the time to create a consistent proactive outreach program students feel connected to the instructor and strive harder to be successful in the classroom. Online outreach programs can include tasks as simple as consistently emailing students, enlisting the help of student advisors, and taking time to phone students. Each approach has the potential to keep engaged students participating and can re-engage non-participating students by ensuring a high level of faculty and student interaction.

Keywords: Retention, Retain, Online, Non-traditional, Distance

Introduction

In the realm of higher education, student retention has been a consistent priority for both the administration and the faculty. Programs have been developed and perfected throughout the higher education community to identify the best practices and methods to retain student enrollment. Barriers, such as institutional or epistemological challenges, can exist and hinder retention. Training and improved communication at all levels of higher education can help overcome these hurdles. Retention contributes significantly towards presenting a positive image to current and potential students about the institution's programs as well as the institution as a whole. Ultimately, high student retention rates improve the overall profitability of the institution. As a result, institutions have recognized the cost/benefit of implementing effective student retention programs (Stanford-Bowers, 2008).

Student perception of an institution and the institution's overall reputation are critical factors that contribute to the success of any higher education institution. One factor that influences both a student's perception of an institution and the overall reputation of the institution is student retention. The quality and creditability of a program or institution can often be equated to the institution's overall retention rate (Stover, 2005). For example, a retention rate higher than the average may indicate that the program lacks substance over form. Conversely, a lower than average retention rate may indicate student dissatisfaction with the program or institution and suggest the program may be too rigorous. Even though there are more factors involved in retention rates than satisfaction, the retention rate is often one of the first aspects a potential applicant will consider in their decision-making process.

Recruitment costs versus the implementation costs of successful retention programs are an important consideration for higher education institutions and these costs should be analyzed. For every student in a university setting where students are actively recruited a substantial amount of time and effort is put forth by an admissions advisor. If the student drops or discontinues their program, the recruitment costs are lost. In addition, further recruitment costs will be invested to recruit a new candidate to replace the

lost enrollment. In general, the implementation costs of retention programs are often less than recruitment costs when compared on a per student basis.

The effect of retention rates is equal among traditional on-campus institutions and distance education or online institutions. As traditional institutions have developed student retention strategies, the average retention rate has increased from 55% in 1980 to 80% in 2001 (Stover, 2005). Unfortunately, the average retention rate for online programs is significantly lower by 15-20% (Stover, 2005). The difference in retention rates between traditional on-campus programs and on-line programs is the level of personal contact (Betts, 2009). Online institutions should have more proactive approaches to managing student retention rates. In addition, the goal of achieving higher student retention should be communicated and driven by all departments of the institution. The proactive approach to student retention should start with the course instructor or faculty member. The course instructor is the first level of any outreach student retention program. Each faculty member must be fully engaged and proactive in the course – sending the message to the student that as an individual, the student has an important contribution in the course (Betts, 2008).

Just as in a traditional class, there will be a variety of students in an online class. Each class typically consists of a group of students that are actively involved and another group that sits in back of the class and appears to be observing. In cases where the observer is struggling, the faculty member may be more likely to reach out and draw the student out of his/her shell. In the online environment, the 'out of sight, out of mind' approach is more likely to lead the struggling observer to not be noticed – or automatically assumed to not be putting forth the necessary effort. No matter the case, the online faculty member must be proactive in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of each student and facilitating their application to the course (Betts, 2008). In the article, "Online Student Retention Requires a Proactive Approach", the necessity of a proactive approach to student retention and reaching out to course participants is illustrated. In the article, a professor describes the strategies she implemented to improve the retention rate of her course. She states that "… you [the faculty member] actually pursue the students to get them involved and keep them involved" (Online Classroom, 2004).

An essential component of the student retention strategies for traditional campuses involves face-to-face time. Research conducted supports the necessity of faculty/student interaction. For example, one study concluded the "… caring attitude of college personnel is viewed as the most potent retention force on a campus." (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985). A concurring conclusion was offered in a comprehensive review that "…high rates of retention are most frequently those which are marked by relatively high rates of such [student-faculty contact] interactions." (Tinto, 1993). This statement provides additional support for the need of a high level of interaction among students and faculty/college personnel. Online programs face an unusual challenge in developing strategies focused on improving student retention rates. With online programs, face-to-face time is lost, but can be compensated for by effectively using other outreach programs or methods that ensure a high level of faculty and student interaction.
Successful outreach programs should include the use of online tracking systems to report on each student's participation and identify at-risk students. For example, Sinclair Community College implemented such a system to improve their retention rate. By using the system, Sinclair was able to identify at-risk students. Once an at-risk student was identified, the faculty, advisor, and student worked together to develop a "success plan" known as an individual learning plan (ILP). The ILP was customized based on the student's strengths and weakness. The use of the online tracking system improved the College's retention rate from 45% to 73%. Due to the success of the program, Sinclair won the Macromedia "Rich Internet Application" Award. (Recruitment & Retention in Higher Education, 2005).

Direct instructor outreach can assist with student retention. Instructor outreach shows the student that they are more than a number and their success is important to the university beyond them being a revenue source. In the following section, outreach steps used in an online course are detailed and the effectiveness from outreach is discussed.

First Week of Class

During the first week of class, it can be extremely important to engage students in the classroom as many students are new to both higher education and the online environment and can be apprehensive. An instructor's initial contact early in the course can ease student fears. It may be necessary to use multiple levels of communication during this important time period.

The first level of outreach should occur on day 3 of the first week of the course. If a student is not active by day 3 of the course, the instructor should email the student inviting them to class and also include an

offer of assistance. A student in an entry-level course may need this level of communication to begin interacting in the classroom. This approach is especially critical if the student is new to the university or the subject matter. Providing this level of communication can lead to increased student success. Below is a sample email that was sent on day 3 of week 1.

> Hello! My name is Professor Jones and I am your instructor for Accounting I. I wanted to touch base and see how you are doing. I am excited about our class together this term. I wanted to let you know if you have any questions or need help, you can count on me! I hope to see you in the classroom soon and look forward to the upcoming term.

If the student does not respond to this initial email by day 4 of week 1, the instructor should then initiate phone contact with the student. The instructor should again invite the student to class, but via a phone conversation where the student can hear the sincere inflection in the instructor's voice. This form of contact will assist in establishing a sense of ease for the student and help form a bond between the student, instructor and the classroom. This personalized contact can greatly help to alleviate potential problems and fears going forward into the course. If the student does not respond to the instructor email or phone outreach attempts by day 5 of the course, the instructor should contact the student's advisor. The instructor and advisor should maintain close communication and keep each other informed of the student's status. Knowledge of any issues a student may have can be of great assistance to the instructor in re-engaging the student. If the student has contacted their advisor, the advisor should inform the instructor and the instructor can follow up with an email to the student. When instructors let their students know they are concerned and willing to help, the instructor and students establish a good rapport with the one another. A student's positive perception of the instructor can lead to greater student success.

Throughout Term—Student not Participating

Contact should continue throughout the course with non-participating or sporadically participating students. In each contact the instructor should be conscious to show that the instructor is concerned about the student's success and willing to assist the student in any way necessary to ensure their success. At the very least, an email should be sent to struggling students weekly.

The instructor may want to enlist reinforcements. One prime reinforcement option is the student's advisor. Instructors should copy the student's advisor on all of the correspondence with the student. The instructor should ensure that close contact is maintained with the student's advisor, updating the advisor on the student's level of classroom participation. Instructors should seek out and enlist the advisor's help. Instructors should impress upon the advisor that this task is a team effort and the instructor absolutely must have assistance from the advising department of the University.

If the instructor does not receive an immediate (one or two day) response to the emails sent to the student, the instructor should phone the student. The tone of the phone conversation should be one of caring, encouragement, and concern for the student. Instructors should emphasize to the student that success is possible; however, it will take hard work and good time management and study skills on the part of the student. Instructors should explain how success can be achieved in the course if the student were to put time and effort into learning the materials. Instructors should help students develop a detailed plan to re-engage them and demonstrate to them how they can get back on track in the course. For example, the plan can include specific deadlines for make-up work and scheduled one-on-one study sessions.

Throughout Term—Student Participating but Not Understanding Materials

Instructors should make initial contact with the student through email offering assistance with the class material. Instructors should provide the student with an overview of the tools available in the class room and offered by the textbook publisher so the student has a roadmap to resources available to assist them. Examples of some tools available may be tutorials, websites, example problem solutions, archived lectures, course games, flashcards, sample quizzes and more. Instructors should offer to meet with the student in a University chat room or instant messenger to discuss some of the class materials. Below is a sample email used for contacting a student not understanding the materials.

> Hi! I hope you are doing well. I wanted to touch base with you about our class. Your current grade in the class is 69.00%. If you need me to assist you with the material, please let me know. Accounting can sometimes be a difficult subject and that is why I am here to support you along the way. I can set up a one on one session with you if needed. Also, there are many tools within the class room that can help you understand the

> material. I am outlining them for you here: (Insert a detailed explanation of the tools and their location in the class room and publisher's website. Use print screens and/or videos to help student navigate these tools.) We are a team and I am here to support you.

Another helpful communication with the student is to send their weekly grade. This approach will help ensure that the student is focusing on the big picture and knows exactly what their grade is in the class. Again, never underestimate using reinforcements. The student's advisor should always be copied on all of the correspondence and close contact with the student's advisor should be maintained with the student's current status. As discussed previously, an instructor's final communication tool is to call the student if there is no timely response to the emails.

Throughout Term—Student with over 70%, but did Poorly on Current Week's Assignment

As the instructor moves throughout a term there are always student's that consistently maintain at least a 70% and then perform poorly on an assignment. It is imperative to be proactive in this situation to prevent a student from becoming discouraged and lagging behind. A simple email offering to clarify the difficulty they encountered and an offer of help on the current unit's material is an effective tool to utilize in this situation. Also, it can be very helpful and proactive to copy the student's assigned advisor on any correspondence so they are aware of the student's situation. If the student is unresponsive to this email outreach, a phone call should be conducted by the instructor to the student.

Acknowledging High Performers

A high performing student is one that is in need of outreach as well. An outreach gesture for those students that maintain above a 70% during the term might be an email, with a courtesy copy to their advisor, showing appreciation for their hard work on three separate occasions during a term. Those students that maintain an average of 80% during the term have earned a phone call from their instructor highlighting their success. Students are quick to reply to these emails with excitement and appreciation for the recognition. A sample email is below.

> Hi! I wanted to touch base and send you your overall grade to date. You currently have a 92.75% in the class. I want to say it has been a true pleasure having you in my class. You have worked very hard and should be very proud of the work you have accomplished. It is so motivating to have students like you in the classroom! I know you will go very far with both your academic and personal goals. Great job! If you have any questions about the remaining Units or the Final Exam, please let me know and I will help as much as possible. Thank you for your contributions to the class!

With the large amount of outreach suggested during a term, a need for organization and tracking is necessary. One easy method for instructors to track their outreach attempts is the creation of a simple outreach log. An outreach log should include the student's name, contact date, form of communication with the student, summary of the communication with the student and finally a notation on whether the student has responded and what actions the student is taking to address the instructor concerns. The advantage of this is that all outreach is kept in a central location and helps faculty monitor their attempts and focus on help already provided and additional help needed for each student. An example outreach log template is in the appendix for instructor use. (Appendix A).

Distance Learners are often referred to as non-traditional students. Are the students non-traditional or is the delivery platform non-traditional? The authors think it is the platform. Distance learners have the same needs as "traditional" students. When they enter the classroom and see that it is empty they can become discouraged or disheartened and leave. The role of distance or online instructors is not any different than that of brick and mortar instructors, but how online instructors accomplish this task is critical to the success of the students.

Student outreach is an easy way to help students know that their instructors are there for them and that there is someone who cares about their learning process. In a 1998 article, K. Patricia Cross stated: "Students who have frequent contact with faculty members in and out of class during their college years are more satisfied with their educational experiences, are less likely to drop out, and perceive themselves to have learned more than students who have less faculty contact." In an asynchronous learning environment, the tool that can used to make sure that students stay in contact with faculty and the classroom is outreach. This allows the student to be aware that their instructors are there for them and that their instructors not only care about their performance, but that are actively involved in helping them improve their performance.

Outreach is easy and it is rewarding. We must always remember why we are here because as instructors, we care about the success of our students. Students want to know that their instructors are in the class and are ready to help them. Creating an outreach log is easy and provides a chronological history of your student contact. This log can be used as a follow-up to student issues or concerns, it can be used to inform advisors or counselors of potential issues with students and thus allow an early resolution to whatever barrier exists that is preventing a student from entering the classroom and completing their assigned tasks. This process is worth setting aside time each week to contact those students who are not "coming to class."

Why should instructors care? A student's success is a direct reflection on an instructor's success. When instructors are in a brick and mortar classroom, student contact is a given. When that same course is moved to a distance environment, student contact becomes more of a challenge. Overcoming that challenge can be easy and can truly make a difference in a learner's success at your college. Distance education is more convenient, but that does not mean that is it takes less effort. In order to help students learn effectively, instructors need to find a way to engage them in the process and include them in the conversation and dialog. Sometimes instructors may need to draw a student in, but in a distance environment that may actually be easier to accomplish than in the classroom.

The authors have just begun their study of how outreach in the distance classroom affects students and their learning process, but already the authors have seen an improvement in teaching measures and student evaluations of the related courses and in participating instructors. If students like a course and respect their faculty and believe that the faculty is making a sincere effort to help them learn, they will be more apt to enjoy the experience and learn the material from the course. These students will be retained, society will benefit from a better educated populous, and the efforts instructors put forth will be a success story for all.

Where do the authors go from here? The authors will continue the study of the effect of outreach on the success of distance learners. Some of the questions that the authors will attempt to answer are: What impact does outreach have on student retention? How does outreach impact grades and failure rates? How does outreach with a high risk student affect that student's success in future courses? This will not be a short-term study, and the authors realize that outreach is not the only answer to student retention. The authors believe that student contact is a key to student success and that outreach is an easy and very effective way to engage students, let them know that there is a real person ready, willing, and able to help them learn, and that distance education is a community rather than an individual endeavor.

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Appendix – Sample Outreach Log

Student Name	Contact Date	Emailed Student (and related notes)	Phoned Student (and related notes)	Contacted Advisor (and related notes)	Student Started Interacting with Class
John Doe	1/17/10	Sent email to student inviting him to class.		Copied advisor on student email.	
	1/20/10		Phoned student and spoke to him about our course. Offered assistance and encouragement.		
	1/21/10				Student engaged in course. Posted to discussion board.

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