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EFFECTIVE OUTREACH STRATEGY AND PROGRAMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Outreach programs have been implemented in higher learning institutions to increase student retention and satisfaction. The challenges of outreach can increase when students are in an online environment. Online students do not have physical contact with their instructor and classmates and this can cause students to feel isolated and discouraged. Online higher learning institutions can approach outreach at various levels: no formalized outreach program for instructors, a formalized outreach program for instructors incorporating required outreach periodically throughout the course for at risk students, or a formalized outreach program for instructors incorporating weekly outreach throughout the course for at risk students. The following research provides insight into each of these approaches and how each program can impact student retention and success.

INTRODUCTION

Outreach programs are a necessity in higher education. Students rely on their instructors to set the tone for the course and seek their instructor's guidance and mentoring throughout their time spent together in the course. Students, in general, need to know that their success in the classroom is important to both their instructor and the university. Even more importantly, direct instructor outreach is an essential tool for success for online learning programs as students do not have face-to-face interaction with their instructors as they would in an on ground setting. Without direct instructor contact with the student, the student's need for validation of their efforts from the instructor and institution is not met, which can lead to the student becoming disengaged within the class and/or the institution.

Outreach programs and strategies are effective from the start of the higher education experience (enrollment) to the end (graduation). Research has been conducted that supports the effectiveness of outreach efforts. In an article published in the *Adult Basic Education and Literacy Journal* by S. Goto, R. Spitzer, and J. Sadouk in 2009, the importance of interaction with potential students is emphasized. The authors emphasize that personal interaction encourages potential students to consider and investigate the benefits that can be achieved from higher education. The required interaction involves face-to-face contact with their recruiter as

well as involvement in the university community. In some instances, variations of face-to-face contact are necessary due to the high demands of student enrollments. However, when contact is established between the student and the recruiter, it allows the recruiter to demonstrate empathy for the potential student's concerns or fears. While the focus of this article was course enrollment for ESL courses, the basic concepts of interaction and one-on-one time with student are consistent.

Outreach programs should be an integral program in educational institutions. In general, these types of outreach programs emphasize health, finance, and college success by offering periodic workshops or presentations on a variety of subjects such as personal finance, stress management, and time management. While professionals identify the importance of the programs, student attendance at these workshops/presentations is often extremely low. In a research study conducted by L. Marks and R. McLaughlin, successful interventions were identified. These interventions include effective advertising, collaboration with regular courses, and support of instructors. Based on the research, reminders of the workshops by continuous advertisement are an effective means to trigger the desired behavior. In addition, by requiring students to attend a workshop/presentation as a part of their graded coursework, it stresses the value of the topics.

An article published in *Recruitment and Retention* titled Online Student Tracking System Nets Retention Awards describes how the implementation of a tracking system assisted in identifying at-risk students. Sinclair Community College implemented an online record management system that assists in monitoring at-risk students. Through the tracking system, individualized plans can be created to assist the student in creating a positive educational experience. By instructors or advisors identifying the individual needs of the student, better strategies can be developed to serve the student population.

While the first articles presented in the literature review relate to on-campus and face-to-face environments, it is important to note that instructor-student interaction plays a large role in the traditional on-campus environment for retention and student success. Knowing this fact, it can be assumed that instructor-student interaction is a more crucial role in the online environment where there is limited or no face-to-face interaction. Catherine Stover published an article in the *Distance Education Report* in 2005 discussing the student retention rates among online courses. As predicted, the retention rate is much lower than for traditional on-site

campuses Stover states several factors that affect retention including classroom environment, classroom activities, faculty role, student services, faculty interaction, academic aptitude, and gender. Several of these factors can be controlled by the instructor supporting the conclusion that the instructor interaction with the student has a significant impact on a student's performance.

In June 2006, an article was published in *Recruitment and Retention in Higher Education* focusing on the variation of approaches needed, by online programs, to improve retention rates. As previously noted in Stover's article, the emphasis of a different approach to retention strategies in traditional programs has been made. In the *Recruitment and Retention* (2005) article, retention strategies or outreach should be more tailored to the student's needs and experiences. The article describes the evaluation approach taken by Empire State College to improve the retention of a growing online population. As noted in this evaluation, the academic advisors, mentors and instructors are a critical part of the online learning process to monitor the student's participation in a course and engage the student.

Further support is provided for instructor-student interaction, as a crucial component of the online learning environment in an article published in *Retention Strategies* (2005). This article describes the need for a proactive approach by instructors to online student retention. The article outlines the trial and error approach taken by an instructor upon teaching her first online business law course. In this example, course retention increased from 50 percent to 92 percent. The increase was a result of the proactive approach the instructor took in contacting and pursuing students identified as at-risk. A few examples of the proactive actions include personalized letters to students, the use of and instructor participation in discussion forums, and creating opportunities to interact with students one-on-one in the virtual environment.

Additional support for instructor presence as a critical element of the online learning environment is provided in a published article titled *The Indicators of Instructor Presence that are Important to Students in Online Courses* (2010). In a survey conducted for this research, 299 respondents indicated within the five most important indicators was 'instructor presence'.

A final article highlighting the relevance of instructor-student interaction is located in *The Comparison of Student and Instructor Perceptions of Best Practices in Online Technology Courses* (2008). The Seven Principles of Chickering and Gamson were proven as relevant with four of the principles identified as having a lower perception of use. There were suggestions for

improvement in these four identified principles which were time on task, active learning, cooperation among students, and diverse talents and ways of learning. The use of technology and a high level of instructor involvement was the central theme that would provide methods to improve these items in the online environment. The burden lies on the instructor's involvement level to online learning retention and student improvement.

Based on the current research and literature regarding student retention rates and the need of proactive approaches, two general conclusions can be made: The need for instructor-student interaction is a factor in the student's success whether the learning environment is a traditional on-campus program or online program and the degree and approach of instructor-student interaction for online learning environments must be proactive in the online learning environment.

STUDENT OUTREACH WORKS

Specifically, the purpose of this research is to study the effect of organized and directed faculty outreach on distance learning students. The group selected for this study was the population of students enrolled in Accounting I. The data for this study is organized into three study groups to compare the effect of 1) no outreach for all students enrolled in Accounting I to 2) limited outreach efforts conducted by faculty for students enrolled in Accounting I per the institution's student operations guidelines to 3) consistent weekly outreach conducted by an accounting instructor in their assigned Accounting I courses.

Prior to 2009, no outreach efforts were required or formally initiated by the institution. In 2009 the institution's student services began a limited outreach effort. The courses for the institution were ten weeks in length. Students were ranked by faculty at specific points in the term as to their likely success in the course. The faculty reviewed the student's status in the course in weeks one, three, five and seven. Students that faculty designated as being "At Risk", or below a 70% in the course, were flagged to be contacted by a student adviser encouraging the student to contact their faculty or adviser to discuss any problems that might be a cause for their poor performance. Also, in 2009 one of the accounting faculty members conducted weekly student outreach.

- The instructor contacted students that were "At Risk" each week via email and by phone for those not responding to email correspondence.
- The instructor kept the advising team informed of all student contact and enlisted their input and assistance in the weekly outreach efforts.

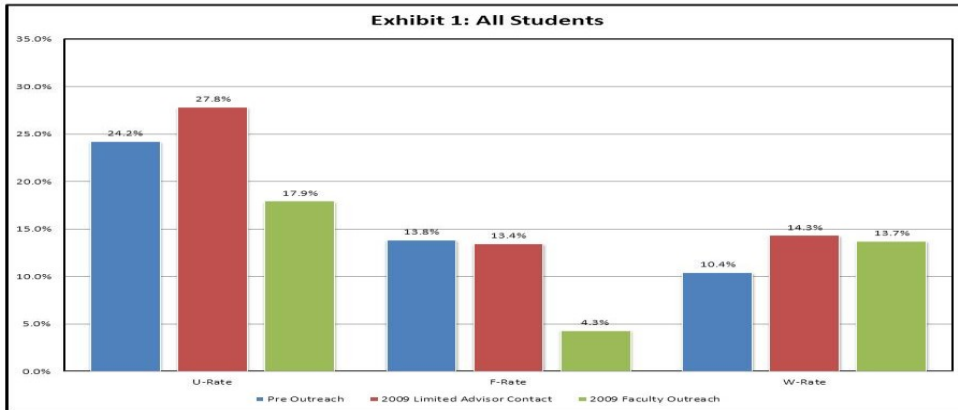
- The instructor offered assistance to the students in the email correspondence and phone calls such as a detailed list of class room resources, video assistance for navigating the class room resources, and one on one study sessions.
- The instructor also contacted students that received below a 70% on any of the week's assignment offering assistance as outlined above.
- The instructor also contacted students that maintained above a 70% three times during the term to thank them for their performance in the course.

OUTREACH RESULTS

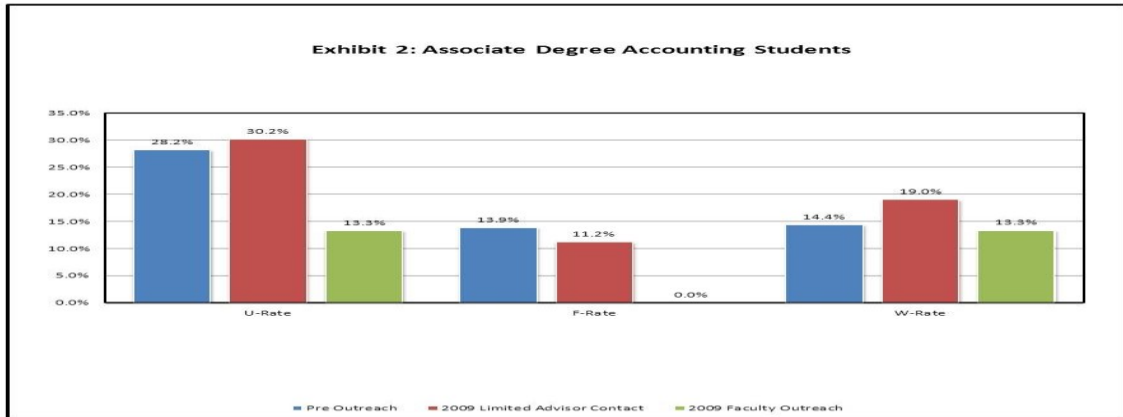
The graphs below (Exhibit 1 and Exhibit 2) compare the U-rates of the 3 study groups. The U-rate is an "Unsuccessful rate" and is the sum of the course withdrawal rate (W-rate) and the course failure rate (F-rate). The data has been grouped as "Pre Outreach", "Limited Advisor Contact", and "Faculty Outreach". The "Pre Outreach" represents the U-rates for all students enrolled in Accounting I prior to any formal intervention or outreach. The "Limited Advisor Contact" measures the U-rates for the group of Accounting I identified as at-risk students by the institution's student operations guidelines. The group labeled "Faculty Outreach" is comprised of the students in the control group that received consistent weekly outreach by their Accounting I instructor. The second graph represents a subset of the population represented in the first graph, but was filtered to include only those students enrolled as "Associate Degree" accounting candidates.

In the table (Exhibit 1), the difference in total U-rate for students enrolled in classes receiving no outreach and students receiving organized and deliberate faculty outreach were 6.3%. In addition, for students enrolled in classes with limited outreach versus faculty outreach the difference was 9.9%. Looking more closely at the total U-rate, the data has separated students into two groups: A group of students that failed the course and a group of students who withdrew from the course. The statistics for F-rate indicates a marked difference between students receiving faculty outreach, but failed (4.3%) and those students receiving either no outreach or limited outreach who failed (13.8% and 13.4%). This is a difference of 9.5% when comparing pre outreach to faculty outreach and a difference of 9.1% when comparing limited advisor contact to faculty outreach. The W-rate differences were 10.4% for students receiving no outreach, 14.3% for students receiving limited outreach and 13.7% for students enrolled in courses where faculty outreach was documented. The average grade for students enrolled in

courses with faculty outreach was .33 grade points higher than the average grade of students enrolled in courses receiving no outreach.



The second control group studied was students enrolled in the Associate Degree in accounting program (Exhibit 2). This group was chosen to measure the effect of faculty outreach on only those students enrolled in the course who had declared accounting as their major area of study. There is a dramatic difference in total U-rates between the 3 groups. There is a U-rate difference of 14.9% between students receiving no outreach and students receiving faculty outreach and a 16.9% difference between limited outreach and faculty outreach. While the pattern of the U-rate is similar between the Accounting student population and the general population, the difference shown in the data regarding Accounting students is more pronounced. The F-rate comparison also indicates a pattern demonstrating the positive affect of faculty outreach. The W-rate also illustrates favorable results when faculty outreach is present in courses. The difference in the average student grade, between the group receiving no outreach and the group with faculty outreach, was .82 grade points higher for the Associates Degree student group receiving outreach.



The overall pattern of the data for the 3 groups appears to be consistent between the populations as a whole and the subgroup of Associates Degree in Accounting students in particular. The consistency of the patterns indicates that all students benefit from organized outreach efforts. The data also indicates limited, organized outreach which identifies at-risk students for advisor contact in weeks one, three, five and seven, has a positive impact on student success and retention. The data also demonstrates when an instructor conducts consistent weekly outreach to students, an even greater positive impact occurs with higher student success and retention.

The previous research and the research data outlined above indicate that outreach can influence student comprehension and retention in a positive manner. When higher education institutions develop outreach initiatives via their advisors and instructors, the research indicates students are more engaged in their course and believe their presence matters to the institution, which is a motivator for them to strive for mastery in their course and ultimately increases student retention.

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