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A Look at Online Orientations

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Community colleges are increasingly finding that many of the issues they deal with on a day-to-day basis -- retention and remedial education, to name two -- are just as present among the students they don't see as the ones who show up for class on campus.

That's because distance learners tend to drop out more readily than students who have regular, face-to-face contact with their instructors. And that fact, seen in retention statistics comparing students in traditional and online courses, motivated the City Colleges of Chicago to start at the beginning: at orientation. The system's Center for Distance Learning,^[1] which offers over 90 courses and has existed in some form for more than 50 years, started a project on student retention several years ago.

In an interactive session called "Student Orientations: Their Impact on Online Student Retention and Success," instructors and administrators in Philadelphia on Monday for the annual American Association of Community Colleges convention discussed strategies that had worked for them at their institutions, and paid closer attention to the one in Chicago, which seems to have produced favorable results.

Some of the first steps colleges can take, according to Darryl Todd, dean of the distance learning center, which is located at Chicago's Kennedy-King College, occur before students even start their classes. Colleges, for example, can identify students enrolled in three or more courses at once as "at risk." (She said the center had pulled data suggesting that was the case; online learners with one or more jobs to worry about might suddenly find juggling three or more courses on their own time even more difficult than ones taken in person.) One audience member suggested that giving an online test to all students could determine whether they are ready to take a course through the Internet, with all the motivation and off-hours work that entails.

At the same time, Todd said, the center made sure to create easy-to-follow instructions and Web materials to make the transition to online learning easy for potentially at-risk students. Part of the overall effort was a renewed emphasis on the CDL student

orientation, both in person and online. Those from other institutions in the audience wondered (sometimes aloud) whether it was better to have orientations held face to face or online, or both (or neither). Such orientations, according to Selom Assignon, instructional design manager at CDL, go over some of the online basics (in his case, for Blackboard) such as how to participate in online message boards.

Data from the CDL presented at the session illustrated a trend, from 2004 to 2007, of greater course retention among distance learners who took online orientations, from 69.8 percent to 75.3 percent last year. Beginning in 2006, the center found that face-to-face orientations worked even better -- last year, the rate was 87 percent. Retention rates for traditional students are still significantly higher than those for students who took online orientations, but they are comparable to those who attended in-person orientations.

"We know there's something in face-to-face that's going to enhance our online orientation," Todd said.

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Links:

[1] <http://cdl.ccc.edu/>