

Face to Face Student Orientations: Their Impact on Online Student Retention and Success

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Abstract - This exploratory study was designed to examine the 2006-2007 qualitative and quantitative data of community college students enrolled in face to face (F2F) and online student orientation programs. The purpose of this study was to determine if the presence of an F2F orientation would increase the retention rates of students in an online course. The study also examines whether certain demographics will influence the retention rates of students in an online course.

Conclusions from this data research must be taken as preliminary and require additional investigation. However, there were indications from evaluations, interviews, and retention reports that F2F orientations had an effect on the retention of students in online courses when compared to students who completed an online orientation.

Introduction

The primary goal of any higher learning institution is to provide exceptional training and learning opportunities and experiences for their students that prepare them for real life challenges. One important factor that helps college to achieve that goal is the learning atmosphere established, both academically and socially, that enables students to work their way through and come out of programs with flying colors. Factors such as retention and course completion can not be ignored when referring to students' success rates.

The Center for Distance Learning (CDL) conducted a research study to find out the student retention rate in online learning. CDL used the student orientation which is the most frequently used intervention strategy in community colleges to determine the retention rate of students. *Astin (1993) and Tinto (1993) stated that students are more likely to have academic success if they are integrated into the social and academic systems of the college/university.*

Purpose

This research study was designed to examine the 2006 -2007 academic year data on students enrolled in the CDL Student Orientation program. The purpose of this study is to discover whether there is a relationship in the methods used to teach the student orientation (e.g. online versus face-to-face).

The study also examined the impact that the face to face student orientation has on student retention in a course and how academic and social factors affect the outcomes. According to the Tinto's model of student retention *whether a student persists or drops out of a course is quite strongly predicted by their degree of academic integration, and social integration* (Drapper, 2005).

Participants

The researchers conducted the study using a diverse population of male and female students taking distance learning credit courses with the one of the City Colleges of Chicago (CCC).

The target population was segmented into distance learning students who completed an online student orientation and those who completed a F2F orientation. In order to be included in the study, distance learning students had to meet the following criteria: (a) enrolled in at least one online credit course during the Summer 2006-Spring 2007 academic year, (b) had a complete student profile (no missing data) in PSSA (PeopleSoft), and (c) had a completed CDL contact form. CDL students who had incomplete data in PSSA or on the CDL contact form were not included in this study. Once the criteria was met, students could volunteer to participate in either the online or F2F orientation based on their personal requirements (e.g. ease of access, schedule). Based on the required criteria and voluntary enrollments, data from 105 distance learning students were included in this study.

Research Design

The research was conducted over three semesters namely Summer 2006, Fall 2006 and Spring 2007. The data collected was categorized by method of instruction (e.g. traditional, online), and student retention rates. The study provided a data comparison of the impact of a face to face distance learning student orientation on students' retention rates in an online course (e.g. Are student retention rates in a course higher for those who participated in a face to face or online orientation?).

An online orientation evaluation and telephone interviews were used to gather quantitative and qualitative data. Immediately after the orientation, participants were initially asked to evaluate the course content and instruction.

The data collected assisted the researchers to determine if the student orientation is focusing on the correct objectives and information (e.g. technology, academic, personal) and if not, make the necessary modifications and revisions.

Methodology

The research study was conducted in three different phases. In Summer 2006, the researchers conducted the pilot study using only students who were enrolled in Business 181 (Financial Accounting) at one of the City Colleges of Chicago. During this pilot, Business 181 student data collected from the CDL contact form indicated that the majority of the students enrolled in this course had taken no more than a maximum of two (2) online courses. Business 181 students were informed about the availability of the CDL student orientation through the Blackboard (Bb) course announcement board. Participating students were given an opportunity to take the CDL student orientation online or attend face-to-face session. Participants were informed that their participation in the pilot was voluntary. However, they were awarded 5 extra points by the course instructor if they did complete the CDL student orientation (online or face-to-face).

At the end of the both methods of orientation, participants were asked to complete an online evaluation which provided a rating of the course components and instructors (if applicable). Each orientation (online/face-to-face) included a statement of consent that described the purpose of the study and the participants' rights to include or exclude themselves from the study. Participants were also informed that they might be randomly selected at a later date to participate in telephone interviews with the researchers.