INCREASING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND RETENTION RATES: CREATIVE USE OF EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGIES

As online courses gain in popularity, community colleges have found that engaging and retaining students enrolled in online courses is an even greater challenge than in on-campus courses. In order to meet this challenge, community colleges across the nation are implementing new ways to integrate educational technologies with results-oriented teaching and learning strategies to increase online student and faculty engagement and improve retention rates.

Online Students: Typically Less Engaged

Preliminary research comparing engagement rates of online and blended students, conducted by the Center for Community College Student Engagement at The University of Texas at Austin, revealed that “online students were less engaged than blended students,” from a survey 906 students enrolled exclusively in fully online courses and 1,179 students enrolled in blended/hybrid courses (at four community colleges and one statewide community college consortium, during fall 2009). “Unfortunately, too many community college online students—especially those attending part-time—learn in relative isolation, disengaged from their peers and faculty members. The challenge for community college administrators, faculty, and staff is to find effective mechanisms for increasing engagement, and ultimately retention and success rates, among their online student populations.”

Since 2001, the Center—through the management and administration of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) survey instrument, titled The Community College Student Report—has identified sound practices that are directly related to retention and other desired student outcomes. The Center’s efforts have expanded in recent years to assess a range of online and blended student practices and behaviors that strongly correlate with student learning and student retention.

Kay McLenney, director of the Center, says that while engagement is certainly an important factor that affects online student retention rates, another issue is student readiness for online courses. “One of the reasons why some colleges have had terrible attrition is that they have, in the past, used online courses as a dumping ground for late registrants. These students are the least likely to be prepared for the self-discipline and computer skills needed to succeed in the online environment.”

Mandatory Online Orientation

To effectively address online student-readiness issues, Richland Community College (IL) developed a straightforward initiative in which online students must take a mandatory online learning orientation course. The outcome of students taking this mandatory orientation is an increased retention rate, from 71.8% in fall 2008, to 79.5% in fall 2009. Today, all students enrolled in online courses are required to take a more sophisticated, self-paced, fully online orientation, proving to be more successful than the earlier, optional, face-to-face course.

Students must pass this two- to three-hour online orientation prior to being enrolled officially in their first online course. The orientation is modular, with quizzes, interactive activities, and self-assessments that reveal how ready students may or may not be for online learning. “We also have videos, tips and tricks, a discussion forum and a drop box. We have implemented a survey at the end of the orientation where students can anonymously give us feedback. The survey includes an open-ended question where students can offer their opinions and advice. We took all that feedback, along with our own experiences working with students and instructors, and rolled it into our next version of the orientation.”
In addition to better retention rates, student trouble tickets at the help desk have been reduced by 50 percent, as a direct result of the mandatory orientation. Negative feedback received from students during the earlier version has been reduced considerably. And, faculty appreciate having the amount of time typically spent dealing with student readiness issues reduced considerably.

**Academy of Excellence: Helping Faculty Incorporate Best Practices**

On the faculty side of online teaching and learning, Anne Arundel Community College (MD) has created an innovative Academy of Excellence that helps faculty incorporate best practices, strategies, and general teaching philosophies into their online and blended courses. The Academy includes a peer mentoring program where faculty who are teaching online or blended courses for the first time can pair up with an experienced online educator. In addition, these experienced faculty mentors also participate in online and hybrid course peer reviews that are based on Quality Matters (QM), a nationally recognized, faculty-centered, peer review process designed to certify the quality of online courses and online components. “These peer reviews ensure that online courses are designed and taught well.”

**Blackboard Building Blocks Partner: Retention Solutions**

Grand Rapids Community College (GRCC) (MI) is in the early phases of integrating a retention solution, Starfish, into the Blackboard Learn platform. Starfish, which is a Blackboard Building Blocks Partner, “allows us to set up rules in the system that specifically targets online courses and lets us know if a student has not logged into a course in 48 hours, or 24 hours, or whatever threshold we decide to set. Then we can communicate with those students who are not starting out well and notify an advisor, a counselor, the instructor, and/or the student. The flags are set automatically in Starfish, based on the rules we define.” Additionally, the Starfish system can be integrated with an instructor’s grade book. “We will be able to show which students have missed their assignments or are not performing well, based on a midterm grade [or other course-related flags].”

The integration of Building Blocks Partner Wimba Pronto into the Blackboard Learn platform is another retention solution that is geared toward helping students become more engaged in the online learning environment. Beginning in October 2006, GRCC began using the basic version of Wimba Pronto for academic instant messaging and has since expanded to using the enterprise version, adding additional features such as video conferencing, application sharing, institutional messaging, and chat queuing for help desks and tutoring. It allows for a variety of synchronous communications, during times that are more convenient, in particular, for adjunct faculty members and busy working adults who do not spend much time on campus. They can chat, launch an audio session, or even have a whiteboard session, which works especially well for math courses.

**Engaging Online Students Early and Differently**

The solution to improving engagement and retention among community college students lies in the ability to integrate educational technologies with results-oriented teaching and learning strategies. McClenney and the research conducted by CCSSE, since 2001, notes that intensive student engagement “needs to happen early and often. What we have established though our research is that this is true in the online environment, and it just has to be done in different ways.” Through the work of enthusiastic faculty, instructional designers, and administrators, community colleges are making positive strides by integrating best pedagogical practices with innovative educational technologies to enhance and increase online student engagement and, ultimately, retention rates.

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