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WHY ONLINE STUDENTS STRUGGLE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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The traditional land-based college campus prides itself on a rigorous curriculum, a welcoming environment that allows interaction among students and instructors, and the support necessary to ensure academic success. Some would say that online educational programs do not offer similar benefits, but that is simply not the case. However, many distance-learning programs seem to have lost sight of the primary goal of academia – helping students succeed. Instead, many students enrolled in virtual learning programs indicate that they “feel all alone, like being on a desolate island in the middle of nowhere” due to the missing interaction among students and staff, that vital “connection” that serves as a catalyst to prevent isolation, discouragement, and even withdrawal from an initially desired program.

Based on experience as both learners and instructors in the virtual classroom, Drs. Armstrong and Hart maintain that the necessary components for academic success online are available but not consistently implemented. As the focus in a brick-and-mortar classroom is human interaction, face-to-face experience, camaraderie, and the potential to make the learning experience meaningful and productive, so should distance-learning programs emphasize the same. We provide an opportunity to recognize some of the barriers present in an online course. However, we confidently and effectively propose a thorough regimen of strategies that will contribute to the success of the online learner. We look forward to sharing our thoughts and ideas!

Current Conditions

Over the past year and a half, higher education not only in the U.S. but globally has experienced drastic changes in how students receive their instruction. Smalley (2021) from the National Conference of State Legislatures reported that over 1,300 colleges, representing 44% of U.S. institutions of higher education, transitioned from traditional land-based in-person classes to online instruction. Most institutions made the forced and scrambled move between March and June 2020. By the fall of 2020, over 3,000 schools had transitioned to online-specific platforms. Those involved in higher education understand that a significant transition of this magnitude is highly unusual for the long-established traditional institutions. Not being known as an innovative, fast-paced industry, many institutions struggled during and after transitioning online with adequate technology; it has been reported that Information Technology (IT) at traditional university and college institutions are assigned budgets of less than 5% (Gallagher & Palmer, 2020). Traditional institutions also lacked people to provide the pedagogy to new online instructors and students who may or may not have experience with online learning. It was a more “sink or swim” mentality during the initial phase of the pandemic. According to Bay View

Analytics (2021), in a survey of 641 higher education institutions, they found 97% of traditional school faculty had no experience teaching online. At the end of 2020, just as we thought the pandemic was over and life was returning to normal, we faced the virus's new variant's rage. We again confront the unknown in educational platforms for the 2021-2022 academic year. It is no wonder students express frustration and feel their education is suffering from online learning (Ezarik, 2021).

The question becomes, why are students struggling with online learning? Before addressing this question, one must understand the typology of online learning commonly used in higher education. According to Fordham University (n.d.), there are several types of distance learning environments, but the three most prevalent are,

Asynchronous: The institution provides students with the course contents, assignments, and due dates. Peer discussion takes place through dialogue on discussion boards. There are no face-to-face meetings. This format is ideal for individuals who are highly disciplined and good time managers. Asynchronous learning is often the choice for learners with busy schedules and for international students. The instructor's role is facilitation throughout the course.

Synchronous: This learning form is similar to an in-person traditional course room. The instructor and students interact simultaneously via video, text, and audio discussions. The institution establishes class times and days, and there is little to no flexibility for students with conflicting schedules and who want to be involved in discussions. This environment is suitable for students who require structure and class interaction. Instructors primarily teach via lectures, some of which are recorded for students.

Hybrid: By blending asynchronous and synchronous styles, a hybrid course offers both virtual computer-based coursework and in-person classes for lectures, discussions, labs, and collaborative learning. This model appeals to students who may have course or work conflicts but need personal interaction with their peers and the instructor.

There are also two main types of four-year higher education virtual institutions. Known as "online schools," some universities focus mainly on distance learning and have various course offerings. Many of these online schools fit the term "Mega Universities" because of their large enrollments. They may have a select few traditional facilities as well.

The "brick-and-mortar" schools are the next type, the traditional land-based institution with limited online course offerings that can be viewed as less comprehensive than the traditional environment's robust programs. While the pandemic has affected both types of institutions, many traditional schools had a much larger transitional process of moving students to an online environment. The pandemic forced land-based institutions to compete with non-traditional online schools.

So Now What?

Because of the rapid and forced transition to virtual platforms, traditional students and instructors were likely unfamiliar with online pedagogy, unprepared with technology, and unsure of what to expect. Unsupported perceptions of instructors and students regarding the lack of quality and rigor in virtual learning flourished (Butnaru et al., 2021; Ezarik, 2021). In a recent study of 200 students conducted jointly by Inside Higher Ed and College Pulse (2021), nearly half of the learners believed their online experience was far less enriching than in-person learning. Nearly a quarter of the participants felt unprepared for college and ill-prepared for an online transition. Moreover, nearly half indicated that a lack of academic integrity was common in virtual learning.

Instructors

Studies have shown that online programs do a poor job of meeting the needs of students with weaker skill sets who are below the median GPA (Bettinger & Loeb, 2017). As of September 2021, there are 1,690 accredited, four-year institutions in the U.S. that have adopted a test-optional or test-free entrance policy (FairTest, 2021). Because of this change in policy, application and enrollments for historically underrepresented students have increased over 50% (Maguire Associates, n.d.). Delnoij et al. (2020) discuss the need for higher education entry exams to predict non-completion. Nevertheless, instructors in online learning programs are seeing more students who are academically challenged. With curricula not being designed to the student's level, it becomes challenging for instructors to adequately assist academically challenged students to meet the enhanced workload in shorter courses.

The recent pandemic brought to light some of the pedagogical inequities in online learning. During the past eighteen months, many instructors at numerous universities gave all A's or Pass/Fail options for coursework so that students would not feel pressured by school requirements (Kachani et al., 2021). Some instructors have chosen to have peer-graded discussions and computer-generated test scoring (Kim, 2018). Other schools chose to pair-down nonessential content and move deadlines to the end of the course. In a recent survey by Bay View Analytics (n.d.), nearly two-thirds of the instructors surveyed indicated they lowered expectations, dropped exams, and reduced course content. Then some instructors maintained the status quo. These types of changes bring up the question of validation of what an "A" means? For students who had instructors who did not alter teaching methods, does their "A" surpass the "A" of the highly lenient instructor? Did students retain the material better with one grading method over the other?

A significant elephant in the room becomes the pay for instructors. Doctoral institutions have the highest number of adjunct faculty; seventy-nine percent of instructors at institutions of higher education work as adjuncts. As these institutions have taken on streamline business models, adding adjuncts who rarely get benefits has become the norm. With schools offering such a wide variety of topics, it becomes prohibitive to hire full-time instructors (Jansson & Irwin, n.d.). Universities view adjunct positions as

necessary, but also as a hobby for those who choose to teach. The 2021 per-course pay in the U.S. for adjunct instructors can be as low as \$600 for a ten-week course. Courses can range anywhere from a few weeks in length to a full semester. The average pay is \$2,700 per course, but many adjunct instructors report they have several courses to make ends meet and put in 16-hour days, seven days a week (Drozdowski, 2021; Roberts, 2021). Other than the fact many adjunct instructors enjoy teaching, what motivation does an instructor have to provide rigor in the classroom?

Class size plays a significant role in how much time an online instructor gives students individual attention. Additionally, the more institutions that can build courses with opportunities for faculty engagement and mentoring, the better the chances for student success.

Non-traditional online programs are mainly based on set curricula. Many instructors transitioning from traditional learning to online tried to mirror the in-person classroom through a video conferencing tool. Numerous students believed this method was not productive.

If instructors working in virtual education feel disconnected, isolated, and not part of their educational community, how does this affect student perception and performance, and why are many struggling? Institutions may need to examine the processes for their online community. Research indicated the need for instructor training and well-developed online programs that use authentic assessments (Altindag et al., 2021; Lakhai & Khechine, 2021). Nevertheless, there are three main reasons students struggle in online learning in higher education: 1) Instructors, 2) Students, and 3) Institutions' culture.

Students

In a 2020 report, the U.S. higher education virtual learning demographics were segmented with 19% of students between 18-24, 37% of the students between the ages of 25-39, and 43% ages 40-55+. Furthermore, up to 70% were employed full time, and 41% were parents. Of these online students, nearly half have been away from collegiate learning for five years or more (Magda et al., 2020). Many of these students faced significant hardships with the onset of the pandemic, ones such as homeschooling, working from home, caring for family members, and the possibility of job loss.

For many students, online education is the only practical way to complete an advanced degree. However, Delnoij et al. (2020) reaffirmed that the completion rate of online students in higher education is less than that of students attending traditional campuses. Additionally, at-risk students with diminished academic backgrounds tend to fare poorly in virtual settings (Baum & McPherson, 2019). The program non-completion range can be staggeringly low, with ranges between 30% and 50%. While students have high expectations of the quality of education and their return on investment, learners' intentions when starting an online program vs. the course outcome can be significantly different (Lakhai & Khechine, 2021). The Altindag et al. (2021) study revealed that the more

academically qualified students have a much better chance at success than less prepared learners who are more apt to fail or drop their programs. Furthermore, students with lower-than-average GPAs and educational gaps in face-to-face courses found virtual learning courses worsened their outcomes (Baum & McPherson, 2019). With such a disparity in age ranges and length of time between collegiate learning, many online learners are not fully prepared to launch into higher education.

According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCR; 2020), college and university enrollments in four-year traditional institutions have been declining over the past ten years. In 2020, higher education saw a 4.2 percent overall drop in enrollment at four-year traditional institutions as compared to the previous year. Non-traditional four-year online institutions have seen continued gains in enrollment during the same period. Nevertheless, the effect is increased enrollment; now is the time to seize the moment and increase retention rates. Most traditional and non-traditional online programs have options for accelerated 5 to 12-week programs as compared to the traditional 16-week semester courses. These can be both advantageous and detrimental to students. For obvious reasons, obtaining a four-year undergraduate degree or a graduate degree in half the time at a lower cost has an overwhelming appeal to students contemplating their future education. Nevertheless, the weekly course requirements can be more demanding due to the course length. Flexibility is another main reason many choose non-traditional education, as students often work full-time and have family obligations. However, flexibility can prove to be a downfall if a student is not self-disciplined.

Student Risk Factors

The primary reasons students struggle with post-secondary distance learning are:

- Student's length of time between the last academic experience and their new one
- Learner's preparedness for higher education and resulting underperformance
- Student's expectations of what online programs require
- Student-faculty level of interaction
- Lack of student engagement
- Falling behind in a course
- Student's knowledge of technology and technical requirements for distance learning
- Lack of in-person interaction, loneliness, frustration, and detachment from peers and instructors
- Less structure than traditional education
- Lack of support services or difficulty locating
- Student procrastination
- Being unorganized
- Lack of support system
- Lack of effective and meaningful communication with the instructor
- Not following course or faculty's instructions
- Lack of standardized testing, which is optional for admission at several institutions for undergraduate and graduate programs

- Not reaching out for help
- Thinking everything is negotiable
- Making excuses for late work
- Waiting until the last minute to start or submit assignments
- Using peers' work to develop assignments
- Demonstration of poor writing skills
(Borrero, 2019; Edsmart, n.d.; Daniel, 2021; Hart & Armstrong, 2020; Jaggars, 2011).

Students' Responsibilities for Success

Students new to online learning often lack the time commitment necessary for succeeding in virtual education. Before enrolling in an online program, the student should be fully aware of virtual learning time commitments and responsibilities. Courses in an asynchronous online program primarily grade students' learning based on writing. Therefore, writing skills are paramount.

Characteristics of a Successful Online Learner

- Plan accordingly: For a three-credit-hour course, plan a minimum of 8 hours per week for undergraduate course work and 12 hours per week for a master's course. Doctoral students devote 35+ hours per week per course (Find a Ph.D., n.d.; UNCG, 2021).
- Reading and responding to course assignments on or before the deadline
- Academic writing
- Weekly participation with peers
- Independent-takes responsibility for the learning process and instructor interaction
- Comfortable working alone
- Self-confidence
- Goal-oriented – self-disciplined and self-motivated
- Passion for learning
- Proficient in reading and comprehension
- Proficient in basic computer skills
- Efficient organization and time management skills
- Ability to go beyond the minimum expectations
- High level of critical thinking and problem solving
- Ability to prepare for exams
- Above-average writing and research skills
- Students have proper technology and understanding of using web browsers, word processing software, downloading, uploading features, and installing software (Fairmont State University, n.d.; Hart & Armstrong, 2020; McWhirter, n.d.).

Improving Students' Potential for Success

As our country and the world are trying to adapt to a new normal, it is apparent that post-secondary online learning will continue to grow. It is time for higher education institutions to develop curricula to promote student engagement, course completion, and ultimately to empower students to be proud of their accomplishments in an online program.

What can be Done?

- **Maximize Interactive Technology:** Institutions can offer quality student learning experiences through highly advanced technology. Asynchronous online programs could benefit by implementing technology to include interactive student learning experiences in all courses featuring video and developing comprehensive dashboards with tracking systems that show the students' progress and class interaction at any point in time. Utilize Artificial Intelligence (AI) language learning applications to deliver natural communication to answer students' questions (Pang, 2021). Furthermore, institutions can provide instructors with analytical support to them identify student gaps and struggling students.
- **Entrance Exams:** It is understandable and admirable that colleges and universities want to encourage students from all economic and diverse backgrounds to advance their education if they so choose. In order to help academically challenged students, the institution could require testing for all students to determine those who may need additional transitional course training to bridge the gap between high school and postsecondary education. This training would assist students in the development of necessary skills and to feel prepared when they begin their undergraduate education.
- **Faculty Grading Consistency:** Rubrics are not enough. Instructors should have the ability, via video, to help students understand the rubric and instructor expectations. The rubrics should clearly match the requirements of the assignment. When students have incongruent instructions, it can cause confusion, student apprehension, and stress. Course grading should be consistent regardless of which instructor teaches. It is incredibly confusing to students to have one instructor grade leniently while another follows a more rigorous grading method while utilizing the same rubric.
- **Instructor Peer Communication:** Instructors who teach the same courses should collaborate and discuss trends, new ideas, struggling students, and more. With active communication, instructors will learn from each other and develop strategies to better support their students.
- **Instructor Compensation:** Anyone with advanced degrees understands the cost of education. Research suggests adjunct faculties' low pay and no benefits affects students' success and retention (Tolley, 2018).
- **Student Admission and Recruitment:** Institutions need to know the student admissions recruitment methods used to attract applicants. Because of the pay structure for recruitment advisors, it is financially advantageous to enroll as many students as possible.

- Many recruitment advisers are incentivized by commission only to make the sale and enroll potential students. Various individuals have associates or bachelor's degrees. They may be promoting graduate programs with no actual experience in graduate-level learning and the associated demands. Do these individuals provide potential students with clear expectations of the time commitment, technical skills, and technology necessary to function well in an online program, or are these critical components ignored?

All students attending online colleges and universities need to empower their students with the best education possible. There will always be a fine line between the institutions' bottom line and the educational quality vs. cost that students perceive. Nevertheless, establishing an environment that will provide the optimum opportunity for student success should be the goal in online education.

Students need to understand their responsibilities to be successful while the institution should construct curricula to provide more interactive platforms for student and increased instructor engagement. Instructors should be financially incentivized and feel included in their institution's culture and advancement opportunities. Moreover, they should support and promote academic rigor in all classes taught.

The online learning experience in higher education can be a uniquely fulfilling experience and the only opportunity for many to receive an advanced degree. Many years ago, Benjamin Franklin stated, "out of adversity comes opportunity" (McShane, n.d., para. 2). No wiser words could be spoken and it holds true today. The pandemic drove people to online learning and now it is time for virtual institutions of higher education to soar ahead and develop educational opportunities that are second to none.

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