Comparing Faculty and Student Perceptions Regarding Factors That Affect Student Retention in Online Education

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Comparing Faculty and Student Perceptions Regarding Factors That Affect Student Retention in Online Education

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This qualitative study compared faculty and student perceptions regarding factors that affect student retention in online courses in an attempt to more effectively address the problem of attrition. A grounded study method was used to interview students taking online courses, analyze their responses related to the critical factors that affect student retention, and compare them with those given by expert online faculty documented by Gaytan (2013). Among the various findings, two are considered critical: online students would like to receive more instruction from their professors and more comprehensive feedback that would allow them to engage in corrective behaviors to improve performance. Comparing faculty and student responses related to the factors that affect student retention could give online program administrators and faculty advisors a better understanding of these critical factors to be able to respond to the student retention challenge more effectively.

The unprecedented growth in the number of online courses and programs being offered and students wishing to enroll in them has brought significant challenges to educational stakeholders. Among the major challenges is the dropout rate in online courses. For example, Patterson and McFadden (2009) found that dropout rates were six to seven times higher in online than in face-to-face programs. Boston and Ice (2011) similarly showed that student retention in online courses is much lower than in face-to-face educational settings. These facts speak to the significant challenges that institutions of higher education are confronting today (Allen and Seaman 2013). In short, “the perception of a majority of chief academic officers at all types of institutions is that lower retention rates for online courses remain a barrier to the growth of online instruction” (Allen and Seaman 2013, 6).

Although many studies have looked into faculty and student perceptions of online instruction (Gaytan 2007a, 2007c, 2008a, 2008b; Gaytan and McEwen 2007), very few studies have been published regarding factors that affect student retention as perceived by online faculty and students (Boston and Ice 2011; Gaytan 2013).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this qualitative study was to compare faculty and student perceptions regarding factors that affect student retention in online courses in an attempt to respond more effectively
to the challenges associated with student retention. Specifically, this study sought answers to the following research questions:

1. Are there any similarities in faculty and student perceptions regarding factors that affect student retention in online courses?
2. What recommendations could be given to faculty advisors and online program administrators to confront the challenges associated with critical factors affecting student retention in online courses?

This study’s findings and recommendations should assist individuals involved in the administration and delivery of online educational programs in developing strategic plans to respond more effectively to challenges associated with student retention.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student retention has been placed at the forefront of most educational and governmental institutions. For instance, the U.S. federal government created a “$2.5 billion grant program to help states improve college-completion rates” (Field 2009, para. 2). Online education was included in this grant program to assist online educational leaders in finding ways to retain students. The efforts made by these educational leaders have extended to the analyses of widely accepted retention models in education, including Tinto’s Student Integration Model and Bean’s Model of Student Departure (Boston and Ice 2011; Soen and Davidovitch 2008; Veenstra 2009). Unfortunately, “most student retention models have been designed for the face-to-face classroom learning environment, making it very difficult to apply them to the online learning environment. In essence, the student demographics for online courses are very different from the face-to-face classroom” (Gaytan 2013, 147).

The Tinto Model claimed that the greater the academic and social integration of students, the higher the student retention rates (Tinto 1975). Bandura’s model suggested that “the behavior of an individual both influences and is influenced by personal factors and the environment” (Ormrod 2011, 354). Street (2010) found that the application of the Bandura Model in the online learning environment would yield several implications:

A student’s decision whether to drop-out or persist in an online environment influences and is influenced by personal factors such as self-efficacy, self-determination, autonomy, and time management. A student’s decision whether to drop-out or persist in an online environment also influences and is influenced by environmental factors such as family support, organizational support, and technical support. A third, unique factor can be added for online attrition. Course factors of relevance and design influence a learner’s decision to persist or drop an online course. (para. 4)

Liaw (2008) also found that an online student’s self-efficacy is the most important factor that contributes to retention. Other contributing factors were multimedia formats and interactive environments.

Park and Choi (2009) sought to find the factors that encourage students to remain in online courses. They focused on internal factors (i.e., satisfaction and motivation), external factors (i.e., organizational and family support), and online learners’ demographic characteristics
(i.e., ethnicity, gender, age). Although no significant differences in demographic characteristics between remaining and dropout students were found, significant differences were found regarding internal and external factors. The researchers concluded that internal and external factors have a significant impact in online student retention.

Boston, Ice, and Gibson (2011) examined the relationship between student demographics and retention. The main finding was that students whose credits earned at another educational institution had been transferred to the current institution were more likely to stay in the online course. Another major finding was that a student’s grade point average (GPA) plays an important role in continued enrollment.

Chen and Jang (2010) completed a study that tested a self-determination theory model, developed by Deci and Ryan, on two online programs. Self-determination theory claims that a human being has three basic needs: competency, autonomy, and relatedness. Results revealed that autonomy “significantly supports competency in the online environment. In turn, competency positively affected perceived autonomy, relatedness, and competency of the online student” (750). In addition, results demonstrated that online faculty and administrators should explain to online students that self-determination is a personal trait that is highly desirable because it leads to academic success. In short, promoting self-determination helps motivate students to remain enrolled and perform well. This finding is consistent with the work of Nichols (2010).

Ormrod (2011) defined self-efficacy as a “belief that one is capable of executing certain behaviors or achieving certain goals” (352) and found that self-efficacy and course relevance and support (i.e., family, faculty, and organizations) emerged as the most important themes affecting student retention in online courses. These themes, however, “were not always empirically tested in the studies reviewed and, consequently, there is a need for studies to empirically test these common themes or factors” (Street 2010, 1). Consequently, individuals involved in the administration and delivery of online courses must find their own unique set of factors that affect student retention. These factors may include student online support level, online course structure, and online faculty involvement (Street 2010).

It must be mentioned that this researcher conducted an extensive and exhaustive literature review on student retention in online courses and confirmed that “no single set of factors exist that is able to predict student attrition in online courses. However, several common themes emerged from this literature review, including external factors (e.g., course factors and support services); personal factors (e.g., self-efficacy and autonomy); and academic factors (e.g., study and time management)” (Gaytan 2013, 147).

Allen and Seaman (2013) found that student retention in online education continues to have a critical impact on the growth of online instruction. They surveyed academic leaders at a variety of educational institutions and found that 74% of them rated lower student retention rates in online education as an important barrier to the growth of online education. In previous years, this concern was rated lower—56% in 2007 and 62% in 2008.

METHOD

This qualitative research study employed a grounded study method to interview students taking online courses, analyze their responses related to the critical factors that affect student retention in online courses, and compare them with those given by expert online faculty documented by
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the study conducted by Gaytan (2013). Comparing faculty and student responses may give online
program administrators and faculty advisors a better understanding of the critical issues involved
in the retention of students and, consequently, may allow them to more effectively respond to the
challenges associated with student retention.

This study called for a methodology that could yield theoretical understandings, including
those that explain factors affecting student retention in online courses. Consequently, a grounded
theory method was selected because it is suitable for the generation of “a theory that explains a
particular phenomenon” (Gay, Mills, and Airasian 2012, 402). The process that researchers follow
in grounded theory begins with the selection of a topic or situation that needs to be understood.
The ultimate goal is to develop a theory that could explain the topic or situation selected (Lincoln
and Guber 1985).

The researcher in this study sought to generate a theory that would help faculty advisors and
online program administrators obtain a greater understanding of the factors that affect student
retention in online courses. Gay and Airasian (2003) stated that “most common strategies used
to carry out grounded theory are observation and interviews” (167). The most critical aspect of
a successful grounded theory study is to compare and integrate the data that researchers collect
using a variety of methods, including interviews and observations. This constant comparison,
rode Gay and Airasian, is “inductive; that is, the analysis shifts from specific information to
broader, more inclusive understandings. Theory evolves during actual research, and it does this
through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection” (168).

Data Collection

In this study, fifteen online students were identified and interviewed to determine their perceptions
related to critical factors affecting student retention in online courses. The only requirement, when
conducting interviews, was that data collected must include the voices of the study participants
(Strauss and Corbin 1994). The goal was to compare these online student perceptions with those
given by online faculty documented by Gaytan (2013) to determine the combined critical factors
affecting student retention that could serve as implications for educational leaders to guide their
student retention strategies, online organizational structures, institutional policies, and online
instructional activities. The participating students consisted of eight females and seven males.
Eight were White, five were African American, and two were Hispanic. All of the students were
seniors majoring in business, and all were enrolled strictly online. Ages ranged from eighteen to
twenty-eight.

Data Analysis

Online student responses were read back to students for verification purposes. Then, data were
analyzed immediately after they were collected. This researcher began to develop categories to
classify the data until reaching saturation. The researcher followed a data-collection process,
referred to as the constant comparative method, which consists of moving back and forth between
data collection and data analysis (Leedy and Ormrod 2012).

The data were analyzed following four procedures identified by Strauss and Corbin (1990,
1998):
1. **Open coding.** The researcher analyzed the data to find themes and specific attributes within these themes, referred to as subthemes, to reduce the data to a smaller set of themes that appeared to be describing the phenomenon under scrutiny.

2. **Axial coding.** The researcher looked for interconnections among the themes and subthemes to determine the context in which each theme was embedded, conditions that produced its emergence, strategies employed by individuals to manage and implement it, and the results of managing and implementing these strategies. In summary, the researcher moved back and forth from data collection, open coding, and axial coding to polish the themes and their interrelatedness.

3. **Selective coding.** The researcher combined the themes and their interrelationship to develop a sense of what took place in order to understand the phenomenon under investigation.

4. **Development of a theory.** The researcher offered a theory, in the form of verbal statements, in an attempt to explain the phenomenon under scrutiny. The verbal statements offered were based exclusively from the data collected.

**FINDINGS**

Table 1 displays the top five themes that emerged from interviews with expert online faculty, and Table 2 shows the top themes that emerged from interviews with online students.

### TABLE 1
Expert Online Faculty Rankings of the Top Five Themes (n = 15)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Affecting student retention n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student self-discipline</td>
<td>7 (47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of faculty and student interactions</td>
<td>5 (33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional support to students</td>
<td>4 (27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last grade received in an online course</td>
<td>2 (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No transfer credit received by the student</td>
<td>1 (6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE 2
Expert Online Student Rankings of the Top Five Themes (n = 15)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Affecting student retention n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased faculty instruction (e.g., modules)</td>
<td>12 (80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningful feedback given to students</td>
<td>10 (67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer credit received by students</td>
<td>9 (60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining an adequate GPA</td>
<td>8 (53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional support to students</td>
<td>7 (47)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: GPA = grade point average.*
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DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

According to expert online faculty, the top five factors that affect student retention in online courses were student self-discipline, quality of faculty and student interactions, institutional support to students, last grade received in an online course, and no transfer credit received by the student. But according to students, the top five factors were increased faculty instruction, meaningful feedback given to students, transfer credit received by students, maintaining an adequate GPA, and institutional support to students.

Highest Rated Factor

According to the online faculty, the most important factor affecting student retention in online courses was student self-discipline. This finding is rather consistent with formal research in this area, as Artino (2008) found the same result and claimed that online students need to be self-regulated to become successful in online courses, which translates into being more responsible for their own learning. Although Heyman (2010) did not find student self-discipline to be the most important factor in online student retention, it was rated the second most important factor in that study. Khare and Lam (2008) referred to this self-regulated requirement of online learning as meaningful and more genuine learning and one of the essential components to online learner-centered models.

However, according to the participating online students, student self-discipline was not one of the top five factors affecting retention. Instead, online students considered increased faculty instruction the single most important factor. Students reported that most faculty members teach very little and assign homework assignments once a week. Students were adamant about online faculty investing more time in the actual delivery of online instruction in the form of videorecorded lectures, PowerPoint presentations with video and audio, and other self-paced modules. This finding is consistent with formal research as well (Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium 2014).

The contrast in perceptions of online faculty and students may help explain the student retention problem. Whereas online professors are holding students more accountable for their own learning, students would like to receive much more instruction, including content knowledge. Perhaps a more balanced approach is warranted by both parties. Online faculty might consider delivering more content so that students don’t need to rely on the highest level of self-discipline in an effort to succeed in the course. At the same time, students must understand that they need to have some degree of self-discipline to be successful in online courses and must take the lead to initiate and control their own learning.

Second Highest Rated Factor

Online faculty rated quality of faculty and student interactions as the second most important factor affecting student retention in online courses. This finding is consistent with several research studies (Artino 2008; Gaytan 2007b) that have reported that faculty and student interactions in online courses must be immediate, consistent, and of high quality. Other researchers (Wuensch et al. 2008) have found that “student–instructor interaction enhances student retention, self-motivation, and pass rates” (525).
However, as reported by online students, quality of faculty and student interactions did not make the top five factors affecting retention. Instead, online students rated meaningful feedback given to students as the second most important factor. Online students claimed that most online instructors provide only a grade for a test or assignment without including ways in which student performance can be improved. This action by online faculty frustrates students because they are unable to engage in corrective behaviors to improve their performance and increase their knowledge and skills. This finding is consistent with other research studies (e.g., Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium 2014).

This researcher told online students that faculty had rated the quality of faculty and student interactions the highest of all the factors affecting student retention in online courses. The students responded that most online faculty associate quality of faculty and student interactions with immediate feedback several times per week. It appears that the number and the immediacy of the interactions were considered high-quality feedback by most online faculty, perhaps to comply with online course policy and/or expert advice in the area of online learning. However, online students considered faculty–student interactions of high quality if feedback from online faculty includes suggestions for students to improve performance and increase their knowledge and skills. In addition, although the immediacy of online faculty feedback was appreciated by online students, it must not be at the expense of quality of such feedback that includes specific ways students are able to learn more and achieve at higher levels.

Third Highest Rated Factor

The third highest factor that affects student retention in online courses, reported by online faculty, was institutional support to students. Previous research shows that students are more likely to remain in online courses whenever they feel supported by their institution in terms of registration, tutoring, admissions, programs, financial aid, and policies and procedures (Appana 2008; Stanford-Bowers 2008). This finding is supported by widely accepted student retention models, such as Tinto’s and Bean’s (Heyman 2010; Soen and Davidovitch 2008; Veenstra 2009). The online students participating in this study rated transfer credit received by students the third most important factor affecting retention. This finding is consistent with previous research (Boston and Ice 2011). Incidentally, online faculty rated this item as the fifth most important factor affecting student retention. It appears that online program administrators and faculty advisors can benefit from entering into articulation agreements that would allow potential students to transfer previous coursework successfully. Coincidentally, institutional support to students was rated fifth by online students. Because these two factors—institutional support to students and transfer credit received by students—made the top five list reported by both online faculty and students, they both represent essential factors in student retention.

Fourth Highest Rated Factor

The last grade received in an online course was rated fourth by online faculty. This finding is consistent with the research of Boston and Ice (2011), who found that having received a failing grade in a previous online course had a significant impact on a student’s decision to drop out.

Online students rated maintaining an adequate GPA as the fourth highest factor affecting student retention in online courses. This finding is consistent with other research (Boston, Ice, and Burgess 2012).
It must be noted that both online faculty and students agreed that student academic performance in online courses represents a critical factor and, consequently, has an important impact on student retention.

Fifth Highest Rated Factor

Online faculty rated *no transfer credit received by the student* the fifth most important factor that affects retention. This finding is consistent with other research (Boston and Ice 2011; Boston, Ice, and Burgess 2012), which found that students not receiving credit for previous coursework were more likely to drop out of school.

Incidentally, online students rated this same factor as the third most important factor affecting student retention. Online students rated *institutional support to students* the fifth highest factor; the online faculty rated this same factor as the third most important factor. As stated in the Third Highest Rating Factor section presented earlier, *institutional support to students* and *transfer credit received by students* made the top five list of both online faculty and students; consequently, both of these factors are seen as essential to student retention.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are derived from both online faculty and student responses. The goal of this section is to provide online program administrators with information that might aid them in responding to the student retention challenge in online courses successfully:

1. Although online faculty claims related to the fact that online students must possess self-discipline and be held accountable for their own learning to become successful in online courses have merit, faculty must also understand that they must deliver at least as much instruction in online courses as in the face-to-face counterparts. Online students reported that they need far more instruction than what their online professors were willing to deliver to them. Faculty must understand that teaching online courses does not mean that students learn as much as they can on their own with very little instruction and supervision. Those of us who have delivered online courses for many years know that, quite often, online courses require significantly more faculty time, resources, and effort than in face-to-face classrooms. At the same time, online students must understand that they need to be self-starters and, to a certain extent, control their own learning. In short, online students must realize that they must possess self-discipline to complete assignments and tests in a timely manner and, consequently, become successful in online courses. In order to be aware of the importance of self-discipline and time-management skills to their success in online courses, students must be required to undergo either a face-to-face or an online orientation/training session (e.g., training modules) before enrolling in their first online course. An orientation/training session would screen online students to help determine if they are a good fit for the online learning environment.

2. Online faculty must understand that *quality of faculty and student interactions* does not mean responding to a student rather quickly, but it includes ways in which online students can improve their performance and, therefore, increase their knowledge. For instance, online students reported frustration whenever their instructors give them a grade
on a particular assignment or test without meaningful feedback on ways to improve their learning.

3. Because transfer credit received by students proved to be an important predictor of student retention, online program administrators and academic advisors must engage in more aggressive recruiting (e.g., articulation agreements) and advising strategies to ensure that students receive credit for previous coursework. They must become more creative in allowing the transfer of students’ previous coursework, including transferring credits as general education requirements, in the event that an exact match does not exist for a given course.

4. Institutional support to students was rated third by online faculty and fifth by online students among the factors affecting student retention. Consequently, online program administrators and faculty advisors must develop more effective and efficient online student support services, such as tutoring, financial aid counseling, online course registration, online training and orientation modules, and remediation for struggling students. Online faculty members and advisors play an essential role in identifying at-risk students and referring them to remediation support specialists.

5. Because the last grade received in an online course was rated fourth by faculty and maintaining adequate GPA was also rated fourth by students, issues related to student academic performance in online courses represent a critical factor that affects student retention. Online faculty must reach out to online students, particularly those who are struggling academically, in an attempt to avoid failing or earning poor grades. This strategy does not warrant lower instructional standards; rather, it provides online students with constant and consistent communication, motivation, and guidance to ensure adequate performance.

6. Online faculty must also be required to participate in training sessions that would allow them to gain a better understanding of the following instructional areas: increased quantity and quality of instruction, including the use of videorecorded lessons and modules; effective and dynamic faculty–student and student–student interactions; and immediate, high-quality feedback containing specific actions online students could employ to improve performance.

7. Online courses must not be delivered unless the aforementioned recommendations are implemented to increase the likelihood that students will not drop online courses and/or programs.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research study included a few online faculty and students. Researchers are highly encouraged to engage in formal, scientific research to look more deeply into the student retention problem, using a variety of research methodologies and larger samples.

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