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The Impact of Face-to-Face Orientation on Online Retention: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

Student retention in online education is a concern for students, faculty and administration. Retention rates are 20% lower in online courses than in traditional face-to-face courses. As part of an integration and engagement strategy, a face-to-face orientation was added to an online undergraduate business information systems course to examine its impact on retention. The study methodology consisted of an early email contact, distribution of course documents, a follow-up phone call, and a pre-course face-to-face orientation. The retention rate of students who attended the orientation was over 91% with a *p*-value of 0.9143. The retention rate of students not attending the orientation was just under 18%. Findings suggest that face-to-face orientations impact retention positively.

Introduction and Background

Online education has been gaining popularity for the last two decades. It has expanded dramatically since the 1990's and continued growth is expected over the next several years (Pisel, 2008). With that increasing popularity come challenges. Most concerning of these challenges is student retention (O'Brien, 2002; Tinto, 2006; Truluck, 2007). Drop out rates in online classes are higher than those in traditional face-to-face courses (Harrell, 2008; Tinto, 2006; Yukselturk & Inan; 2006; Martinez, 2003). Despite focused attention on appropriate design and delivery of online courses, retention continues to be a concern for all constituents. While retention rates vary across programs and courses, many suggest that drop-rates for online courses are 15 – 20% higher than traditional face-to-face courses (Angelina, Williams & Natvig, 2007). Keeping online learners enrolled and engaged is important component of the online learning movement. Retention has been suggested as one of the greatest weaknesses in online instruction (O'Brien & Renner, 2006; Clay, Rowland, & Packard, 2008). It has an affect on the learner and the teaching organization. Low retention rates have a negative impact on students in terms of lost tuition, emotional impact of non-completion, and delay in graduation (Tinto, 2006). The institution is affected in terms of faculty allocations and support resources (Barnard, Paton, & Rose, 2007). For this particular institution, online sections have lower enrollment caps than traditional classes. In order for an online program to be recognized as successful, a strategy must be in place for addressing student retention and success.

In the fall semester of 2007, a large southeastern state university launched an online program offering a bachelor's degree in business administration (B.B.A.) with a management major. This program was designed to offer students constrained by distance and schedule the opportunity to complete all the courses in the B.B.A. sequence through a web-based delivery system. It also offered a potential solution to the constraints on campus space including the limitations of available classroom space, parking, and facilities. At the time of program launch, the university enrolled just under 21,000 students; 5,000 of which were declared business majors. Over the previous five years, the university experienced an unprecedented 32% growth in enrollment and is now the third largest of the state universities in terms of total enrollment and fulltime equivalent students. Online courses in the BBA program enrolled over 800 students in the inaugural semester.

At the time the program was launched, there was no retention management plan in place. Anecdotal results of the inaugural year suggested an unusually high attrition or drop rate. According to Institutional Research findings in the spring semester 2008, the College of Business had an average undergraduate drop rate of 9% across all departments. In the online courses in the B.B.A. program, 21sections were offered with an average drop rate of 23.2%. Administrators and faculty began to take notice. In an effort to address this concern, a student integration and engagement strategy was employed as a pilot study in an information systems course in the summer of 2008. The study consisted of an early email contact, distribution of course documents, a follow-up phone call, and a pre-course face-to-face orientation. This paper describes the study and its components, the impact on student retention, and recommendations for future use.

Research Question

This study aims to answer the question “what impact does attending the face-to-face orientation have on course retention?”

Delimitations and Explanation of Terms

This study focused on investigating the effect of faces-to-face orientation on student retention in online courses. The authors purposely did not discuss other factors that may contribute to said retention. In addition, the authors chose some terms for use in this context.

For the purpose of this study, we will use the terms “face-to-face orientation” and “orientation” interchangeably. Retention success is defined as course completion with a grade of “D” or better. Progression success is defined as course completion with a grade of “C” or better. In relevance to retention, persistence is passing a course successfully and continuing in the next course of the series. The term “attrition” is used as the opposite of term “retention”.

Literature Review

Many factors influence retention, attrition, and persistence in the online learning environment. These may include: (1) a misunderstanding of time and effort expectations, (2) varying degrees of expertise, skills and technical experience, (3) faculty and students’ interactions and relationships and (4) communication, grading feedback, and changes in the learners’ lives (Yukselturk & Inan, 2006). Retention refers to the number of students who progress from one part of the online program to the next. This assumes the successful completion of the course to allow for progression to the next course in sequence. Attrition is commonly referred to as a decrease in the number of students engaged in the course. It is often used interchangeable with drop-rate. Persistence is beyond the scope of this study, however, for the purpose of clarity, persistence refers to the act of continuity in higher education; namely on-time completion of degree (Martinez, 2003). One aspect of online learning that constitutes a major challenge for retention in online courses is the lack of physical interaction (or face-to-face gatherings). This lack may result in a feeling of social isolation. Humans, in general, need the presence of a community for emotional support (Gleason, 2004; Martinez, 2003). Social presence and connection are important to retention in online courses (Reio & Crim, 2006; Link & Scholtz, 2000). As our current research investigates the effect of face-to-face orientation on online student retention, we refer to the literature that supports the use of pre-course orientations to improve the success rate of distance learners (Nash, 2005). A review of the recent literature is presented to examine these studies and the engagement strategies recommended to impact student retention in online learning.

Face-to-face orientations have been recognized as a successful retention and engagement strategy in numerous studies (Kanuka & Jugdev, 2006; Bozarth, Chapman, & LaMonica, 2004; Wojciechowski & Palmer, 2005). Wojciechowski & Palmer (2005) showed that attendance at a class session was a predictor of online course success. Scagnoli (2001) emphasized that “Orientation for online courses serves the same objectives as orientation for college, in the sense that it can facilitate academic and social interactions, increase student involvement, enhance the sense of belonging to a virtual learning community, and help retention.” (p.19) Others recommended orientations to help manage students' expectations and generally prepare them for distance learning (Carnevale, 2000a; Carr, 2000; Chyung, 2001; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Nash, 2005; Rovai, 2003; Ryan, 2001; Scalese, 2001; Tresman, 2002). Orientations present many opportunities for managing students’ expectations, preparing them for distance learning. Nash (2005) noted that student drop-rates are related to the expectation that online courses are easier than campus-based courses. Orientations can help describe the demands for a particular course, introduce technology standards, and allow for social and professional networking (Carnevale, 2000a; Carr, 2000; Chyung, 2001; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Nash, 2005; Rovai, 2003; Ryan, 2001; Scalese, 2001; Tresman, 2002). In academic settings, orientations and face-to-face gatherings offer the potential to create communities of learners. Some of the opportunities available at synchronous sessions are the ability to 1) make acquaintances and building friendships, 2) develop and create study groups, and 3) form project teams. By affording these opportunities the students may become members of a learning community (Stanford-Bowers, 2008; Sher, 2008). These groups or learning communities can be very important to learner success in the online environment (Stanford-Bowers, 2008). Orientations, whether online or face-to-face, can produce some lasting relationships among the participants.

Building learning relationships will help to develop trust among students (O’Brien & Renner, 2002) and can make the transition to the online environment easier. Transferring these face-to-face relationships to the online environment will create a more engaging setting for learning and interaction (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). A learning community provides needed emotional support (Ancar, Freeman, & Field, 2006). It has the potential to make the decision to withdraw more difficult because students feel connected to their learning community. Hence, more students may opt to remain enrolled and hence, retention rates may rise. The social aspect of the orientation also introduces faculty-to-learner relationships. Orientations provide opportunities for the learner to meet the course instructor and make a personal connection. The personal connection becomes essential in the online environment as it forms the basis for future interactions. Personality, mannerisms, and style are revealed and anchored into the foundational relationship. This becomes a factor in the nature of student support and the

delivery of feedback (Miller, 2007). Virtual student support and encouragement becomes personal when first established in the physical realm. It also suggests greater connectivity (Rivera & Rowland, 2008).

An online course by its nature delivers the majority of its content online; thereby eliminating the need for campus visits. Many of the benefits in online learning are based on the flexibility and convenience of anywhere and anytime delivery (Carnevale, 2000; Dutton et al., 2002). An online orientation that requires a campus visit may counter effect the intent of online learning. Several studies have examined the impact of pre-course phone contact to foster faculty-to-learner contact and to impact course completion (Stanford-Bowers, 2008; Kanuka & Jugdev, 2006; Nitsch, 2003). This may offer an alternative to face-to-face interaction when a physical meeting in not possible. Miller (2007) investigated the effect of the learner-facilitator relationship to retention. In this study, he found that sixty-six percent of a group of online learners acknowledged that their relationships with caring facilitator pressed them to stay in their online classes. Miller (2007) concluded that learner-facilitator relationships constitute significant factor of retention. He also suggested that facilitator be trained on how to develop and nurture positive relationships with the learners. Simpson (2004) discussed the many benefits of proactive contact on the online learning environment.

The facilitator can play many roles in online environment such as feedback provider, emotional motivator, and discussion moderator. One should not underestimate the impact these roles in providing comfort to a young learner or a learner with little experience in the online environment. All of these facilitator roles represent the emotional aspect of the online environment. As generally understood, emotional support in a learning environment is essential to participants' success. The pre-course orientation affords a great opportunity to make the emotional connection among facilitators and learners.

Though the emotional support is important to retention in the online environment, a certain comfort level with the course's logistics is also important (Fried, 2007). The orientation provides an insight into the logistical aspects of the online environment. This includes the students' comfort with the content of the course with respect to organization, communication, policies, technical, and assessment requirements. These logistics are important in preparing the learners for the online environment (Harrell, 2008). An effective orientation must include familiarizing the learners with the course. Online learners' expectations span many areas of the experience. The learners have a number of expectations for the facilitator. The facilitator is expected to introduce the objectives and the requirements of the course as well as the assessment and communication etiquette. Such introduction will help in clarifying the expectations of the course to the learners (Yamashita, 2006).

The previous paragraphs formed a brief literature review that discussed many factors that impact online course retention and focused mainly on face-to-face orientation. Some of the factors considered included learning communities, facilitator-learner communication, course content and organization, in addition to others. The review intended to provide a good framework for an effective orientation. Such a framework must address the learner attendance, the course's content, the communication and collaboration venues within the course, and the facilitator and learner responsibilities.

Research Design

Low student retention in the courses of the Online B.B.A. program was recognized by the teaching faculty as problematic. In an effort to address the low retention rate the researchers in this study opted to pilot a student integration and engagement strategy in the summer of 2008. A purposive sample (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001) of two introductory information system courses called Business Information Systems Management (BISM) was used to house the study. A purposive sample is a nonprobabilistic sampling method that is employed for a particular purpose (Singleton & Straits, 2005). It relies on the researcher to use his or her judgment to select units that are representative of the population. The researcher chose this particular sample because of the easy access to the participants. One of the researchers teaches the two classes from which the sample was chosen. "These designs are often used when the experimental treatment is administered to intact groups, such as school classes, making random assignment of individual subjects impossible" (Singleton & Straits, 2005, p. 207).

The courses capped enrollment at 40 students each for a combined enrollment maximum of 80 students. During the late registration and open enrollment period, records indicate that a total of 91 students registered for the course at varying times. At the end of the five day late registration period, 37 and 27 students were enrolled for a combined population of 64 students. The two sections on the course were identical in design, structure, content, and instructor involvement. They were subsequently treated as a single entity.

The BISM course is described as a fully online course. Students are required to meet and interact with their instructor through WebCT VISTA only. WebCT VISTA is a Web-based course management system that includes many features that facilitate course delivery. All assignments and exams are completed and submitted virtually. A strong knowledge of WebCT VISTA is recommended for enrollment. The course catalog highlight suggests that students' login to the course homepage through the course management system on the first day of the semester to review course documents and policies. The three-credit hour class provides the business

undergraduate students with foundational knowledge on information systems, software applications, and business communication. Application software use and information technology concepts are focused upon to provide the student with the skills to enter and successfully complete the rigors of the upper division business core classes. This course assumes a basic proficiency on MS Office products (Word, Excel and PowerPoint). Basic proficiency is defined by the skill set offered in the Information Technology Services (ITS) training courses in Beginning MS Word, MS Excel, and PowerPoint. Training booklets and access to primer courses are made available to the students prior to registration if they believe basic skills are not met.

The information systems course is a part of the lower division group of core courses; it must be taken by all students enrolling in the B.B.A. program. According to the Institutional Research Center at the university, the course posts a substantially lower than average retention rate. The average retention rate across four sections of the information systems course in the spring semester of 2008 was 66%, compared to the 88% average of other lower division core courses. Two sections of the course taught by the primary researcher reported a 62% and 44% retention rate respectively in spring 2008; for a combined average retention rate of 53%. In the first course only 23 of 37 students completed the course for credit with a grade of "D" or better. In the second course only 17 of 39 students completed the course for credit with a grade of "D" or better. This rate was noticeably inconsistent with the instructor's previous progression success and lower that the course retention rate average. It warranted further investigation.

The study was conducted to answer the question "what impact does attending the face-to-face orientation have on course retention?" The researchers hypothesized that attendance at a face-to-face orientation would increase course retention. The alternate hypothesis was that attendance at a face-to-face orientation had no impact on course retention. The integration and engagement strategy was executed through a series of documented steps. Students enrolled in the course experienced these steps as an integrated part of the course design. Enrollment was tracked throughout the 16 week semester. To eliminate bias, integration and engagement efforts throughout the course were matched to those used in previous semesters. No additional efforts outside of the normal course of teaching were made after the conclusion of the face-to-face orientation. At the conclusion of the semester, the class roster was investigated to check whether the students who attended the orientation had passed the course with a "C" or better. In the online B.B.A. program, successful course completion is defined by progression to the next course in the lower division core series, or progression into the upper division if all other lower division courses are complete. Business majors need a "C" or better in all lower division core business courses to avoid re-taking the course. Therefore for the purposes of this study, a "D" or better is the requirement for successful retention, a "C" or better is the requirement for successful progression.

The Integration and Engagement Strategy

The integration and engagement strategy was formulated based on a literature review of online retention literature. The strategy devised was based on availability of resources, timing, and feasibility in an 8 week condensed format. The strategy employed for this study consisted of five elements centering on a face-to-face course orientation: (1) an early email contact, (2) distribution of course documents, (3) a phone call follow-up, (4) a pre-course face-to-face orientation, and (5) the posting of the face-to-face orientation in digital video (DV) format on the course homepage. The five elements of the integration and engagement strategy are described in Table 1.

Table 1

Integration and Engagement Strategy

Strategy component	Description
Phase I email	Students were sent a welcome email message from the instructor with an invitation to attend an on-campus orientation. The course syllabus, schedule, and policies were attached. A confirmation of receipt and an RSVP for the orientation was requested.
Phase II email	The welcome message was resent with a reminder request for reply and RSVP if one had not been received.
Phone call	Personal phone calls were made by the instructor to students who did not reply at all previously. Orientation attendance information was requested.
On campus orientation	A one hour course orientation was held on campus covering six topics: (1) online learning success strategies, (2) course content and navigation, (3) technology, (4) graded discussions and assignments, (5) textbook and exams, and (6) team projects.
Orientation video	The on campus orientation was posted to the course homepage for reference and review. Each of the six topic areas was posted as a separate video file for ease of use.

Three weeks prior to the start of the semester, the phase I email was sent to students through campus mail (Appendix A). If a response was not received within one calendar week, the phase II email was sent with an additional request for reply. Students who did not reply within a 2 week period, or failed to RSVP with regard to the orientation, were called by the instructor at the phone numbers provided in university records. In the

event the student was not available by phone, the instructor left a message with a call back number. Only 15 students replied to the first email request. In five cases contact was not made due to inactive or non-working numbers, or failure to return the instructors phone call. Pre-orientation contact was made with 59 out of 64 students. The communication log for the integration strategy is provided in Table 2.

Table 2

Communication Log

Communication Context	Tally
Reply to First Email Message	15
Reply to Second Email Message	29
Personal Phone Conversation	15
Message Not Retuned/No Phone Contact	5
	Total:64

The courses posted a total enrollment of 64 students. Not all of the students contacted were able to attend the orientation due to previous schedule commitments. Of the 52 students who replied that they would be able to attend the orientation, 35 attended. This represents almost 55% of the total enrollment. The orientation was held on a Friday morning at 11:00am and repeated at 5:00pm on the same day. It lasted one hour and covered material related to online learning strategies, course specific software, graded discussions and assignments, team projects, textbook, and technology support. Introductions were made to foster student-to-student, and instructor-to-student interaction. Conversations and contact information exchange were encouraged. The orientation was video recorded and a series of digital video files were made of the orientation for those that were unable to attend. Students who were unable to attend, or who were not contacted due to nonworking numbers, were asked via WebCT Vista mail to view the videos before beginning any course work. Students were asked to send an email to the instructor upon completion of the video orientation. Of the 29 students that did not attend the orientation, 11 sent an email acknowledgement that they had watched the orientation video.

Results and Analysis

Success rates for students attending the face-to-face orientation were significant. The results for the student participants in the online retention pilot study are provided in Table 3.

Table 3

Pilot Study Retention Results

	Attended Orientation	Did Not Attend Orientation	Total
Retention Success (D or better)	32	6	38
Retention Failure (F, WF, or W)	3	23	26
Total Enrollment	35	29	64

Most of the students who attended the orientation received a “C” or better and progressed to the next course in the sequence. The progression results are provided in Table 4.

Table 4

Pilot Study Progression Results

	Attended Orientation	Did Not Attend Orientation	Total
Retention Success (C or better)	32	5	37
Retention Failure (D, F, WF or W)	3	24	27
Total Enrollment	35	29	64

The retention rate for students not attending was under 18%. The combined effect of the face-to-face orientation as part of an engagement and integration strategy was a retention rate of 57.8% through the two courses. Yet in a test of population proportion, 35 students attended orientation and 32 successfully completed the course. The retention rate of students who attended the orientation was over 91%. At 95% confidence interval, the p-value result is 0.9143. The hypothesis that attendance at a face-to-face orientation significantly increases course retention cannot be rejected. Results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Testing of Population Proportion

Sample size	35	*n*

#Successes	32	*x*
Sample Proportion	0.9143	*p*-value

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study sought to assess the impact of face-to-face orientation on student retention in online courses. The study was conducted in two introductory information system courses with a total of 64 students. Based on the findings of this study, face-to-face orientation plays an important role in raising student retention rates because these gatherings contribute positively to the building of learning communities, which in turn provide emotional and social support for the learners. We acknowledge that there are many factors and complexities that go beyond a face-to-face orientation, that can affect students' retention and success in online course. However it is important to note a strong correlation between orientation attendance and successful completion of course. The different literature shared in this document agreed by recommending some type of orientation to familiarize the prospective online learners with the facilitator, peers, and course's content. We, as well, recommend that for higher education institutions that seek to build successful online programs, face-to-face orientation should be implemented and designed with a learner-centered approach. Special attention should be paid to the facilitator-learner and learner-learner dynamics.

Based on results of this study, we recommend making a face-to-face course orientation a part of online learning. If a face-to-face orientation is not feasible, higher education institutions can consider the implementation of a residency program requirement. We also recommend using other supportive venues or tools such as video conferencing or synchronous live meetings if the learners are not able to attend because of geographic distance. Another approach is to incorporate a personal phone call to establish the facilitator-learner interaction and personal contact.

Future Research

This pilot study evaluating the impact of a face-to-face orientation on online learning retention is one step in addressing the researchers concerns in online education. Similar studies should be explored on larger samples in different educational institutions to confirm or contradict the findings of this study. Furthermore, other factors should be information on the learners involved in this study and in others, should be collected and used as a predictor of retention when combined with a face-to-face orientation. Additionally, a look at alternate retention strategies to compare impact will be important. A meta-analysis of the different online retention strategies previously employed is recommended. Furthermore, we recommend separate studies to explore the learners' perspective on the face-to-face orientation and its effect on their decision to remain in or withdraw from the course.

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APPENDIX A

WELCOME

You are receiving this email because you are registered for a section of BISM 2100 online. This course is a completely online 8 week course that will require approximately 15 hours per week. The first few weeks of the semester are more work intensive than the later weeks, so starting early and working hard are important keys to success. Time management and reliable system support are also critical factors.

In order to help facilitate your success, we are forwarding the course syllabus and semester schedule. Please review these documents carefully. They will give you some insight into the course, the projects, and workload.

Please also plan to attend a **Course Orientation on Friday, May 30th in Room 150. We will be meeting at 11:00am and again at 5:00pm.** This orientation is not required, but strongly recommended. The orientation will last about one hour, but may be extended if requested.

Course materials, assignments, and activities will be reviewed. Course policies, work quality, and software registration will also be discussed. Students and faculty will share some strategies for success. This is also a wonderful opportunity to put names and faces together, say hello, and make some new friends.

Please review the attached documents, and **REPLY via Email to Dr. Leeds @ eleeds@kennesaw.edu to confirm receipt of this mail message, and to RSVP to the Orientation.**

The semester begins on May 29th.

I look forward to working with you!

Dr. Leeds

Back to the Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration Contents