Masthead Logo

Scholar Works

M.S.Ed. in Educational Leadership Research
Projects

Graduate Works

2018

Student Persistence and Factors which Affect Retention in Online Courses at a Small Rural College

Loni L. Nadeau
University of Maine at Farmington

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umf.maine.edu/ed_leadership_projects

Part of the Educational Leadership Commons

Student Persistence and Factors which Affect Retention in Online Courses at a Small Rural

College

Loni L. Nadeau

University of Maine at Farmington

Loni L. Nadeau is a graduate student of the University of Maine Farmington. She has

been working at the University of Maine Fort Kent for the past 7 years in the areas of teaching

First Year Experience, student advising, and instructional design in her lead role as the Assistant

Director of Distance Education. In spring 2015 she received her Certificate in Educational

Technology and is now working towards her Master's Degree in Educational Leadership at the

University of Maine Farmington.

Table of Contents

Abstract

With declining enrollment and retention issues among Maine public universities it would be beneficial to try and determine what factors are contributing to online student retention and student persistence to ensure we are meeting the needs of online students which may help lead to better attrition rates, student success, and degree completion.

This mixed-methods study sought to determine the various factors which may have contributed to student persistence and retention in online courses and programs at the University of Maine Fort Kent. The research correlated student experiences and perceptions with institutional efforts in order to address any gaps in services which may improve the educational experience and student success for online learners, in turn, helping to improve retention. Analysis of the data revealed that there are identifiable factors within the institution's control that may help increase retention rates and that using available student information may help to ensure students have the resources they need to be successful in meeting their educational goals.

Keywords: distance learning, persistence, retention, student success

Introduction

To a large extent, online learning was developed to provide access to higher education for underserved populations, and access for underserved populations remains a measure of quality in online programs (Online Learning Consortium, 2015).   More than 1 in 4 college students takes at least one of their courses online. However, nationally roughly a quarter of all college students drop out at the end of their freshman year and only 53.4% earn a bachelor's degree within 5 years (Chen, 2012). With 49% of the University of Maine Fort Kent's credit generation coming from online courses and having 15 fully online degree programs and 2 fully online certificate programs research in the areas of student persistence and factors which affect retention in online courses will prove to be beneficial to the institution and can help provide insight regarding necessary changes to strengthen processes, services, and programming to help ensure a better student experience hopefully leading to student satisfaction and retention.

A common strategy to address online retention issues has been to provide special programs or give additional attention to members of groups such as those of low socioeconomic status, individuals from underserved rural communities, or those characterized by high dropout rates or little institutional commitment. Many online supports are made available to help aid students in distance courses, however, oftentimes these supports are not assessed for quality or relevance. Nor is it known if these supports are well received, utilized, or relevant to the needs of students.

To help address these deficiencies and bring light to possible solutions research will be conducted at the University of Maine Fort Kent (UMFK) in regards to student persistence and

factors which affect retention in online courses. By learning further about UMFK student's

needs through qualitative and quantitative inquiry, staff and faculty can make better informed

decisions could be made in regards to many different aspects of how business is conducted

including strengthening advising, online orientation, course building, course instruction, student

support services, and engagement between the students, faculty, and staff. Using an approach of

design thinking and empathy fueled, human-centered problem solving may allow the institution a

process to address student needs and find solutions to gaps in services. Hopefully, through design

thinking and empathy fueled problem solving, student satisfaction will improve in turn

increasing student retention.

Literature Review

Distance Learning Retention Issues

Distance Education has since grown in popularity for it accessibility especially in rural

areas of Maine where students cannot easily access college campuses. Like many other

institutions of higher education online learning has now found vocation at UMFK's brick and

mortar campus. With the addition of online programming and distance learners the issue of how

services are provided remotely and how the needs of online learners being met has become a

matter of importance because student retention is a central institutional concern.

Educational Shift

Along with retention issues institutions also have to report out if students are graduating in a timely manner and state and federal financial aid is often dependant on Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) all of which are areas of concern for college accreditation.   While online learning has steadily grown in the United States there have been questions regarding the quality and efficiency of distance learning and how online programs are being assessed. With the option of this modality also comes the learning curve of the various technologies that may be used in a virtual learning environment and how institutions are preparing students to meet these expectations.

As education shifts so does the demographic of students. Many students cited the convenience of the asynchronous, self-paced course as their reason for preferring online courses over face-to-face classes (Drouin, 2008). Age was noted to be a factor differentially affecting delivery mode as older students taking only online courses were retained at higher rates than younger students in the same category (James, Swan, & Daston, 2015). At the University of Maine Fort Kent the average age of students is 27 years old which is also a trend across the country as the U.S. Department of Education has reported that in 2015 there were 8.1 million students 25 years of age or older. Online programming has grown in popularity among older college students as it allows for accessibility as many of these students may be working part-time or full-time jobs and raising families. This is no exception for UMFK as the largest program is the Registered Nurse to Bachelor of Science in Nursing upgrade (RN to BSN), which is fully online. Many of these students, already holding Residential Nursing licensure, are employed by hospitals or healthcare facilities and online learning has allowed them the access they need to be

able to complete coursework to obtain an advanced degree around busy schedules which may include work and family. It has been suggested that online courses may provide access to higher education for populations who traditionally may not have otherwise had access and, furthermore, that taking online courses is not harmful for most students, and in fact, may be beneficial when combined with on campus courses (James, Swan, & Daston, 2015).

The growth of online programming has not come without its challenges. For example, it has been reported that dropout rates were found to be six to seven times higher in online programs (Gaytan, 2013; Patterson & McFadden, 2009). Contrary to what has been widely reported in the press taking some online courses did not result in lower retention or course completion rates (James, S., Swan, K., & Daston, C., 2015). Additionally, Cochran, Campbell, Baker, and Leeds (2014) suggested through their own research and that of other research studies it has been reported that attrition rates for online courses can be higher than the attrition rates for face-to-face classes.

Factors Which Affect Student Retention and Institutional Commitment

There are many factors which affect student retention in online programs and courses. While some factors may be beyond the control of an institution others may be addressed through such things as course design, support services such as tutoring, and engagement. Gayten (2013) concluded that the top three factors affecting student retention in online courses were: student self-discipline, quality of faculty and student interaction, and institutional support to students. Similar to Gaytan's findings, Park and Choi (2009), found that online learners are more likely to decide to drop out when they are not getting organizational support for their learning.

Organizational support would include, but not be limited to academic advising, financial counseling, and academic support services such as tutoring.

Course design has been identified as a contributing factor to student success and retention. Technologies are incorporated into online courses to enhance learning, but student's comfort level with technology varies. One aspect of online courses where a gap seems to be present is in technological readiness. Some online learners lack the technology skills they may require in order to successfully engage with their online coursework. Many institutions offer readiness tools and programs, such as surveys or online orientations, which are designed to enhance success in the online learning environment.   James, Swan, and Daston (2015) stated that most institutions often use college readiness instruments that measure technology aptitude and offer online orientations prior to taking online courses. As online courses are still relatively new and many are in their formative stages, some researchers who have attempted to analyze online discourse and sense of community have cited student problems, concerns, and complaints with understanding technology and organization of the course (Hara & Kling, 1999; Outz, 2006). All of these factors and other interventions designed to enhance online success merit additional research to determine their contribution and influence on course outcomes and retention. More research should be done to help assess the validity of these types of readiness tools to ensure they are meeting the needs of students. Recommendations from Gayten (2013) included that online students must receive a mandatory, face-to-face or online orientation and training session prior to beginning of the online course to ensure students understand the impact of self-discipline and time-management skills on their academic success in online courses. Also, Gayten suggested that online students must be screened to ensure that they possess adequate computer skills and

self-discipline to be considered a "good fit" for the online learning environment. Regarding self-discipline or self-regulation, students must become more responsible for their own learning to ensure academic success in online courses.

Online Support Services

College institutions across the country have had to address the issue of translating student support services, such as advising and tutoring, into the virtual learning environment. Nichols (2010) highlighted various factors that help adult learners persist and most are are attributed to support services available to distance learners. Similarly, Cain and Lockee (2002) also recommended that library support, tutoring, mentoring, and career advising should be included in support services for distance learners. While online learning continues to grow at post-secondary schools in the United States many question efficacy especially for at risk students. Gayten (2013) stated that more effective and efficient online student support services must be available , such as tutoring, financial aid counseling, online course registration, online training and orientation modules, and remediation for struggling students. Online faculty play a very critical role in identifying at-risk student and refer them to remediation support specialist.

Engagement

When discussing decorum for online learning and factors which affect retention student engagement is often an area identified that attributes to student success. The level to which students interact with other classmates and the degree to which they are actively communicating with their instructor can be contributing factors in student retention. Some of the most desirable aspects of online learning include time and distance convenience, quicker feedback, more learner control, being able to review learning materials continuously, more instructor-to-student contact

and accessibility (Singh & Pan, 2004). Online faculty must understand the critical importance of

dynamic faculty-student and student-student interaction to the success of an online course.

Institutions should monitor instructor response time and online presence. Professional

development programs must be designed and delivered to ensure that instructors teaching online

courses have received adequate training and, as a result, are very much aware of what works and

what does not (Gayten, 2013). Faculty presence and participation is valued most notably faculty

involvement in feedback and procedural clarity is important to online learners (Carlson &

Jesseman, 2011).   Gaytan's (2013) research findings also point to institutional support and

quality of faculty and student interactions as influences on student retention. Additionally, Hu,

McCormick, and Gonyea (2012) found through their research that the more students are involved

the more they gain from college.

Student Persistence, Perception, and Institutional Connectedness

As mentioned previously there are also external institutional factors and external factors

unique to individual learners, both intrinsic and extrinsic, which contribute to student persistence

and in turn can positively or negatively affect student retention. There is a need for additional

research on student persistence and success, largely due to the stagnant performance of U.S.

higher education in graduating students. Demands of employment, needs of dependants,

workload, financial problems, and organizational issues are common reasons for student

withdrawal. Following matriculation, the commitment of online students is likely to change as

they gain experience with the institution's academic and social environment (Beck & Milligan,

2014). This factor should be of particular importance to institutions as when a student feels

connected to an institution academically and they have socially adapted and integrated into the

campus community they are more likely to succeed. Good faculty advising can also contribute

to a student's ability to integrate academically. Student persistence was tied in through student's

academic background, academic performance, involvement, and institutional commitment

(Gentry, 2014). Gentry also noted that because dropping out is influenced by both individual

and institutional factors, intervention strategies can focus on either or both sets of factors. In

Gentry's work, he found that a student's feeling of connection to the institution positively

connected with retention. Beck and Milligan (2014) also found similar results in their research.

They too saw that a student's connection to the institution academically and socially was

correlated with retention. The researchers also stated that institutional commitment was

primarily determined by student's interactions with the school's academic and social

environments. The researchers also claimed that leaders and faculty in higher education should

develop assessments and interventions to improve the commitment of online students. (Beck &

Milligan, 2014).

Student experience and perception of how they believe they are performing academically

are contributing factors to student persistence. A literature review by Davidson, Beck, and

Milligan (2009) identified nine prominent "student experience" themes that were statistically

related to retention and/or institutional commitment. They are as follows: academic integration,

social integration, financial strain, degree commitment, scholastic conscientiousness, collegiate

stress, motivation to learn, effectiveness of advising, and academic efficacy. Lee and Choi

(2013) also referenced the relationship between student learning and persistence in their research

and noted that a student's failure to complete their first online course may lead to lowering

student's self-confidence or self-esteem and discourage them from registering for other online

courses. They also noted that the more students are actively involved in their own learning, the more they are likely to persist in, and be satisfied with online courses. Similarly, Gentry (2014) found that a student's feeling of connection to the institution positively connected with retention.

Another contributing factor to student persistence in online education is their internal motivation by grades and self-perception of how well they believe they are performing. GPA and self-reported gains retain their positive relation to persistence. Hu, McCormick and Gonyea (2011) stated students' educational decisions have more to do with their perception of how well they do in the eyes of their professors as reflected in grades and how much they think they are getting out of college, as opposed to how much they may have actually learned.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to identify factors which contribute to students withdrawing from online courses and programs at the University of Maine Fort Kent and to help identify why some students persist. As enrollment continues to decline there is a need to better understand our students, their needs, and determine how we can best support them. An institution's reputation could be jeopardized if attrition rates from courses are too high as it may be seen as an indicator of the quality of the programming.   The study focuses on identifying factors which contribute to students withdrawing from or failing online course at the University of Maine at Fort Kent and on why some student persistence in online courses and programs and how this can affect retention. The two research questions I would like to address in this mixed methods study are: What factors contribute to students withdrawing from or failing online classes? What factors contribute to student persistence? Through the use of qualitative and quantitative research data recommendations can be made to help to improve policies and inform practices which can

contribute to positive change and maybe bring some insight to issues that may have not been previously identified or addressed so that better informed decisions may be made by the campus to help ensure student success and satisfaction hopefully resulting in retention in online student populations.

I am also hoping to use the information from this research to help me grow as a professional and possibly inform the decisions and recommendations I make as the Assistant Director of Distance Education at the University of Maine Fort Kent and aid in how I provide instructional design support to faculty. Furthermore, to learn about the needs of online students to help advise how I work with them while providing student support and academic advising. And finally, the results of the research can help identify what factors contribute to retention and persistence so that I may design my section of the first year seminar to student's expectations, needs, and inform instruction so that I can ensure I am meeting the expectations of students while adhering to the learning outcomes of the course in turn creating a more positive learning experience for students.

Methods

Setting and Participants

Founded in 1878 the University of Maine Fort Kent, a small college in rural northern Maine, has been offering distance education courses, in its earliest form through ITV, since 1989. As of FY 2018 there are currently 1,327 students enrolled at UMFK. There is student representation from 28 of the 50 United States and the student body has representation from 27 different countries. Demographics of research participants may include male and female students ages 18-74.

Participants of the research project were recruited through the University of Maine's Student Information System Mainestreet Database data query which was generated to determine students who are still matriculated at UMFK in online courses and programs who may have withdrawn from or failed online courses within the past four years. Students were asked about factors that may have led to attrition. Mainestreet data was also be generated to determine students who are still matriculated at UMFK in online degree programs who many have gone beyond the traditional 2 - 4 year projected degree completion timeframe. These students were surveyed to help try and determine what factors may have caused their persistence within the program.

Research Question

This mixed methods research project aimed to determine factors which affect student persistence and retention at a small rural institution and focused on these particular research questions:

- What factors contribute to student retention? More specifically, what factors contribute to students withdrawing from or failing online courses?

- Why do some online learners persist?

This research sought students perspectives so that we may be able to increase student success and retention at the University of Maine Fort Kent and better meet the needs of online learners.

Assessments and Measures

With declining enrollment and retention issues among Maine public universities it would be beneficial to try and determine what factors are contributing to online student retention and student persistence to ensure we are meeting the needs of online students which may help lead to

better attrition rates, student success, and higher graduation rates. The researcher used a

mixed-methods approach for this project to help determine factors which contribute to retention

in online courses and programs and why some students persist beyond the traditional 2 year - 4

year track. Once these factors are identified and common themes emerge we can begin to

brainstorm interventions which will help us to ensure student satisfaction and success.

Throughout my years in higher education I have come to understand and appreciate the many

different factors which can play into student retention. As an instructional designer, instructor,

and academic advisor there are many best practices and strategies which one can adhere to

ensure that students are getting quality services and a holistic educational experience, however,

there seems to be another layer present which factors into students success which I would like to

explore further and begin to understand how this factor, persistence, affects retention in online

classes. Gentry (2014) reported on the role of instructional strategies in student persistence and

with the varying factors which impede on student persistence and achievement. The author noted

that academic integration and social integration play key roles in student attrition. When a

student feels connected to the institution academically and they have socially adapted and

integrated into the campus community they are more likely to succeed. Good faculty advising

can also contribute to a student's ability to integrate academically. Student persistence was tied

in through student's academic background, academic performance, involvement, and

institutional commitment. Also, students who choose a major aligned with their skills and

interests are more likely to succeed and persist.

   I chose to focus on the course modality of distance education as it is the one that I am

most familiar with and pertains directly to my work and how I assist others. There may be ways

in which to build courses that encourage students to persist, however, it seems as though this characteristic is more prevalent in some students than others and it would be interesting to learn further about how students are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to persist in the virtual learning environment and how we can harness this information and improve student retention. As an ever growing issue within the University of Maine System, student retention plays a vital role in the future and success of all seven schools and learning more about how and why students persist in the online learning environment may help us to better service and retain students of all ages and demographics.

I have chosen a mixed-methods approach for this research. I believe this to be the ideal method for obtaining new data through survey results and using previous data from Mainestreet queries and a survey, Student Educational Technology Needs Assessment, which I implemented to 115 students in the Spring of 2015 as part of the capstone for the Certificate in Educational Technology from the University of Maine Farmington to address my research questions regarding online student retention and persistence. As most of the students identified are online learners research will be conducted electronically. I used the Scantron software, Class Climate, which is an evaluation and survey solution, to develop and email two surveys: Online Student Retention Survey (Appendix A) and Online Student Persistence Survey (Appendix B). Based on Mainestreet data students could receive one or both surveys. Class Climate provided graphs, charts, comments, etc. of the formative data which was reviewed and helped to provide visual aids to begin analyzing results from. By quantifying and interpreting this data, and through detailed examination, commonalities and trends were present which I then identified and used as

a basis for further discussion to help inform recommendations and suggested the need for further research in specific areas.

Data Collection

For the Online Student Retention Survey potential participants were identified as students over the age of 18 who are still matriculated at UMFK in online courses and programs who may have withdrawn from an online course or failed the course within the past four years. Potential participants for the Online Student Persistence Survey were identified as students who are still matriculated at UMFK in online degree programs who many have gone beyond the traditional 2 - 4 year projected degree completion period. Each initial email and subsequent reminder email(s) consisted of the consent statement in which students will be able to understand that by continuing on to the survey they are agreeing to take the survey and have the data results used for further research, discussion, and publication. If participants consented a hyperlink directed them to the survey. Surveys were created in Class Climate software this allows for the surveys to be emailed to potential participants through their individual password protected university Gmail account and will be administered and submitted electronically. Surveys were administered in mid to late November 2017 into mid-January 2018 and will remained open for a period of at least two weeks to help ensure there is a significant number of response rates and sampling of students to help ensure validity of data. Creswell (2015) recommends to reduce sampling error, select as large a sample from the population as possible. The larger the sample, the more the participants will be representative of the entire population and reflect attitudes, beliefs practices and trends of population. Accordingly, all online students within the criteria of the survey narrative will be sampled. Validity also was taken into consideration during the

design of questions within the survey instruments to ensure that questions were developed to

help meet the desired outcome of answering and further assessing the research questions. Survey

deployment will be staggered to help ensure potential participants can distinguish between the

two unique surveys. This is important to help encourage responses. Creswell (2015) suggests

that to reduce error, use rigorous administration procedures to achieve as large a return rate as

possible. The consistency with the data collection process and relevance of information obtained

by the survey instruments will help to ensure reliability in the data that is collected. I paid

particular attention to the types of questions I asked participants to ensure that they were relevant

to helping address the research questions as outlined in the project. Creswell (2015) also

recommends to reduce measurement error, use a good instrument, with clear, unambiguous

questions and response options. Such instruments will encourage individuals to respond and

answer correctly.   Surveys were reviewed and test piloted by staff prior to implementation to

help test-retest reliability of the tool by administering the same test twice over a period of time to

ensure continuity.

The Online Student Retention Survey (Appendix B) was launched on Tuesday,

November 21st, 2017 and was emailed to 820 students. Reminders for the survey went out on

November 28th, 2017, December 7th, 2017, December 2nd, 2017, and the survey closed on

Tuesday, January 9th, 2018. At the time of close there was a survey completion rate of 37%

with a total of 302 returned surveys.

The Online Student Persistence Survey (Appendix A) was launched on Friday, January

12th, 2018 and was emailed to 325 students. Reminders for the survey went out on January 19th,

2018, January 26th, 2018, February 9th, 2018, and the survey closed on Thursday, February

15th, 2018. At the time of close there was a survey completion rate of 11% with a total of 34

returned surveys.

Data Analysis

The qualitative and quantitative data was analyzed once the survey period ended. Many

survey questions are quantitative in nature as there are designated choices in which the survey

participant can choose from. These results were compiled and analyzed on a

question-by-question basis. This data was quantified in order to determine commonalities in

which to use to inform recommendations. A qualitative analysis of the open-ended and write in

survey questions was also be completed. A thematic approach was used to help examine and

record patterns in survey results. This is a widely-used qualitative data analysis method. It is one

of a cluster of methods that focus on identifying patterned meaning across a dataset. After data

analysis was completed I identified patterns, strengths, weaknesses, and gaps which helped to

inform my recommendations and suggestions for further research where applicable.

Creswell (2015) states that after reporting and explaining the detailed results, researchers

conclude a study by summarizing key findings, developing explanations for results, suggesting

limitations in the research, and making recommendations for further inquiries.

Expected Findings

Prior to beginning the study, I believe that research results will suggest that students do

not always feel academically prepared as they begin college and that many lack basic skills such

as those in the areas of studying, organization, and time management which may be crucial to

their success as online learners. Throughout my years as an instructor of first year students I

have come to understand that many students come to university having never heard of or learned

about APA writing style which is a requirement of many college classes at UMFK. Many

students are also coming from Proficiency Based K-12 institutions which, in theory, allows

students flexibility in demonstrating mastery of knowledge and skills through self-paces method.

I think that this way of learning, while conceptually very progressive in terms of individualized

learning, does not always prepare students for the expectations of hard deadlines and other basic

requirements of college courses, some of which may come with other barriers including

compressed session and online courses which require the use of technologies. Through further

research in this area I can begin to understand how these and other factors affect persistence and

retention in online classes. I chose to focus on the modality of online instruction as it is the one

that I am most familiar with and pertains directly to my work and how I assist others. There may

be ways in which to build courses that encourage students to persist, however, it seems as though

this characteristic is more prevalent in some students than others and it would be interesting to

learn further about how students are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to persist in the

virtual learning environment and how we can harness this information and improve student

retention. As an ever growing issue within the University of Maine System, student retention

plays a vital role in the future and success of all seven schools and learning more about how and

why students persist in the online learning environment may help us to better service and retain

students of all ages and demographics.

Based on my prior research and knowledge, I know that there are some issues with

courses being offered only online for certain programs and students have expressed wanting

certain courses on-campus. Course sequencing may also be a questionable factor. The

institution has been trying to work towards registering students for a full year, fall and spring

semesters, at once, but this has not gone into effect as of yet. Any changes in course sequencing can set students back and as an advisor of online students I have noted that many students have to complete directed studies as courses aren't offered online when students may need them or sections are under enrolled and canceled. I suspect there may also be reported issues regarding course quality and faculty engagement. Overall, advising needs to be strengthened at all levels both online and on-campus at UMFK and I foresee this being a factor which may negatively affects student satisfaction and retention. I would also expect for survey participants to comment on access and quality of support services and how these services translate into the modality of distance education. In the past we have had really positive feedback regarding student support services in the areas of instructional technology support and library database and research assistance, but I presume that many online students are not fully aware of supports that may be available to them or where to locate these supports and resources. Through the research, I can also begin to determine how online learners perceive the effectiveness of these supports and may be able to identify services that students need that the institution may not be currently providing.

Potential Issues and Weaknesses

One of the foreseeable issues is timing of surveys as many potential survey participants are currently students and data collection may come within close proximity, timing wise, with course evaluations which are also implemented using the Class Climate software. Depending on the student they may receive one or both of the surveys and there is the possibility that students may be confused and think they completed the survey already if they receive a second survey. Surveys will be staggered to try and prevent confusion. There may also be confusion on the part of students in feeling obligated to complete the survey due to my role within the institution as the

Assistant Director of Distance Education as the survey will be coming from my supervisor who is the Associate Dean of Information Services and Distance Education on my behalf. I have tried to be clear on the email prompt which accompanies the surveys to address this so students know that their participation is optional and in no way affects their relationship with the institution or grades. Since surveys are completed by students and are based on their opinions there may be the issue of accuracy in reliability and validity through self-reporting whereby their answers and feedback may not be an accurate depiction, instead it may be a description of what they believe to be true.

Good data analysis may be dependent on the percentage of surveys returned. While the goal is at least a 27% return response rate to get more statistically relevant data I am planning on monitoring the return rate while the surveys are open and send reminders as necessary.

Results

The purpose of the mixed-methods surveys was to explore factors which affect persistence and retention in online classes. Explicitly, this study sought to answer the following questions:

- What factors contribute to student retention? More specifically, what factors contribute to students withdrawing from or failing online courses?

- Why do some online learners persist?

The studies were conducted through two mix-methods surveys. The Online Persistence Survey (Appendix A) was distributed to students who are still matriculated at UMFK in online degree programs who have gone beyond the traditional 2 to 4 year projected degree completion timeframe. These students were surveyed to try and answer the research question by determining

what factors may have caused them to persist. The Online Retention Survey (Appendix B) was distributed to students taking classes online who are still matriculated at UMFK in online courses and programs. Students were surveyed to try and answer the research question by determining which factors have attributed to their successes or difficulties contributing to student retention.

Retention and the Student Experience

Three hundred and two students currently taking online courses from the University of Maine Fort Kent completed the Online Retention Survey. The survey consisted of both quantitative closed-response questions and the opportunity for students to provide their own perspective on retention issues through open-ended qualitative feedback questioning. Survey data was analyzed to identify trends in student perception towards their experiences as online learners. Through the qualitative data and feedback from open response questions many common factors emerged frequently which seemingly impacted student's online educational experiences and could play a key role in student retention. The common factors cited within the research data included dissatisfaction in the areas of engagement, more specifically with the use and appropriateness of discussion forums, instructor engagement and timeliness of feedback, and course design. Support services were also an area in which gaps in services were identified, most notably in the areas of academic advising and availability of support services.

Engagement

Of the various factors commonly cited amongst online students many fell within the theme of engagement and all of these factors regarding engagement can be viewed as that of within the university's locus of control. The first of these engagement factors encompassed the appropriateness of discussion board forums. Discussion board forums are commonly

asynchronous open forums where students and faculty can hold conversation on a given topic or

open ended question and make comments on each other's posts. Discussion forums of this

nature are thought to add an engagement element to a course and possibly create a sense of

community in the virtual setting which students are commonly used to within the traditional

classroom setting. Student comments from the retention survey expressed frustration with

having to use discussion forums, the appropriateness of the types of questions, and the lack of

engagement by students and faculty within the forums.

Some of the comments from online students in regards to engagement within discussion

board forums included:

Survey Respondent Comments Regarding Engagement with Discussion Board Forums
"We are forced to give other students personal information in discussion boards and debate each other in online forums. Students should never have to speak to each other in an online course for any reason."
"I have taken two classes in which learning about process, giving, and receiving feedback is an essential goal (and an important skill in any workplace, no matter the profession). One class - no one was offering feedback on time, it made it very difficult to derive anything of value from the "group learning experience" - I might as well have been doing a directed study course."
"My only issue is that when the professor wants us to respond to others posts and my classmates don't post in a timely manner. If they wait until the last day, it makes it difficult for those of us who post early and want to respond early due to work schedules."

"Discussion board assignments are not beneficial for students. We should never have to speak to another student in an online class. We are taking classes online for a reason, we are here to focus on learning, not each other."
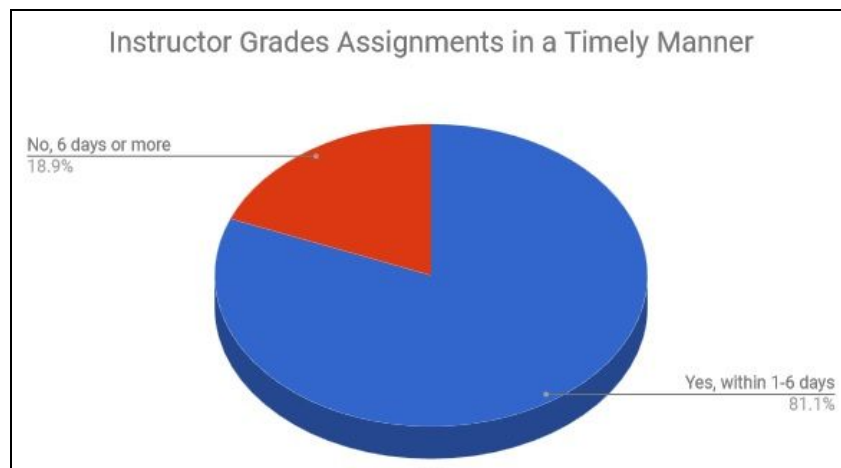
Figure 1

Many of these comments correlate with similar research regarding the use of discussion boards to create engagement amongst peers in online classes. Notably, Drouin (2008) through qualitative research found that some students not only felt no sense of community in [online] courses, but also stated they didn't want or need sense of community in online course. Included in his discussion of findings it was suggested that sense of community is not necessarily an essential component of online classes.

While discussion board forums can be a beneficial tool to use in the online learning environment, the appropriateness of the forums should be considered and faculty should be mindful of the level of engagement and timeliness of postings and feedback to ensure this teaching method is effective and resulting in the expected experience for their students. While some survey participants cited dissatisfaction with having to engage with other students within the discussion forums they also seemed to be stating that they were disillusioned by having to interact with their peers in general within the online learning environment. This concern may constitute the need for institutions to clearly define online learning engagement expectations.

Another promintate factor cited by online students from the retention survey was instructor engagement. Specific questions regarding timeliness of instructor grading, time-frame in which instructors provide feedback to student questions, and the frequency of opportunity to

communicate with instructors allowed for students to share their perspectives as online learners.

As seen in Figure 2 in regards to instructor grading 81.1% of online students stated that yes, their

instructor grades assignments in a timely manner within 1-6 days. While 18.9% of survey

respondents reported that no, their instructor does not grade assignments in a timely manner as it

takes 6 days or more.

Figure 2

When students were asked the time-frame in which their instructor provided feedback to

questions students stated the following as seen in Figure 3. Amongst the students surveyed

35.7% stated they received a response in less than 24 hours, 57.2% stated they received a

response within 24 - 72 hours, and 7.1% stated that it took 72 or more hours to receive inquiry
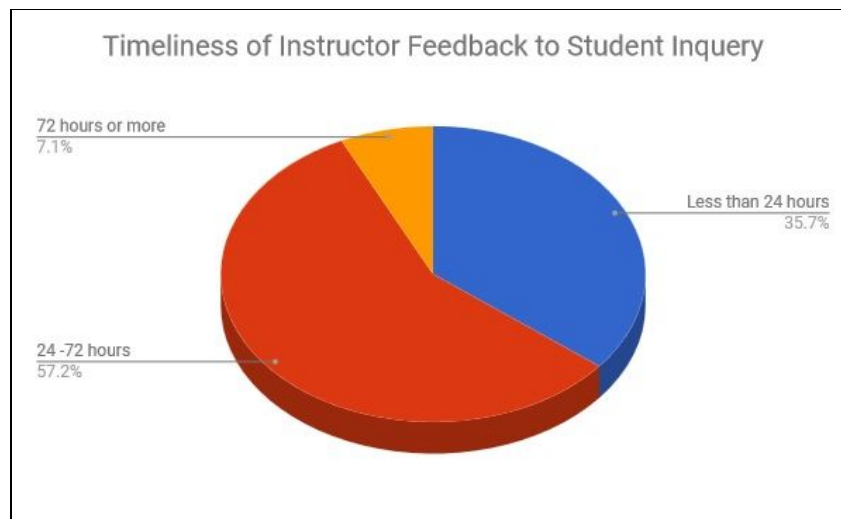
feedback from their instructor.

Figure 3

Depending on the nature of the question and the timeframe in which work must be submitted online, especially in the case of open ended online courses and compressed course sessions, student success may be attributed to the timeliness of instructor communication and feedback.

When asked if online students had the opportunity to communication with their instructor in person, via office hours, or via email almost half of the student, 48%, responded sometimes, rarely, or never as depicted in Figure 4. Many students noted that they did not know if their instructors had scheduled virtual office hours when faculty may be readily accessible to them much like on-campus students would have access to. In a society riddled with technology and instant access to information it may prove difficult for students, when policies and procedures regarding turnaround of feedback are unclear, to be confident in their ability to be successful in the online learning environment, especially when they are unsure of when or how to contact their professors.
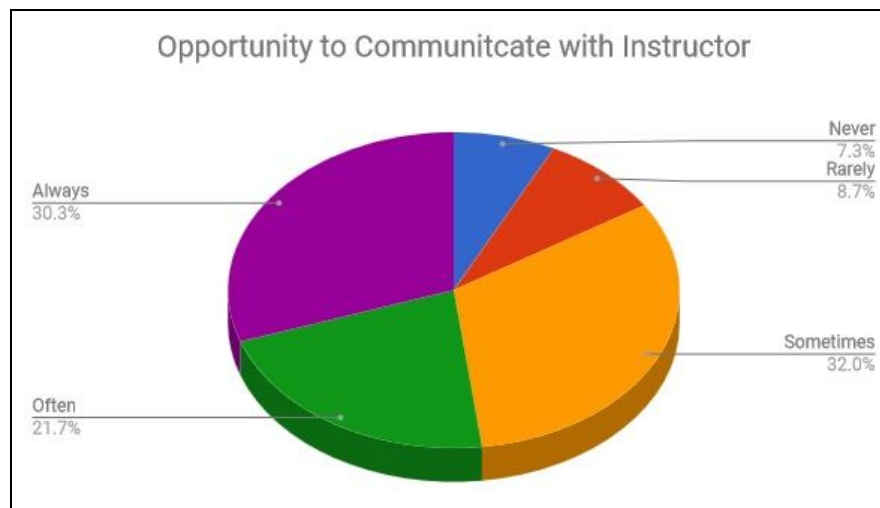
Figure 4

The final engagement factor which commonly was referenced in the open-ended responses from students and can also affect student engagement and hinder the online learning experience was in regards to course design, more specifically course organization and the updating of course materials and dates. Many respondents stated that there was a lack on common design in online courses and that, at times, it was very difficult to navigate the course and find the documents and other ancillaries necessary to properly engage within the course. Participants also mentioned course materials, due dates, and syllabi either not being updated or not correlating with the course schedule or course modules. Specific comments as seen in Figure 5 included:

Survey Respondent Comments Regarding Course Design
"The complicated demeanor in which some courses were laid out on black board was hard to navigate and decipher assignments."

"The syllabus and modules were difficult to follow as they did not match up 100%. I felt like I

needed to review both and the assignments tab to make sure I was completing everything, and

I had still missed assignments."

"None of the courses follow a standard course layout so it is a massive headache finding out

the course schedule, assignments, content, due dates etc. Seems to be a quite disorganized

program."

"[Instructor] never posted a syllabus or course schedule for the class."

"The syllabus doesn't match the course in terms of dates and content. Numerous times

received a syllabus that was different then the calendar dates, attempted to ask about it with no

response. A lot of times no response from emails sent. Had a discrepancy on a quiz and asked

about it, no response."

Figure 5

While UMFK does utilize Blackboard as a Learning Management System (LMS) and

employs a common template in online courses to try and ensure ease of use instructors can, and

do, regularly modify the template. The Distance Education office frequently sends out an

adopted Course Design Tool which suggests best practice in course design and delivery methods

for instructors to consider as they build or redesign online courses. Furthermore, online

instructors are supposed to, by contract, either complete a UMS systemwide Blackboard training

or meet one-on-one with UMFK instructional design staff to ensure they are familiar with the

LMS prior to teaching their first online course. Student comments, however, do suggest that

there may be a need to revisit current practices to ensure courses are easily navigable and always

up to date to avoid student confusion and frustration as this may become a retention issue for

some.

Support Services

Through the survey results it was noted that online students expressed dissatisfaction with

the awareness of and accessibility to online support services including academic advising.

Although, 83% of retention survey respondents reported that they were satisfied with their

academic advising experience as seen in Figure 6, 17% stated that they were not satisfied and

many of the open-ended comments did suggest that there may be some gaps within the advising

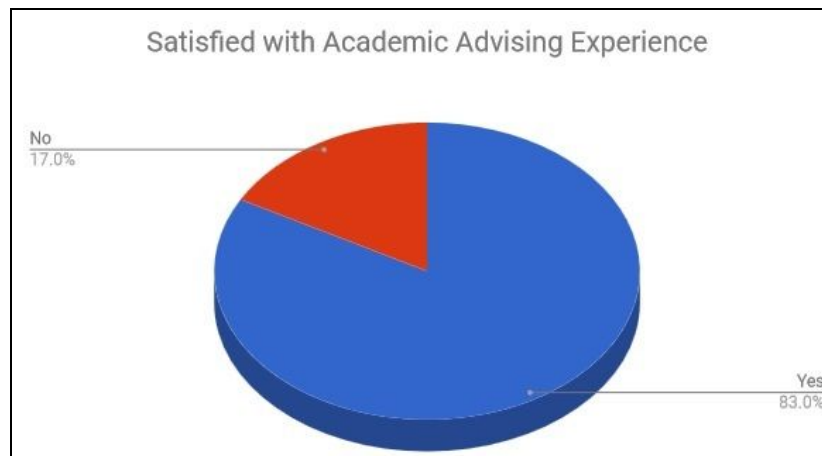experience for online students.

Figure 6

Survey feedback as depicted in Figure 7 regarding academic advising experiences included:

Survey Respondent Comments Regarding Academic Advising
"Another issue I had was that my advisor never responded to my many emails and calls and I had to have the head of the department sign me up for classes each semester. I feel an advisor needs to take care of advisee."

"My advisor has not answered my emails and did not give good advice on which classes to

enroll in and didn't even get me full credit for credits that transferred in I had to contact a

nursing professor to help with that."

"I contacted my advisor prior to enrolling in fall classes and explained that I would like to go

full time and graduate in the spring, My advisor made up a course plan that I have followed. I

just found out that I will be one course short of graduating in the spring because the course is

not offered until the fall. I am not happy about this as I was planning on enrolling in graduate

studies in the fall of 2018."

"My advisor was less interested in helping me achieve my goals as she was interested in

making me take 100 level courses prior to others. After explaining this is my 3rd degree and I

was capable of successfully completing the work. I am upset that I have had to request

assistance repeatedly from the dean of my program in order to bypass my advisor and her

unwillingness to assist me."

"The one problem that I have had throughout my time at UMFK is the contact with my

advisor. This is super frustrating when I tried to contact through email all the time and he

doesn't contact me. This semester I have finished what he said was required for my degree

and needed to make up a portfolio. I have asked for guidelines multiple times and he hasn't

sent them. It is now the end of the semester and I still have no clue what needs to be done to

get my credits applied and how to get my degree."

Figure 7

Proper advising is an important component of academic success. While UMFK currently does have designated program specific advisors for online students many of the students surveyed may have been on-campus students taking online classes. There have been some recent changes to the campus advising model which are intended to help address areas of concern with advisor assignments, timeliness of advising/course registration, and appropriateness of course recommendations to ensure consistency and continuity within the advising process.

An additional possible retention factor which many students noted within the survey were issues with academic support services such as lack of online advising and tutoring. While some students did identify specific services for with which they were not currently satisfied there were many comments within the feedback that alluded to the fact that some students may not be aware of support services which are available to them online or where to find information regarding such services. To this notion it is not common knowledge and may not be clearly communicated that all of the support services that are available to on-campus students at UMFK are also available online including, but not limited to: technical support, tutoring, financial counseling, accommodation services, virtual writing lab, proctoring, and advising. Services are provided through various methods including email, chat, phone, and virtual meeting software. University of Maine System services are also available to UMFK students such as technical support help desks and VAWLT virtual writing lab services. Additionally, there are eight sites and centers across the state of Maine where students can receive in person services and assistance with courses close to home, awareness of such services and resources for distance students may be a key component to their success as online learners.

Persistence and Student Locus of Control

Many of the self-identified factors which attribute to student persistence fall within the student's locus of control. Time management seemed to be a significant factor in which students cited can affect both retention and persistence within online courses and programs. Currently, the largest online degree program at UMFK is the RN to BSN degree which is comprised of 170 non-traditional aged learners who already have an associates degree and are working within the professional field of nursing. This may account for the heightened reported number of hours worked a week outside of school by survey respondents, see Figure 8 below. However, it is not unlikely for many undergraduate students to have to work while attending college.

Consequently, stress was an additional factor students discussed which can negatively affect their ability to persist within a traditional degree completion timeframe and may cause them to withdraw or fail online courses, subsequently, causing institutional retention issues. Identifying and analysing retention characteristics of UMFK online students may be the first step in addressing potential areas of concern where there may be an opportunity for the institution to be proactive in offering direct interventions to students.
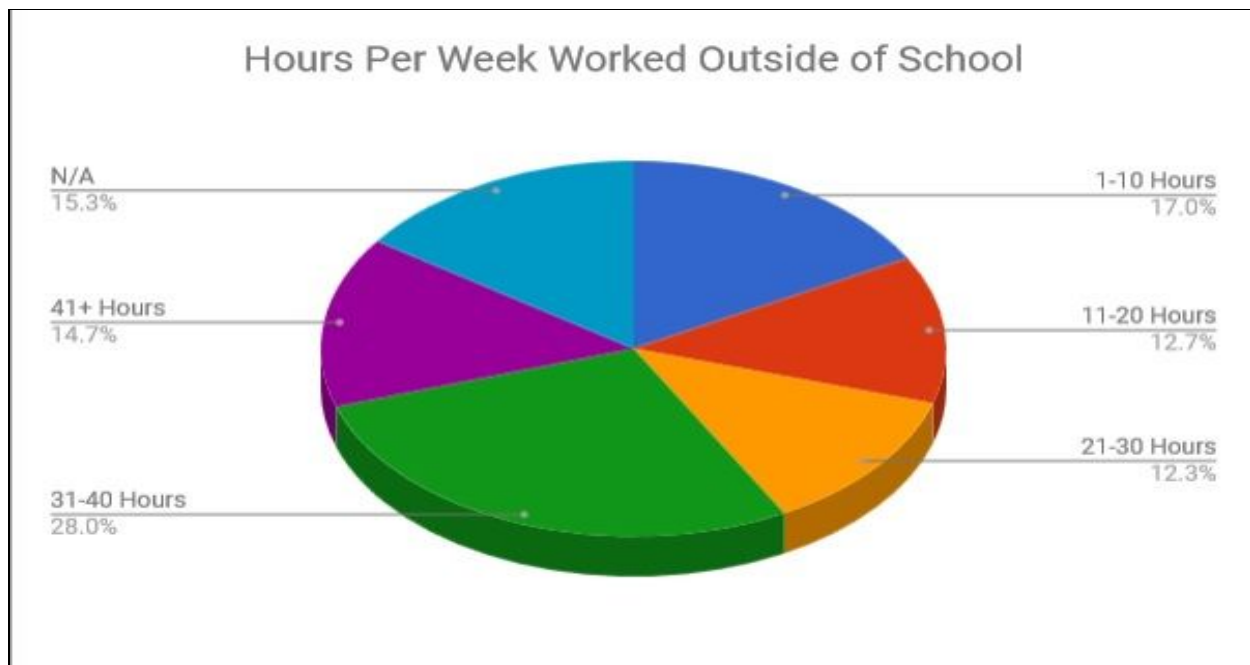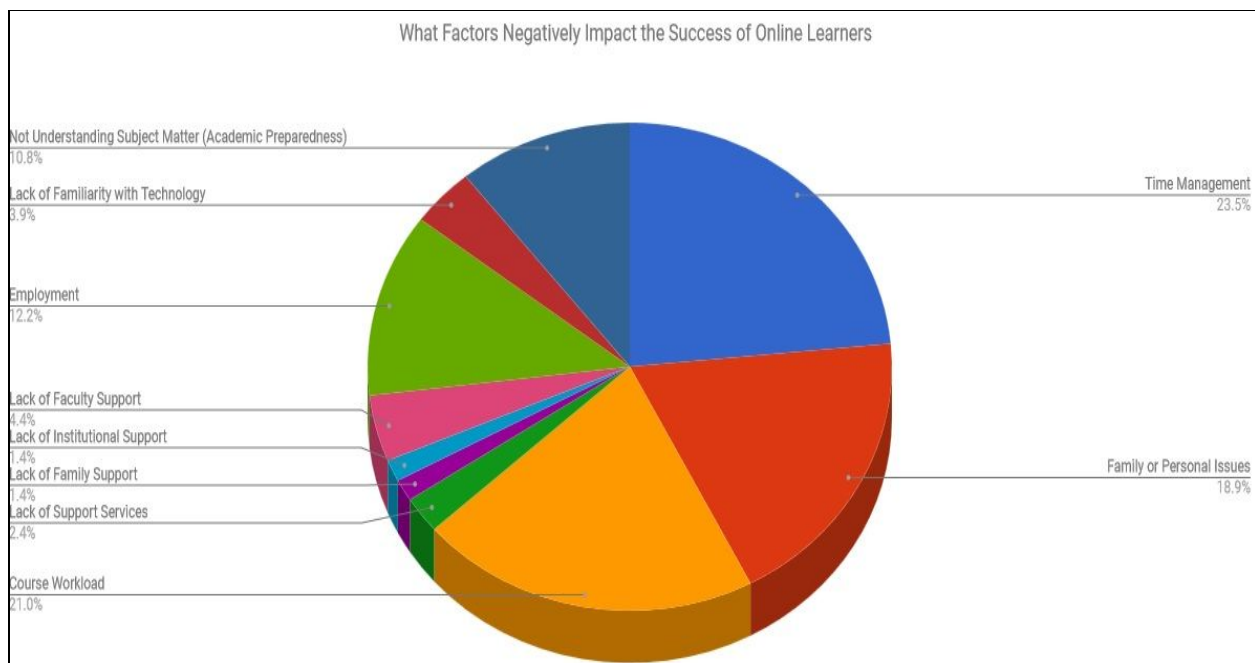
Figure 8

Time Management and Stress

A considerable amount of persistence survey respondents noted that time management and course workload were major factors which contributed to their success as an online learner, see Figure 9. Similarly, Nichols (2010) through review of research emphasized that students often cite lack of time or time management difficulties as an important reason for dropout. Often times the course workload can be unexpected for online learners as there is a common misconception that online courses are "easier" than on-campus courses. Combined with other extrinsic factors such as finances, dependants, health issues, and employment the school-work-life balance may be a difficult one for many to manage. It is important for students to be properly advised into the appropriate amount of credits based on their availability by taking family and employment obligations into consideration. Students should also be aware of course workload expectations so they understand the commitment they are making prior to registering

for classes. UMFK is a New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) accredited

institution which follows a policy that outlines meeting student learning outcomes, the

expectations are that a 3-credit courses, delivered over a 15 week term, will approximate: 3

hours/week classroom or direct faculty instruction and 6 hours/week out of course time.

Accordingly, students should be mindful that for each 3-credit course they take online

they are committing to at least 9 hours of course engagement and coursework. This information

is particularly important for those who many be working and taking more than a 12 credit

full-time course load or those who may be taking compressed 3-week/6-week/8-week/12-week

online sessions.

Figure 9

A student's ability to cope with pressures associated with their education, such as time

management and course workload, can attribute to their level of stress. As depicted in Figure 10

below 39.8% of survey respondents reported that they withdrew from an online course because it was too stressful. Nichols (2010) also referenced various stressors such as demands of employment, needs of dependants, workload, and financial issues as common reasons for student withdrawal. Proper advising into the appropriate courses and number of credits based on a student's prior commitments may prove to be essential to their success. Campus support staff should also ensure that students are aware of support services available to them if they need tutoring, help to further develop their time management skills, or if they need counseling services to help them work through challenges which may be affecting their ability to progress socially and academically. As noted by Nichols (2010) investigating student characteristics and skills prior to admission makes it possible for institutional support staff to identify students who are likely to benefit most from support services and who need to be monitored. Grade point average, Education Advisory Board (EAB) - Student Success Collaborative predictive modeling software, and Accuplacer test scores are employed by UMFK and can all be used to help student support staff assist in identifying students who may be high risk and need additional supports or monitoring.
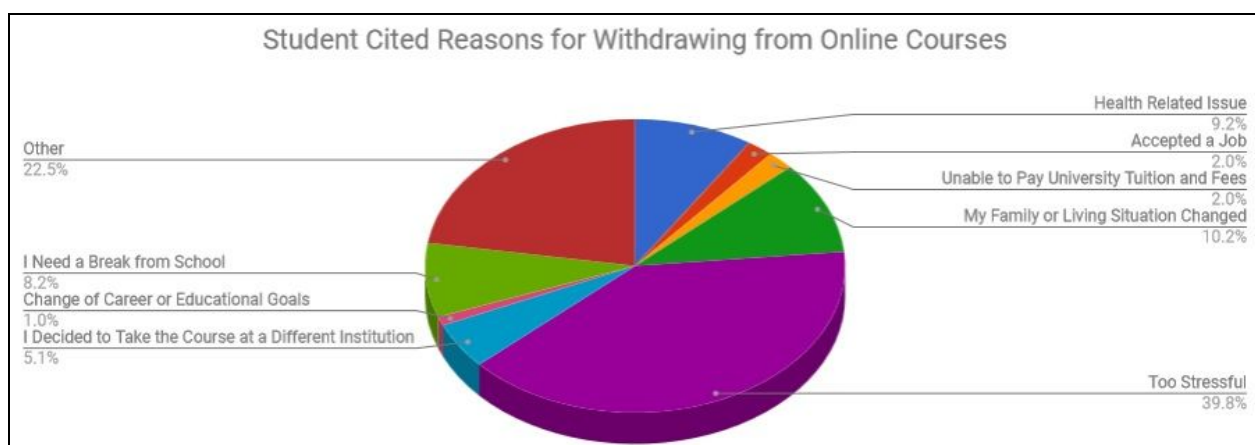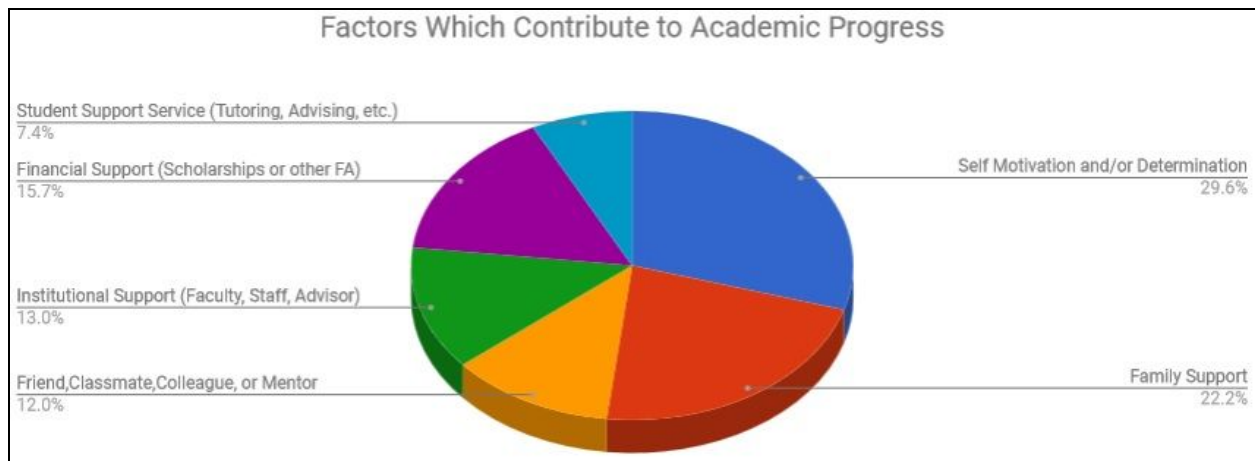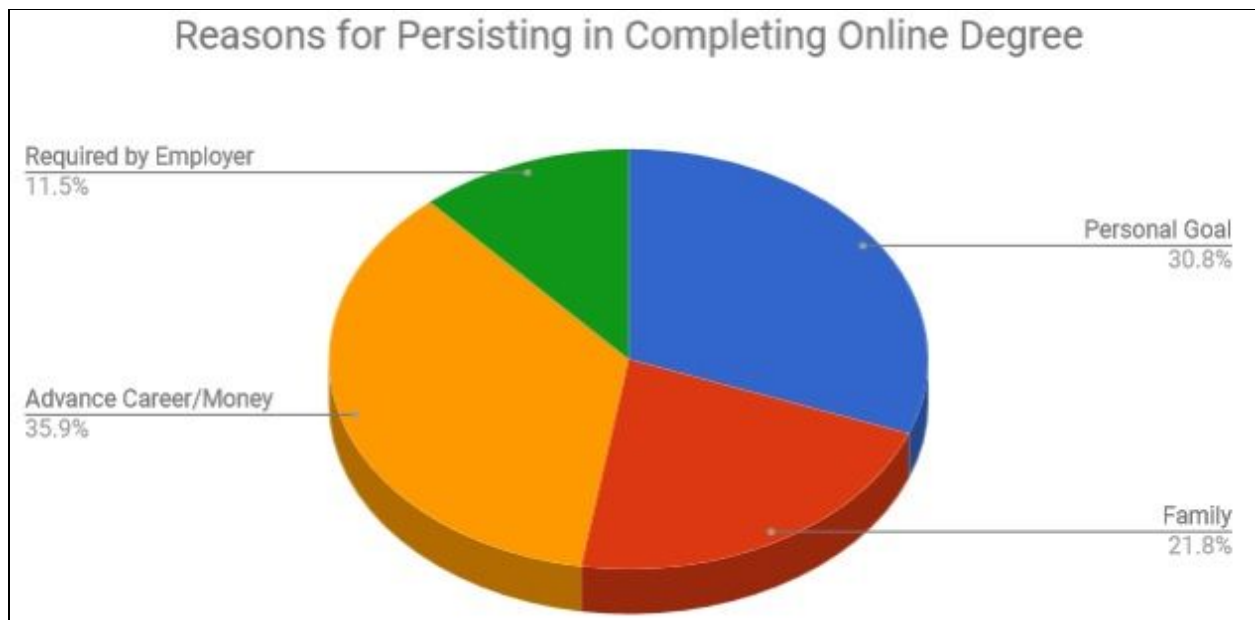

Figure 10

Intrinsic Motivation and Persistence

When trying to determine common reasons why the majority of online students have persisted past the traditional degree completion timeframe, there was a predominant self-indicated factor reported by nearly a third of all students surveyed as depicted in Figures 11 and 12. When asked to think about the reasons students have continued their education indicating which factors are most important and have contributed to their academic progress students cited intrinsic factors encompassing self-motivation, self-determination, and personal goals. While many extrinsic factors such as family, money, and career advancement did have a significant impact on a student's motivation to persist qualitative research data indicated that they key factor to persistence may be in the student's locus of control and inherent on their own fortitude.

Figure 11

Figure 12

Accordingly, open ended survey comments as seen below in Figure 13 regarding factors which

contribute to student persistence included:

Survey Respondent Comments Regarding Factors Which Contribute to Persistence
"Continuing my education is important to me."
"For the overall good of myself and family."
"I am extremely goal oriented person and getting my BSN is something that is very important to me."
"Personal goal and I can become a better candidate to future employers."

Figure 13

In trying to implicate factors which affect students decisions to persist and dropout rates,

Park and Choi (2009) through quantitative research indicated that dropouts were significantly

different from persistent learners in external factors (i.e., family support and organizational

support). Adult learners are more likely to drop out of online courses when they do not receive support from their family and/or organization while taking online courses, regardless of learners' preparation and aspiration. As stated previously, when an institution better understands the context of their learners they can better support their educational goals which could increase student attrition. There are various stakeholders within a university setting including admissions counselors, student support service staff, academic advisors, and faculty who all can play an essential role in monitoring a students behaviors and progress to ensure they are successful in their academic endeavors. Prompt intervention through early alert reports, mid-semester grade reporting, and academic progress plans can be effective tools which are advantageous to student retention when used both in the on-campus and online learning environments.

Discussion

Through the examination of perceptions of online learners, analysis of the data results revealed that there are identifiable factors within the institution's control that can help increase retention rates. Additionally, using available student information may help to ensure students have the resources they need to be successful in persisting and meeting their educational goals. As indicated in the results section various factors which prompted dissatisfaction amongst online students were in regards to engagement, more specifically with the use and appropriateness of discussion forums, instructor engagement and timeliness of feedback, and course design. Also, indicated were factors in the areas of support services, most notably, in the areas of academic advising and availability of support services. Nichols (2010) highlighted various factors that help adult learners persist mainly which are attributed to support services available to distance

learners. Therefore, an emphasis should be placed on ensuring these areas are addressed by the institution in order to better support distance learners and ensure their satisfaction and success.

Self-identified intrinsic factors that are within the student's control which directly affect their ability to persist within online courses and programs correlate with online student retention and included factors such as time management and stress. By identifying these challenges early through information collected through the admissions process, students grades and GPA, predictive modeling, and advising the institution has an opportunity to address and support students through their challenges. Noted by Gentry (2014) were similar factors which may play into student persistence and retention: family background, academic preparedness, and prior skills and abilities. Early identification of these factors and individualized student intervention may be the key to ensuring degree completion.

While survey respondents cited self-fulfillment and self-determination as the main factors which contributed to their academic progress leading to persistence in completing their college degree, family, money, and career opportunity/advancement were also major determinants. Again, the identification and acknowledgement of these factors can help an institution ensure they have the appropriate support services to assist students. As indicated by Park and Choi (2009) learners are more likely to decide to drop out when they are not getting organizational support for their learning.

Implications

Engagement, particularly lack thereof, can have major implications on the success of online students. The institution has the opportunity to improve upon the distance learner's educational experience by focusing attention on the design and quality of course materials, such

as discussion forums, by providing best practice training to faculty and ensuring instructors heavily consider the appropriateness of discussion forum topics, questions, and other required coursework by placing emphasis on student learning outcomes.   Additionally, course design workshops and one-on-one instructional design support should be offered at various points in a semester which can help to ensure faculty are getting the assistance they need in order to ensure online courses are easily navigable by students and that the information within the course site and syllabi are current. Timeliness of faculty feedback and communication to student inquiry are heavily dependent on student grades and the quality of work submitted. If students do not receive timely feedback they may continue to progress through required coursework and assignments inaccurately.   It is imperative that that students are advised how to properly reach their faculty and for faculty to clearly indicate how long it may take for them to respond to student inquiry and grading.

Awareness and accessibility to online support services can have a direct affect on student retention. With many students citing issues with academic advising the institution has a chance to address issues in this area by implementing an advising mentor program for new advisors and hold mandatory annual advisor trainings as course requirements and policies change from year to year and it is important to the success of students that advisors stay current and consistent in their recommendations. It would also be advantageous for online learners to be able to have access to their faculty and advisors by means of virtual office hours which may be implemented through the use of technologies already available such as Google Calendar appointment slots or through free technologies such as the use of YouCanBookMe appointment scheduling software. This

will enhance the effectiveness of advising and engagement between students, faculty, and support staff.

Many online students indicated that they are unaware that supports are available to them at a distance and most are unsure where to find information on these services. Through his own research Gaytan (2013) concluded that the top three factors affecting student retention in online courses were: student self-discipline, quality of faculty and student interaction, and institutional support to students. To ensure that online students are aware that support services such as technical support, tutoring, financial counseling, accomodations services, virtual writing lab, and advising are available to them at a distance department specific communications and website information my need to be updated and redesigned so the information is clear and easily accessible to online learners. Online and on-campus students should be encouraged whenever possible to engage in and refer back to the UMFK Online Orientation and UMFK Pre-Orientation which may serve as a point of reference for all of the support services and contact information they may need.

Finally, some of the factors which affect student persistence are intrinsic, but the institution has an opportunity to support students through those challenges. Time management and stress can easily be linked when looking at the habits and self-indicated factors which affects online student retention and persistence. Course workload expectations should be clearly defined so online students are fully aware of the commitment they are making when registering for classes, especially since many of UMFK's online students indicated working more than thirty hours a week. Stress management workshops should be available virtually to ensure students have the information and resources they may need to help them cope with stress and know when

and how to seek further assistance if necessary which may include, but is not limited to various types of counseling services through the university and student health clinic. Identifying student characteristics through the use of available student data and through implementation of students surveys may aid in ensuring students get the support they need to persist to degree completion. As with prior research recommendations Nichols (2010) explored the importance of utilizing a student support survey to help identify characteristics of incoming students as a way to help predict issues that would negatively affect retention in online classes and help associate support services accordingly.

Recommendations for Further Research

From this study, a need for additional research is present which would be advantageous to learning further about students who engage in the online learning environment. This research should also include surveying traditional age online college students and early college populations to cross compare experience and expectations. Online students should be surveyed by major to see if there are correlations with different populations of students or if the experiences are comparable regardless of academic program. Furthermore, it would be strategic for UMFK staff involved in institutional research and enrollment management to analyze retention rates of students who have taken compressed online sessions along with retention rates of students who may have entered courses late, two weeks into the semester during the add/drop period, to see if this information helps aid institutional policy, practice, or intervention to help ensure students achievement and attainment.

Conclusion

While online students at the University of Maine Fort Kent are seemingly satisfied with their overall academic experience, nearly a fifth of students surveyed indicated that there are, in fact, factors which hinder their educational experiences. There are opportunities to address identified gaps in services and practices through purposeful institutional efforts and commitment which may assist in supporting students to achieve academic satisfaction, success, and degree completion. These efforts may help to minimize retention issues and ensure students have the necessary supports they need to persist.

References

Beck, H. P., & Milligan, M. (2014). Factors influencing the institutional commitment of online students. *The Internet and Higher Education*, *20*, 51-56. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2013.09.002

Cain, D. L., & Lockee, B. (2002). *Student Support Services at a Distance: Are Institutions Meeting the Needs of Distance Learners?*. Retrieved June 27, 2003, from ERIC E-Subscribe database

Carlson, J., & Jesseman, D. (2011). Have we asked them yet? Graduate student preferences for web-enhanced learning. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 12(2), 125. Retrieved from http://search.ebscohost.com.ursus-proxy-3.ursus.maine.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=66173719&site=ehost-live

Chen, R. (2012). Institutional characteristics and college student dropout risks: A multilevel event history analysis. *Research in Higher Education, 53,* 487-505.

Cochran, J. D., Campbell, S. M., Baker, H. M., & Leeds, E. M. (2014). The role of student characteristics in predicting retention in online courses. *Research in Higher Education*, *55*(1), 27-48. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org.ursus-proxy-6.ursus.maine.edu/10.1007/s11162-013-9305-8

Creswell, J. (2015). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson

Davidson, W. B., Beck, H. P., & Milligan, M. (2009). The College Persistence Questionnaire: Development and validation of an instrument that predicts student attrition. *Journal of College Student Development,* 50, 373-389.

Drouin, M. A. (2008). The relationship between students' perceived sense of community and satisfaction, achievement, and retention in an online course. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, *9*(3), 267. Retrieved from http://www.infoagepub.com/index.php?id=89&i=2

Gaytan, J. (2013). Factors affecting student retention in online courses: Overcoming this critical problem. *Career and Technical Education Research*, *38*(2), 145-155. https://doi.org/10.5328/cter38.2.147

Gentry, R. (2014). Sustaining college students' persistence and achievement through exemplary instructional strategies. *Research in Higher Education Journal*, 24, 1-14. Retrieved from

http://www.eric.ed.gov/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=EJ1064117

Hara, N., & Kling, R. (1999). Students' frustrations with a web-based distance education course. *First Monday*, *4*(12). Retrieved April 15, 2002, from http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue4_12/index.html

Hu, S., McCormick, A. C., & Gonyea, R. M. (2012). Examining the relationship between student learning and persistence. *Innovative Higher Education*, *37*(5), 387-395. doi:10.1007/s10755-011-9209-5

James, S., Swan, K., & Daston, C. (2015). Retention, progression and the taking of online courses. *Online Learning*, *20*(2). Retrieved from http://www.eric.ed.gov/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=EJ1105922

Lee, Y., & Choi, J. (2013). A structural equation model of predictors of online learning retention. *The Internet and Higher Education*, *16*, 36-42. doi:10.1016/j.iheduc.2012.01.005

Nichols, M. (2010). Student perceptions of support services and the influence of targeted interventions on retention in distance education. *Distance education*, *31*(1), 93-113. doi: 10.1080/01587911003725048

Online Learning Consortium. (2015). Five pillars of quality online education. Retrieved from: http://onlinelearningconsortium.org/about/quality-framework-five-pillars/

Ouzts, K. (2006). Sense of community in online courses. *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education, 7*(3), 285-296.

Park, J. H., & Choi, H. J. (2009). Factors influencing adult learners' decision to drop out or persist in online learning. *Journal of Educational Technology & Society*, 12(4). Retrieved from Weblink

Singh, P., & Pan, W. (2004). Online education: Lessons for administrators and instructors. *College Student Journal, 38*(2), 302-308.

Appendix A

Online Student Persistence Survey
(Survey will be given to students 18 years of age or older who are still matriculated in online degree programs at UMFK, but may have gone beyond the traditional 2-year or 4-year degree completion timeline.)

Consent statement – In an effort to learn more about issues that may attribute to student persistence in online courses and programs here at the University of Maine Fort Kent we invite you to share your experience and opinions by completing this short survey. The survey should take about 10-15 minutes to complete. By clicking on the survey link you are agreeing to allow your anonymous answers to be compiled so that we can analyze the data which may help to inform campus decisions. As a graduate student of the University of Maine Farmington and staff member of the University of Maine Fort Kent, I may use data results in a formal thesis paper and for institutional analysis and recommendations. **Please note that participation in the survey does, in no way, affect your grades or relationship with the institution.** All data collected will be done so confidentially and anonymously through Class Climate software. Any questions pertaining to the survey or how data collected will be used can be addressed to loni@maine.edu, lesliek@maine.edu, or the Chair of the UMF IRB Karol Maybury at karol.maybury@maine.edu. Thank you for your consideration and participation. ~ Leslie E. Kelly in collaboration with Loni L. Nadeau

Demographic Information

1. Are you currently a

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Graduate
- Other

2. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Other/Do Not Wish to Respond

3. What is your age range?

- 18-29
- 30-49
- 50-64
- 65 Year or Older
- Do Not Wish to Respond

4. Which online degree are you currently pursuing at the University of Maine Fort Kent?
- Accounting (Bachelor of Science)
- Allied Health (Associate of Science)
- Allied Health (Bachelor of Arts and Sciences)
- Conservation Law Enforcement (Associate of Arts)
- Criminal Justice (Associate of Arts)
- Cybersecurity (Bachelor of Science)
- Emergency Management / Homeland Security (Associate of Arts)
- General Studies (Associate of Arts)
- Health Information Technology (Associate of Science)
- Healthcare Administration (Bachelor of Science)
- Information Security (Associate of Science)
- RN to BSN (Bachelor of Science in Nursing)
- Rural Public Safety Administration (Bachelor of Science)
- Self-Designed (Bachelor of Arts and Sciences)

Academic Integration and Institutional Commitment

5. How would you rate the quality of the instruction you have received in your online courses to this point?

1 – Poor
2 – Fair
3 – Good
4 – Very good
5 – Excellent

6. How difficult is it for you or your family to be able to handle college costs?

1 – Not difficult

2 – Somewhat difficult
3 - Neutral
4 – Moderately difficult
5 – Extremely difficult

7. How much of a financial strain is it for you to purchase the essential resources you need for courses such as books and supplies?

1 – Not a financial strain
2 – Somewhat of a financial strain
3 - Neutral
4 – Moderate financial strain
5 – Extreme financial strain

8. How much does the cost of courses limit how many courses you take?

1 – Not a barrier
2 – Somewhat of a barrier
3 - Neutral
4 – Moderate barrier
5 – Extreme barrier

9. Based on your financial situation, how inclined are you to work more hours per week than you want in order to pay bills?

1 – Extremely unlikely
2 – Unlikely
3 – Neutral
4 – Likely
5 – Extremely likely

 10. How likely is it that you will re-enroll here next semester?

1 – Extremely unlikely
2 – Unlikely
3 – Neutral
4 – Likely
5 – Extremely likely

11. How much loyalty do you feel to the University of Maine Fort Kent, based on your experiences?

1 – Not loyal
2 – Somewhat loyal
3 - Neutral
4 – Moderately loyal
5 – Extremely loyal

12. How strong is your sense of connectedness with others (faculty, staff, and students) at the University of Maine Fort Kent?

1 – Poor
2 – Fair
3 – Good
4 – Very good
5 – Excellent

Degree Commitment and Academic Motivation

13. How supportive is your family of your pursuit of a college degree, in terms of their encouragement and expectations?

1 – Not supportive
2 – Somewhat supportive
3 – Neutral
4 – Moderately supportive
5 – Extremely supportive

14. How confident are you that this is the right college or university for you?

1 – Not confident
2 – Somewhat confident
3 – Neutral
4 – Moderately confident
5 – Extremely confident

15. At this moment in time, how strong would you say your commitment is to earning your college degree, here or elsewhere?

1 – Not very strong
2 – Somewhat strong
3 – Neutral
4 – Moderately strong
5 – Extremely strong

Stressors

16. Overall, how much stress would you say that you experience while attending this institution?

1 – Not stressed
2 – Somewhat stressed
3 – Neutral
4 – Moderately stressed
5 – Extremely stressed

17. How confident are you that you can get the grades you want?

1 – Not confident
2 – Somewhat confident
3 – Neutral
4 – Moderately confident
5 – Extremely confident

18. How important is GPA and academic progress to you?

1 – Not important
2 – Somewhat important
3 – Neutral
4 – Moderately important
5 – Extremely important

19. When you consider the techniques you use to study, how effective do you think your study skills are?

1 – Not effective
2 – Somewhat effective
3 – Neutral
4 – Moderately effective
5 – Extremely effective

20. How much do other aspects of your life, such as relationships and work, suffer because you are a college student?

1 – Do not suffer
2 – Suffer Somewhat
3 – Neutral
4 – Suffer Moderately
5 – Suffer Extremely

21. Would you say the advantages of attending an online degree program outweigh any disadvantages?

1 – Does not outweigh the disadvantages
2 – Somewhat outweighs the disadvantages
3 – Neutral
4 – Moderately outweighs the disadvantages
5 – Extremely outweighs the disadvantages

22. How often do you feel overwhelmed by your academic course load?

1 – I am never overwhelmed
2 – I am occasionally overwhelmed
3 – Neutral
4 – I am frequently overwhelmed
5 – I am always overwhelmed

23. On a typical day, how much do you worry about getting your school work done on time?

1 – I never worry
2 – I occasionally worry
3 – Neutral
4 – I frequently worry
5 – I always worry

Academic Advising

24. How easy is it to get answers to your questions about aspects related to your course schedule, academic plan, transfer credit and other advising related topics at the University of Maine Fort Kent?

1 – Not a barrier
2 – Somewhat of a barrier
3 – Neutral
4 – Moderate barrier
5 – Extreme barrier

25. How satisfied are you with the academic advising you have received?

1 – Poor
2 – Fair
3 – Good
4 – Very good
5 – Excellent

26. How well does the institution communicate important information to students about academic rules?

1 – Poor
2 – Fair
3 – Good
4 – Very good
5 – Excellent

27. How well does the institution communicate important information to students about degree and individual course requirements?

1 – Poor
2 – Fair
3 – Good
4 – Very good
5 – Excellent

28. How well does the institution communicate important information to students about campus news and events?

1 – Poor
2 – Fair
3 – Good
4 – Very good
5 – Excellent

29. How well does the institution communicate important information to students about tuition costs, financial aid, and scholarship opportunities?

1 – Poor
2 – Fair
3 – Good
4 – Very good
5 – Excellent

Persistence

30. When you think about the reasons you have continued your education which are most applicable. (Please select all that apply.)

- Personal goal
- My family
- To help advance my career and make more money
- Requirement of employer

31. Which factors are most important and contribute to your academic progress thus far. (Please select all that apply.)

- Self motivation and/or determination
- Family support
- Friend, classmate, colleague, or personal mentor
- Institutional support (Faculty, Staff, Advisor)
- Financial support (Scholarships and other Financial Aid)
- Student Support Service (Tutoring, Accessibility, Advising, etc.)

32. Please share in just a few words why you have continued to pursue your degree.

Write In_____

Appendix B
Online Student Retention Survey
(Survey will be given to students 18 years of age or older who are still enrolled in classes, but may have previously failed or withdrawn from an online class at UMFK within the past four semesters.)

Consent statement – In an effort to learn more about issues that may affect student retention in online courses and programs here at the University of Maine Fort Kent we invite you to share your experience and opinions by completing this short survey. The survey should take about 10-15 minutes to complete. By clicking on the survey link you are agreeing to allow your anonymous answers to be compiled so that we can analyze the data which may help to inform campus decisions. As a graduate student of the University of Maine Farmington and staff member of the University of Maine Fort Kent, I may use data results in a formal thesis paper and for institutional analysis and recommendations. **Please note that participation in the survey does, in no way, affect your grades or relationship with the institution.** All data collected will be done so confidentially and anonymously through Class Climate software. Any questions pertaining to the survey or how data collected will be used can be addressed to loni@maine.edu, lesliek@maine.edu, or the Chair of the UMF IRB Karol Maybury at karol.maybury@maine.edu. Thank you for your consideration and participation.
~ Leslie E. Kelly in collaboration with Loni L. Nadeau

Demographic Information

1. Which option best describes your enrollment status?

- Bachelor's Degree
- Associate's Degree
- Non-Degree

2. Is this degree program

- Online
- On-campus
-N/A

3. Are you currently a

- Freshman
-Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior

- Graduate
- Other

4. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Other/Do Not Wish to Respond

5. What is your age range?

- 18-29
- 30-49
- 50-64
- 65 Year or Older
- Do Not Wish to Respond

6. Are you currently taking online courses?

- Yes
- No

7. Where do you generally complete your online coursework from?

- Home
- Work
- School/Dorm/Library/Etc.
- Other

8. Which of the following best describes why you have taken online classes. (Please select all that apply.)

- I am in an online degree program
- I don't live near campus
- The course was not offered on my campus
- The on-campus section did not fit my schedule
- My advisor recommended the course
- Other

9. How many hours a week, outside of school, do you typically work at a job for wages?

- 1-10 Hours
- 11-20 Hours
- 21-30 Hours
- 31-40 Hours
- 41+ Hours
- N/A

Campus Services

10. Did you complete the Online Orientation or Pre-Orientation?

- Yes
- No
- Never heard of it

11. Are you aware of support services available to online learners?

- Yes
- No

12. ** Only if they answer yes to the above question. **If so please check all the services you are aware of that are available to online learners:

- Online Orientation
- Writing Lab
- Tutoring
- Tech Support
- Library
- Blackboard Support
- Accessibility Services

13. Are you satisfied with online student support services?

- Yes
- No

14. ** Only if they answer no to the above question. ** If not please check services for which you are not currently satisfied:

- Online Orientation
- Writing Lab
- Tutoring
- Tech Support
- Library
- Blackboard Support
- Accessibility Services

15. What support services may be missing which would be beneficial to online learners?

Write In _____

16. What was the timeframe in which your instructor provided feedback to questions?

- Less than 24 hours
- 24 – 72 hours
- 72 hours or more
17. My instructor grades assignments in a timely manner?

- Yes, within 1-6 days
- No, 6 days or more

18. I had the opportunity to communicate with my instructor in person, via office hours, or via email.

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

19. I had the opportunity to communicate with and get to know my classmates within the course site or via email.

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

20. I enjoyed the structure/format of the class.

Strongly Agree\Agree\Neutral\ Disagree \Strongly Disagree\N/A

21. ** Only if they answer Disagree or Strongly Disagree to the above question. ** What specifically in regards to the online course structure/format hindered your learning? Write In
_____

22. Do you work with your advisor to enroll in classes, complete a degree plan, discuss issues, etc.?

- Yes
- No
- I am not sure if I have an advisor
- N/A – I don't have an advisor

23. Are you satisfied with your academic advising experience?

- Yes
- No
- N/A – I don't have an advisor

24. Are you satisfied with the Learning Management System Blackboard?

- Yes
- No
- Neutral

25. Are you satisfied with your online courses in terms of ease of use and course design? This may include being able to easily access and view course content?

- Yes
- No
- Neutral

26. How comfortable are you with other course technology requirements? This would include any technology you are required to use for the course that is not related to the learning management system Blackboard.

- Comfortable
- Not Comfortable
- Neutral

27. How satisfied as you with support for technological issues you may have encountered?

- Satisfied
- Not Satisfied
- Neutral

28. Have you ever had to withdraw from or failed an online course?

-    Yes
-    No
-    Prefer Not to Answer

** Questions 29 & 30 will be asked only if they answer yes to the above question. **

29. What factors would you say have negatively impacted your success as an online learner? Please check all that apply:

- Time Management
- Family or Personal Issues
- Course Workload
- Lack of Support Services
- Lack of Family Support
- Lack of Institutional Support

- Lack of Faculty Support
- My Employment
- Lack of Familiarity with Technology
- Not Understanding Subject Matter (Academic Preparedness)

30. If you withdrew from an online class voluntarily, which were the most important reasons for your decision? (Please select all that apply.)

- Health Related Issues
- Accepted a Job
- Unable to Pay University Tuition and Fees
- My Family or Living Situation Changed
- Too Stressful
- I Decided to Take the Course at a Different Institution
- Change of Career or Educational Goals
- I Need a Break from School
- Other (Write In)

31. If you have taken a compressed online course, less than 15 weeks in length, do you think there was sufficient time to complete the coursework?

- Yes
- No
- N/A

32. ** Only if they answer yes to the above question. **
How long was your compressed course?
- 3 weeks
- 6 weeks
- 8 weeks

33. How likely are you to take another online class at UMFK?

- Very Likely
- Somewhat Likely
- Not Likely

34. What type of device do you use to complete your online course work?

- PC (Personal Computer)
- Laptop
- Tablet
- Smartphone

35. Are you aware of add/drop and course withdrawal deadlines?

- Yes
- No

36. Do you ensure that you have the required books and course materials prior to the start of the class?

- Yes
- No

Please rate each of the following statements referring to your experience at the University of Maine Fort Kent:

Strongly Agree\Agree\Neutral\ Disagree \Strongly Disagree\N/A

37. The online courses were too difficult for me.

38. The online courses weren't relevant to my career plans.

39. Teaching methods were poor.

40. The faculty members weren't very supportive.

41. My grades dissatisfied me.

42. The courses schedule didn't fit my program.

43. Class sizes were too large.

44. Academic advising was dissatisfying.

45. The financial aid received was inadequate.

46. Overall value of the education for the price was dissatisfying.

47. Is there anything you wish to share about your experience as an online learner?

Write In _____