

The Effect of Faculty Involvement on Student Retention in Online Higher Education:
A Mixed-Method Study

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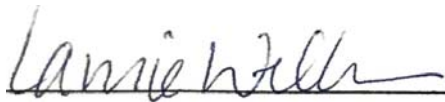
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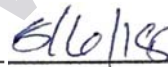
The Effect of Faculty Involvement on Student Retention in Online Higher
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Abstract

Without persistence when enrolled in each online course, it is likely that students will not meet their personal goals of completing a course or earning a degree. Online students are especially susceptible to dropping out. Colleges and universities are interested in identifying factors that impact student retention rates. The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to analyze the involvement of faculty engagement on student retention rates for undergraduate students enrolled in online courses at an Arizona community college. The method used were surveys and interviews, used in a sequential exploratory design, with the quantitative data collection being followed by the qualitative. The quantitative portion of the study utilized the administration of a Likert scale questionnaire. The qualitative aspect of the study employed the use of phone interviews conducted with the participants who completed the Likert scale questionnaire. The interview was administered using open-ended questions as a means of collecting additional data about the perceived factors that hinder or enhance course retention. The participants were undergraduate faculty actively teaching online and undergraduate students actively enrolled in an online degree program from an accredited Arizona-based community college. The theoretical framework for this study was based on the *Community of Inquiry (CoI)*, developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer. It is recommended that future studies include following faculty and students over several courses and semesters. Both faculty and student need to be proactive in reaching out to each other. The results of the study suggested that student communication was not always one sided and that instructors were also proactive in reaching out to students. It is also recommended that survey and interview timelines be expanded to better capture more students and instructors as they progress through any given course.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation is dedicated in memory of my NAU friend and mentor, Dr. Guy Bensusan. I miss you, Guy! Education, and most specifically online education, has changed my life –both in degrees earned, friends met, and employment opportunities. I will forever be grateful to the people who have inspired me during my educational journey, a long and winding path that has finally led me to my goal. A huge thank you goes to my partner for her never-ending support, encouragement, and soon-to-be loan payment assistance. Where would I be without you? Thank you to Mr. Peck in heaven who was always proud and curious about my progress. Thank you to my dear sisters, my special friends --both near and far-- and those friends too smart to even consider advanced degrees.

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Since the start of the World Wide Web in 1991, colleges and universities have been offering online distance education courses (Sun & Chen, 2016). With increasing popularity, the demand for distance education continues to grow (Amirault, 2012; Gaytan, 2013). Though many students enroll in online courses, not all will complete them; consequently, student retention in online learning programs is an important concern for colleges and universities (Gaytan, 2013; Herbert, 2007; Heyman, 2010; Shaw, Burrus, & Ferguson, 2016). Many colleges struggle to identify the reasons and factors that impact student retention rate (Hart, 2012; Allen & Seaman, 2007). One such factor influencing student retention involves faculty involvement and interactions (Gaytan, 2013). For online courses, Gaytan (2013) noted effective faculty interaction with students as being consistent, immediate, and of high quality. Faculty involvement in online courses includes detailed responses and explanatory information in text, either within assignment feedback, discussion boards, or email (Gaytan, 2013; Kuo, Walker, Schroder, & Belland, 2014).

This chapter contains information pertaining to student retention within online courses. The background information will attempt to establish the importance of online course retention. The statement of the problem, purpose, research questions, and nature of the study will attempt to provide a deeper understanding of student retention as it pertains to faculty involvement in online courses.

Statement of the Problem

The problem to be addressed by this study was student retention rates and faculty involvement. Research has shown the more involved students are in the academic and social

aspects of learning, the more likely they are to stay enrolled (Tinto, 2006). There is much research on overall solutions in which to improve student retention rates (Boston & Ice, 2011; Clay et al., 2008; Fetzner, 2013; Hachey, et al., 2012; Tinto, 2005; Willging & Johnson, 2009). With national attention focused on student retention at the community college and university levels, there is a new resurgence of exploring and researching the issues pertaining to adult learning (Glazier, 2016; James, Swan, & Daston, 2016; Lester, 2013; Shaw, Burrus, & Ferguson, 2016). However, there is limited research conducted concerning faculty involvement through assignment engagement within an online course as a relationship to course retention rates (Kaliski, Booker, & Schumann, 2012). Kaliski, et al. (2012) postulated online instructors are not always aware when or if a student is having difficulty unless the student specifically reaches out and informs the instructor. Assignment engagement refers to detailed responses and explanatory information in text (Purarjomandlangrudi, Chen, & Nguyen, 2016). It has been proposed that there are three forms of involvement: 1) interaction with the content, 2) interaction with faculty, and 3) interaction with other students (Fetzner, 2013).

As colleges and universities continue to explore retention issues, it is important to also explore the factors surrounding students' desire to stay enrolled. Although the above studies have explored external factors related to student retention, there is a need to expand the literature regarding student retention rates and faculty involvement through assignment engagement.

Assignment engagement has been generally accepted as meaningful completion and demonstration of stated assignments: student engagement with learning (Meyer, 2015; Sleeter, 2014). Because of limited scholarly research pertaining to the relationship regarding student retention rates and faculty involvement, this research explored student retention within online learning.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to analyze the involvement of faculty engagement on student retention rates for undergraduate students enrolled in online courses at an Arizona community college. Faculty engagement has been generally accepted as student or content engagement, and/or a written form of feedback within graded assignments (Berling, 2010; Meyer, 2014). This mixed-method study examined the degree to which undergraduate faculty and undergraduate students perceive the influence of faculty in affecting student retention. In this study, the faculty participants were drawn from the population of those actively teaching an online course at Rio Salado College, an Arizona community college, either part-time or full-time. The participating community college is part of the Maricopa Community College (MCC) system of Arizona. MCC offers a broad array of associate degrees and academic certificates ranging from accounting to computer technology, and eLearning design to dental assisting. In March of 2017, MCC reported a total student enrollment of 60,000 credit and non-credit seeking students. The student subjects were 18 years of age or older and included only those enrolled in a minimum of one online course at the participating college. The student participants came from a population of online students enrolled at an Arizona community college. Rio Salado College assisted in identifying the online students and faculty that met the stated criteria. The target population included students actively enrolled and faculty (full to part-time) teaching online at the college. The survey population included all races, genders, and ethnicities 18 years of age or older.

The target subjects included: 1) students actively enrolled in online courses; and 2) full to part-time faculty teaching online courses at the college. In terms of student demographics as of March 2017, the college reported 60% are female, 38% are male, and 2% as unknown.

Twenty percent of the students were under the age of 19; 41% were between the ages of 20-29; 20% were between 30-39; 12% were between 40-49; and 7% were 50 and over. The ethnicity of those students included 2% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 4% Asian, 11% Black/African American, 17% Hispanic/Latino, and 58% White. Those whose ethnicity was not specified comprised 8% of the student population.

The average age of the students participating in this study was anticipated at 18. Both males and females participated with varying backgrounds and ethnicity. The faculty participants included those actively teaching an online course at the Arizona community college, either part-time or full-time. In the fall of 2015, MCC reported a total of 1,068 full-time faculty. The total sample group included a goal of 105 participants based on a G*power a priori analysis (effect size= .06; power = .8; alpha .05).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was based on the *Community of Inquiry (CoI)*, developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000, 2009), Tinto's research on student departure and retention (2006), and Boston's research (2009 & 2011) on whether the CoI factors correlate to student retention. Additional information was also drawn from Xin's (2012) critique of the CoI. The premise of the CoI represents learning through the development of three interdependent elements - social, cognitive, and teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2000; Olpak, Yağci, & Başarmak, 2016). The *Community of Inquiry* has been researched extensively as a theory related to online learning. While the models play a role in the educational experience, this study will focus primarily on the *teaching presence* element. Anderson et al. noted that teaching presence is the "design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the

purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes” (2000, p. 5).

Nature of the Study

The study was a sequential exploratory survey design. A survey method allowed for more targeted questions and the control of all questions. The survey was created within an online survey tool system, Survey Monkey, and self-administered questionnaires were utilized. This method was chosen for its inherent advantage of providing a secure, password-protected environment. An online survey also offered quick access and convenience, as well as protection of participants’ anonymity, and provides an environment for honesty. The online survey also allowed for more targeted questions and the required completion and control of all questions. The online survey tool provided respondents with 24-hour access and was not geographically time-dependent.

In addition to the survey, interviews with the participants were also conducted. The interviews provided qualitative data for the mixed method methodology. Using both quantitative and qualitative data yielded solid data and added validity to the study. Careful recording is required for all types of scientific research (Cozby, 2012). The three primary sources of archival data are statistical records, surveys, and written records (Creswell, 2009). Content analysis is a research tool used by way of a systematic approach of existing documents. There are two general categories of content analysis: 1) conceptual analysis and 2) relational analysis (Cozby, 2012). Content analysis requires that the researcher develop some type of coding system to identify information. This researcher used an open coding system for this study.

Research Questions

This mixed-methods study attempted to answer the following research questions based on participant feedback.

- Q1.** To what degree does faculty involvement influence student retention?
- Q2.** To what degree do undergraduate students perceive the importance of faculty involvement having an influence on course retention?
- Q3.** What factors hinder or enhance course retention as perceived by faculty.
- Q4.** What factors hinder or enhance course retention as perceived by students.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study resides in its potential to obtain results that provide insights, and therefore application, to potentially constructive practices related to faculty involvement and student retention. When students persist within a given course, they meet their personal goals of completing a course or earning a college degree. To maintain student retention in the online learning environment, administrators and faculty must recognize and understand the related issues and be willing to address them. Both the institution and its online students stand to benefit. There is a need to contribute to the literature regarding how faculty involvement influences student retention and to identify factors that may hinder or enhance course retention.

Definition of Key Terms

Assignment engagement. Assignment engagement is generally accepted as meaningful completion and demonstration of stated assignments; student engagement with learning (Meyer, 2014; Sleeter, 2014).

Collaboration. Collaboration refers to faculty involvement that includes detailed responses and explanatory information (Anderson, T., Rourke, L., Garrison, D. R., & Archer, W. 2003).

Distance learning. Distance learning is generally accepted as three generations labeled as correspondence, broadcast, and currently, computer mediated (Caruth, 2012; Simpson, Anderson 2012).

E-learning. E-learning or electronic learning is all activity done online using a computer, tablet, or cell phone (Online Learning Consortium, 2015).

Faculty engagement. Faculty engagement refers to student or content engagement as a written form of feedback (Berling, 2010; Meyer, 2014).

Internet course. An Internet course contains materials offered and delivered entirely online (Amirault, 2012; Caruth, 2012).

Learning Management System. Also known as LMS, a learning management system or course management system is the system that houses internet or online courses (Hussain, 2012).

Online course. An online course is a web-based, and typically interactive course, which contains all required lessons, materials, and syllabi for students (Baghdadi, 2011).

Persistence. Persistence is also referred to as retention - staying enrolled within a course (Boston, 2011).

Retention. Retention is also referred to as persistence - staying enrolled within a course (Boston, 2011).

Student engagement. Student engagement has been generally accepted as meaningful interaction within an online environment (Sleeter, 2014).

Summary

Retention of students enrolled in online courses continues to be an important issue for colleges and universities as they attempt to identify and amend factors associated with student attrition rates. The purpose of this study was to examine the degree to which undergraduate faculty and undergraduate students perceive the effect of faculty practices on student retention. The second purpose was to explore the factors that hinder or enhance course retention. With national attention given to higher education student retention, there appears a resurgence of exploring and researching the issue. Data collected from students in online courses was examined to determine the extent to which undergraduate faculty and undergraduate students perceive the influence of faculty on student retention. The research from this study will further expand the current body of knowledge concerning student retention issues with hopes of identifying applicable solutions for educators and presenting specific suggestions for further study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to analyze the involvement of faculty engagement on student retention rates for undergraduate students in online courses. To that end, the focus of this literature review was to obtain and present information from scholarly writings and research that pertains to the effect of faculty engagement on student retention. Without student persistence within a given course, students may not meet their personal goals of completing a course or completing a college degree. Online course offerings and programs continue to increase, but low retention rates continue to be of concern (Chiyaka, Sithole, Manyanga, McCarthy, & Bucklein, 2016; Glazier, 2016).

Several studies offer viable solutions to address improving student retention and course satisfaction. This section presents a brief history of online learning in higher education, history of community colleges in the United States, retention issues, and personalized services related to retention concerns, student engagement, and faculty engagement. Previous studies related to retention issues such as personalized services, student engagement, orientation programs, and various ways of building rapport are reviewed and presented.

This literature review was conducted exclusively from the extensive resources made available through the Northcentral University (NCU) library. Databases made available through NCU and used for this study included EBSCOhost, Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), ProQuest, SAGE Journals Online, and SAGE Research Methods. Key word searches included *student engagement in online learning*, *online retention*, *faculty engagement*, *student retention*, *online student retention*, *student persistence*, *assignment engagement*, and *faculty involvement in online learning*. Except for seminal work and the history of online learning, research articles were primarily from the years 2012 through 2017.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was based on the *Community of Inquiry (CoI)*, developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000, 2009), Tinto's research on student departure and retention (2006), and Boston's research (2009 & 2011) on whether the CoI factors correlate to student retention. Additional information may also be drawn from Xin's (2012) critique of the CoI. The premise of the CoI represents learning through the development of three interdependent elements - social, cognitive, and teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2000; Olpak, Yağci, & Başarmak, 2016). The *Community of Inquiry* has been researched extensively as a theory related to online learning. While the models play a role in the educational experience, this study will focus primarily on the *teaching presence* element. Anderson et al. noted that teaching presence is the "design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes" (2000, p. 5).

A common reference for researchers concerning student retention issues is the early work of Vincent Tinto (1975). Tinto developed a theoretical model in which he argued that dropping out from college involved "process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college" (p. 94). Tinto's 2006 research expands on his earlier research from 1975, which suggested that the continual changing of goals and commitments from both the student and the institution led to either the persistence in or dropout from college. Retention issues are now related to a range of models, including sociological, psychological, and even economic in nature. Tinto (2006) stated, "Throughout these changes and the putting forth of

alternative models, one fact has remained clear involvement, or what is increasingly being referred to as engagement, matters” (p. 4).

Where retention issues are concerned, data from studies by Boston et al. (2009, 2011) on the relationship between indicators of the community of inquiry and student persistence, suggest that further exploration will help determine the validity of the premise that community matters, specifically with respect to faculty input. Even though results of research on faculty involvement have been widely accepted as key to student retention (Tinto, 2006), the information is limited in scope. The CoI model holds a compelling applicability to creating and facilitating online courses. The importance of a sense of community for online students, faculty presence and involvement, and cognitive awareness and motivation of students, has been well supported by research, as previously noted.

Research has revealed the more involved students are in the academic and social aspects of learning, the more likely they are to stay enrolled (Tinto, 2006). There is much research on overall solutions in which to improve student retention rates (Boston & Ice, 2011; Clay et al, 2008; Fetzner, 2013; Hachey, et al., 2012; Tinto, 2005; Willging & Johnson, 2009). With national attention focused on student retention at the community college and university levels, there is a resurgence of exploring and researching the issues pertaining to adult learning (Glazier, 2016; James, Swan, & Daston, 2016; Lester, 2013; Shaw, Burrus, & Ferguson, 2016). However, there is limited research concerning faculty involvement through assignment engagement within an online course as a relationship to course retention rates (Kaliski, Booker, & Schumann, 2012). Kaliski, et al. (2012) postulated online instructors are not always aware when or if a student is having difficulty unless a student specifically reaches out to inform an instructor. Assignment

engagement refers to detailed responses and explanatory information in text

(Purarjomandlangrudi, Chen, & Nguyen, 2016). There are three forms of proposed involvement: 1) interaction with the content; 2) interaction with faculty; and 3) interaction with other students (Fetzner, 2013).

Many institutions have been criticized for creating online courses or programs based on the ever-changing technological tools provided for online learning rather than on educational theories and known practices for success. Vincent Tinto, an academic theorist in the field of higher education and distinguished professor at Syracuse University, has spent over 30 years researching and writing about student persistence and retention issues. He has theorized that the greater the student involvement and academic integration, the greater the chance that the student will stay enrolled and graduate (Tinto, 1975, 1993, 2006). In 2006, Tinto provided a synopsis of what were believed to be truths about retention, the changes involved, and the next questions for understanding retention. He presented the following three findings. First, understanding the experiences of students from different backgrounds has changed and shaped student retention. Second, the process of student retention differs based on institutional settings (i. e., residential and non-residential, and two- and four-year). Third, insight into the complexities of student retention were limited due to the research typically being viewed through the lens of psychology (Tinto, 2006).

Tinto provides a range of models, some sociological, some psychological, and others economic, that are proposed as being better suited to the task of explaining students' departure from online courses (Tinto, 2006). Involvement, or what is increasingly referred to as student engagement, is an important consideration when looking at factors that affect student retention (Boston, Ice, and Gibson, 2011; Gaytan, 2013; Tinto, 2006). Tinto's theories of engagement

helped guide many institutions into providing practical retention solutions for their online courses.

Several studies offer viable solutions to student retention and course satisfaction. The stated theories helped guide institutions in applying actual solutions and sound instructional design practices in online courses. Institutions basing their practices on current research have employed personalized services initiatives that reflect delivery of increased student support services (Hachey et al., 2012), more closely aligned student advising (Clay, Rowland, & Packard, 2008), greater access to faculty and supplying resources to increase faculty satisfaction (Fetzner, 2013), presenting social and academic integration (Heyman, 2010), and incorporating motivational aspects to encourage students (ChanLin, 2009).

Data was accessed from the American Public University System to explore the relationship between student demographics, interactions, and retention (Boston & Ice, 2011). The purpose of their research was to garner more information regarding online retention issues. Two questions served as the focus of their research: 1) What type of student enrolls at an online institution? 2) What factors influence online student retention? The researchers found no correlation between ethnicity and gender in relation to persistence but postulated that much social and proactive engagement may be correlated to student retention.

U.S. Community Colleges

Community colleges were originally called “junior” or two-year colleges. The first public college was Joliet Junior College in Illinois. It is the oldest two-year college that is still in existence (AACC, n.d.). William Harper, the then president of the University of Chicago, was instrumental in the creation of Joliet Junior College. It has been stated that the passing of the

Morrill Act in 1862 and the passage of the second Morrill Act in 1890 were the impetus for expanding public higher education, along with the vision of William Harper, which resulted in the creation of Joliet Junior College (AACC, n.d.; Bahr, 2016).

In 1920, the American Association of Junior Colleges was founded. Now called the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), the organization focuses on providing national community college leadership, advocacy, and is a source for information and resources concerning community colleges. Early on, national leaders recognized the need for a more skilled labor force, informed and educated community members, and a place other than universities where people could be educated. By offering programs and degrees to reflect local and national needs, community colleges have been known to be responsive to workforce needs, and for being a facilitator for change, (AACC, 2017).

In the 1930s, junior colleges continued to increase across America. Women, especially, benefited from the increased availability of community colleges, as many studied to become grade school teachers (AACC, 2017). In 1944, Congress passed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act which provided financial assistance for veterans of World War II who wanted to attend college. The Act became better known as the GI (Government Issued) Bill and resulted in a dramatic increase in attendance at community colleges (AACC, 2017). Further expanding enrollment in community colleges, the Higher Education Act of 1965 provided Pell Grants to those students from low-income families. Pell Grants, unlike loans, do not have to be repaid.

During the Obama Administration, community colleges—Northern Virginia Community College in particular—enjoyed special attention because one of its professors of English, Dr. Jill Biden, was the wife of then-Vice President Joe Biden. Dr. Biden's prominence brought renewed visibility to community colleges. President Obama's America's College Promise Act of 2015

proposed to make community colleges free for students, in part to support the goal of increasing graduation rates (Scott, 2015). This legislation awarded grants to states to waive tuition and fees at community colleges for eligible students. States and colleges had to do their part by providing a portion of the expense and building quality and relevant programs. Eligibility includes being a first-time student, being enrolled at least half-time, and maintaining satisfactory academic progress through their program. Students are also required to enroll in a program that could transfer to another higher institution or be enrolled in a credentialed training program identified as an *in-demand* industry (AACCC, 2017; Scott, 2015).

Some researchers have noted enrollment at community colleges continues to grow (Building American Skills through Community Colleges, n.d.; Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Robichaud, 2016). However, the report by AACCC (2016) indicates otherwise. It stated that overall enrollment in postsecondary institutions declined in the fall of 2015. Although community colleges experienced the smallest decline in their enrollment, nevertheless a decline was reported (AACCC, 2016; Juskiewicz, 2016). The drop-in enrollment at community colleges fluctuated between 2.4% and 4.4%, in comparison to an average of 13.7% at four-year colleges (Juskiewicz, 2016).

The demand for higher education will remain high, and in turn community colleges will sustain their enrollment numbers, Cohen postulated (2014). Community colleges have historically been more readily accessed by traditional 18-year-olds as they are located closer to home and communities (Cohen, et al., 2014). Robichaud (2016) and Scott (2015) speculated that the decrease in higher education enrollments, including community colleges, is due, in part, to continuing improvements in the national economy (AACCC, 2017; Robichaud, 2016; Scott, 2015). Time, financial incentives outlined by Obama's America's College Promise Act of 2015,

student goals, more online course offerings, and the status of the economy may result in growing enrollments, a situation similar to what was reported during the recession of 2008-2010 (National Bureau of Economic Research).

Brief History of Online Learning in Higher Education

Is it distance education, E-learning, or online learning? Online learning, historically, has a direct connection to distance education (Caruth, 2013). The terms for students using the Internet as a form of learning has encompassed a variety of names (ASHE, 2014). The literature does not provide consistent or common definitions of these terms (Amirault, 2012; Anderson & Simpson, 2012; Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Galyen, 2011). Distance learning in higher education has evolved over the years. Online learning directly stems from distance education. Three generally-accepted generations have been coined as correspondence, broadcast, and computer mediated (Anderson & Simpson, 2012).

One of the first correspondence schools in the United States, established in the late 1800s, was the Society to Encourage Studies at Home (Caruth, 2013). The Society to Encourage Studies at Home was intentionally created to benefit women, who were yearning to learn, but were denied education due to a lack of means or because of their gender, or because circumstances made it difficult or impossible to attend an institution of higher education (Eliot, S., 1897). The founder of the Society, Anna Eliot Ticknor, envisioned a means of educating women—without distracting from the domestic responsibilities that were common for women of the 19th and early 20th century— by providing resources and library materials through the mail.

Correspondence refers to print-based materials presented as a way of communicating course material to students and is conducted through mail. Correspondence courses were