

Supporting Online Students: Strategies for 100% Retention

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The Lesley University Online Technology in Education Masters Degree Program serves K-12 educators from around the world. Generally there is a consistently higher student drop out rate in distance learning courses than traditional classes, usually because of reasons not directly tied to the course content. The retention rate for the Lesley University program is close to 100%. This paper will explore the challenges and solutions that contribute to that statistic. The effect of low class size, administrative resources, academic support, and course design and delivery will be discussed. How can academic concerns and technical difficulties be addressed quickly and effectively? How can faculty and advisors support student learning and promote course participation? In what ways does community building and collaborative projects contribute to high retention rates? What proactive strategies can promote communication and problem solving for both administrative and academic functions? These questions will be addressed and guidelines for effective student support services will be provided.

Student satisfaction is high according to course evaluations and unsolicited testimonials. Student comments, instructor observations, and a survey of graduates also inform the statements below and were used to develop the list of key components to student success.

Students continually comment on three aspects of their online learning experience in the Lesley University Online Technology in Education Program:

1. The course content and its relevance and timeliness
2. The feedback from and interaction with their instructor
3. Their involvement in an online learning community

Anecdotal evidence is mostly very positive, but students also include commentary on weaknesses and make suggestions for improvement. Those comments have contributed to the following observations and suggestions.

How Does an Online Student Access Administrative Resources?

Before students can participate in academic activities, the logistics of applying to the program, registering for a course, and paying the tuition must be addressed. Information on these requirements is on the Web site and also sent by traditional mail. Students can contact the offices of the Registrar, the Bursar, Admissions, and Financial Aid by phone or email if they have questions. If they are near campus they can visit the offices. When these processes do not go smoothly, a student can contact their academic advisor for assistance. It is essential that a student's email address is recorded in a student's records upon initial contact, as the vast majority of communication is conducted via electronic mail.

How Can Academic Concerns Be Addressed Quickly and Effectively?

Each student is assigned an academic advisor who is in contact with the student, by email, from the time they send an initial inquiry to the last stages of the graduation process.

Before a student begins classes, there are often many questions about the logistics of an online course. Students want to know if there are specified class times, how often they need to be online and what kinds of assignments they will be required to complete. These questions are answered with Web page information and personal responses from the student's academic advisor. Once a class begins, the class Web page and the instructor take over as the providers of information about the specific class. The

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course outline and the interaction with the instructor usually provide sufficient explanations of the course content and requirements.

If a student falls behind or has some problem completing the course assignments, the instructor, or the student, contacts the student's academic advisor. Usually, with support from the instructor, the student can catch up. Many graduates say that the personal attention they received when they were having trouble was the primary factor in their staying with the program during a difficult time in their lives.

Occasionally there are personal or professional responsibilities that preclude a student from completing their assignments by the end of the class. A student can take an "Incomplete" and continue to work on the missing assignments during the following semester. The instructor continues to work with the student, evaluating assignments and providing support. In most cases the student completes the work and the instructor turns in the grade to replace the "Incomplete".

What Happens When a Student Has Technical Difficulties?

In an online course a student's Internet connection is vital to their success in the class. If that connection malfunctions for any reason a student has a variety of options. Usually their Internet Service Provider can assist, talking them through the process. If the problem is a computer failure a student usually finds local assistance. Usually a student can use a different connection, at work or at a friend's house, until the connection can be fixed.

Most technical problems do not prevent a student from communicating online. Instructors encourage students to help each other by posting and responding to technical questions in a conference area set aside for technical problems. Students can also email or call the University's technical support office. Problems sending attachments, or reading files, are very common, and can almost always be solved with the help of a more technically experienced student.

How Can Faculty and Advisors Support Student Learning and Promote Course Participation?

Classes are limited to 15 students. Instructors and students agree that the small size is ideal. Class discussions do not become overwhelming and students can get to know one another quite well. Instructors can provide personal feedback to each student. The most common observation that students make as they complete courses and graduate from the program is that they received helpful feedback from their instructors that contributed to their understanding of the content and helped make their assignments more meaningful to their classroom activities.

Interaction in threaded discussion areas is an important part of coursework. Most instructors require both quantity and quality of participation in class discussions. Students are required to post and respond with thoughtful, researched responses. Instructor facilitation is crucial and public interventions as well as private emails are used to encourage and guide student participation.

In What Ways Do Community Building and Collaborative Projects Contribute to High Retention Rates?

Students value the feeling of being part of an online learning community. The building of that community occurs in a variety of ways. Some instructors create ice breaker activities and require students to introduce themselves to their classmates, sometimes with attached photographs. In many classes, students are divided into groups to collaborate on class assignments. In most classes students take part in class discussions.

Another way that students get to know one another is with informal interaction about non-course related activities. Topics covered range from the weather to world events to personal news such as the birth of a grandchild. A class discussion devoted to informal conversations can add to the collegiality in a course and substitute for the coffee break friendships that develop in traditional classes.

What Proactive Strategies Can Promote Communication and Problem Solving for Both Administrative and Academic Functions, Increasing Student Satisfaction and Retention:

1. Make sure that students know about the administrative resources available to them so that registration and admissions procedures are straight forward and any problems can be addressed quickly and effectively.
2. Encourage and support opportunities for students to get to know each other and develop support systems within the class
3. Provide timely and useful feedback about class assignments and discussion contributions
4. Facilitate class discussions and intervene when students need to refocus
5. Monitor discussions and other class activities. If a student is falling behind or appears to be struggling with assignments, contact them personally and offer assistance.

Conclusion

Students who take courses in an online learning format may not be able to see their classmates face to face or benefit from the physical presence of the instructor, but other factors can compensate and help create a positive environment for learning. Feedback from the instructor and interaction with the other students are the two most important factors in contributing to student satisfaction, according to Lesley University online degree students. Timely and relevant content also contribute to a positive learning experience and a high retention rate. Students who feel that they are part of an online community of learners graduate from the program with knowledge and skills as well as feeling that their online learning experience was as good, or better, than a traditional, face to face classroom experience.

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Biographical Sketch

Maureen Brown Yoder is a Professor in the Technology in Education program at Lesley University, Cambridge, MA. She has been the Program Director of the Online Masters Degree Program in Technology in Education since 1997 overseeing program content and course delivery, working with online faculty, and advises students. She teaches courses in multimedia and educational uses of the Internet using a constructivist and project based approach, and has written about and presented extensively on online learning and teaching. She has an Ed.D. in Educational Media and Technology from Boston University.

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Invited Speaker, "Socrates? Web Page? An Email from Piaget? How Important Thinkers Would Use Current Technology: An Instructional Technique" and "Constructivist Teaching Using the Internet: Supporting Theory, Exemplary Examples, and Outstanding Resources for Developing Customized Webquests", 2003 International Conference on Innovation in Higher Education, Kiev, Ukraine, May, 2003.

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