To Drop or Not to Drop?

Understanding Attrition
In Online Education

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Who Cares About Who Drops?

- Institutional concerns
  - Want satisfied students
    » Students will take more online courses
    » Maybe even come to campus

Students equal $
Our Plan for Today

- Review our research method
- Present our findings
- Discuss some ideas for change
- Hear some of your strategies
WTOnline Background

- 1997 – 1 class, 24 students
- Spring 2003 – 97 courses, 4,215 students
- Several complete programs
  - MBA, M.Ed.
  - B.A.A.S degree in Emergency Management Administration
- A number of core classes
Definition of Attrition

- Students who drop the course between 12\textsuperscript{th} class day and mid-term
- Concern is with individual courses
  - WTOPonline has fewer complete programs
  - Literature talks about attrition in programs
Research Method

- Surveyed students who dropped WTOnline courses
  - Fall 2001, Spring 2002
  - 18 percent response rate

- Surveyed students who completed WTOnline courses
  - Same semesters
  - 24 percent response rate
Research Method

- Students who dropped were asked an open-ended question
  - Why did you drop the course?
- Other questions
  - Demographic
  - Survey instrument from Wallace and Clariana (2000)
Why Students Dropped

- Reasons for dropping the course
  - Lengthy explanations
  - Withdrawal reasons (Cookson 1989)
Withdrawal Reasons

- Job-related factors
- Family or domestic pressures
- Lack of time
- Change in career plans
- Course too hard or long
- Loneliness and lack of support

- Dissatisfaction with teaching methods
- Dissatisfaction with the subject matter or course materials
- Slow turn-around time on assignments
Persistance Barriers - Morgan and Tam (1999)

- Situational – change in life
  - “I obtained additional work load in my profession”

- Institutional – difficulties with institution
  - “I was able to take the course at Clarendon College (Pampa Center) for cheaper and have it transferred”
Persistence Barriers (cont.)

- **Dispositional** – student attitude
  - “Because it was going too fast and it was no way to caught up (sic). Too much reading for a person who does not like to read.”

- **Epistemological** – course material/content
  - “I didn’t have the time to devote to this class. I can’t imagine being able to take other classes along with this [subject] course. It is taught like a graduate class instead of freshman [subject].”
Comparison of the Groups

- Questions from Wallace and Clariana (2000)
  - Principal components factor analysis
  - Five factors
  - Most interesting and useful is “Active Engagement”
  - Constructed a scale using questions 1, 4, (reversed), 7, 10 (reversed), 16, 17, 20
Active Engagement Scale

- Reliable scale
  - Cronbach’s alpha = .9024
- Range 5-35
- Compare “dropping students” to completers
- Drop – Mean of 22.34 (N=71)
- Complete – Mean of 26.37 (N=542)
- Completers appear more actively engaged than those who dropped
- Concerned about small N in dropped category
Additional Research

- More semesters of data
  - Increase N among the dropped

- Look at attrition data across courses
  - Do more students drop required courses, or courses with instructors new to online, or courses with lots of students?
Additional Research

- Administer survey to f-2-f courses
  - Reasons for dropping may be exactly the same
  - Even harder to reach students who have dropped

- After implementation of change
  - Does attrition decrease after additional faculty training?
Ideas for Change

Student training
- Done informally right now
  » What is involved in an online course?
  » Am I ready for an online course?
- Hold WTOnline “open houses” to show off courses and provide “screening” tests

Better students are happier and submit higher instructor ratings
Ideas for Change

- Faculty training
  - Some teaching theories
  - How to engage students
  - “Learning activities must be organized to provide maximum advantage for minimum inconvenience.”

- Better instructor equals happier students and higher course evaluation ratings
Ideas for Change

Administrator training
- Learn what is involved in designing and implementing an online course
- Know the difference between a well-designed course and one developed “on-the-fly”
- Challenged by lack of faculty resources
- Understand the role of a skilled instructional designer
Sharing of Strategies and Questions

References
