

Qualitative insights into faculty use of student support services with online students at risk: Implications for student retention

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ABSTRACT

This article provides qualitative insights into the ways that faculty can impact retention rates of online students. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted at random with 16 faculty who teach online courses at a community college in the Northeast. Faculty were asked to describe behaviors of online students that made them feel concerned, conversations with these students, and whether or not they referred these students to the college's student support services. Qualitative analysis using grounded theory methodology revealed that few faculty referred online students that they were concerned about to any of the student support services available at the college. Faculty who did not refer online students to student support services discussed a lack of knowledge about student support services, or did not believe in using these services. College administrators need to educate and encourage online faculty about using the wide variety of student support services that are available to community college students. Under-utilization of student support services can contribute to a low retention rate found in online courses.

Keywords: Online Learning, Community college online instruction, Grounded theory, Online student support services

Introduction

The literature offers compelling reasons to research ways to increase student retention in online classes. Online courses in colleges and universities are growing (Allen & Seaman, 2007; Hignite, 2011; Mole, 2012). However, online classes have lower completion rates compared to face-to-face classes (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Brown, 2011;

Jenkins, 2011; Patterson & McFadden, 2009).

There is some variety reported among college course completion rates. For example, Bart (2012) reports that attrition rates can be as much as 10 to 20 percent higher in online courses than face-to-face classes (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Bart, 2012). On the other hand, Jenkins (2011) reports "...countless studies showing success rates in online courses of only 50 percent-as opposed to 70-to-75 percent for comparable face-to-face classes..." The overall dropout rate for undergraduates in the US is between 40 and 45 percent (Berge and Huang, 2004; Tyler-Smith, 2006).

In addition, Brown (2011) writes about community college students and differences in attrition rates in online classes and face-to-face classes based on studies at Virginia Community Colleges (Jaggars, & Xu, 2010) and Washington State Community and Technical Colleges (Jaggars & Xu, 2011). Brown reports that both studies have two relevant findings. (1) Researchers found that students enrolled in online courses failed and dropped out more often than students enrolled in face-to-face classes. (2) There was an eight percent gap in completion rates between face-to-face classes and online classes. Students enrolled in an online course had an 82-percent chance of completing the course, compared with a 90-percent chance of completing it in face-to-face format.

Attrition in online classes is due to a combination of technical problems, isolation, lack of structure, and time management issues (balancing school, family, and work responsibilities) (Brown, 2011; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005). Most of the literature about improving online student retention focuses on identifying factors that predict success in online classes, and have suggested better screening and training of online students or faculty (Beyrer, 2010;

Brown, 2011; Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004; Harrell, 2008; Herbert, 2006; Heyman, 2012; Jackson, Jones, & Rodriguez, 2010; Jenkins, 2011; Norwin & Wall, 2010; O'Brien & Renner, 2002; Stanford-Bowers, 2008; Yoder, 2005).

Strategies to reduce attrition focusing on students include careful screening, face-to-face orientation, and increased technological support. For example, to improve students' technological skills, training may include practice taking online quizzes, uploading assignments, posting messages on Discussion Board, an introduction to Word, Excel, Powerpoint, the Internet, and providing a student manual (Ali & Leeds, 2009; Beyrer, 2010; Brown, 2011; Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004; Harrell, 2008; Heyman, 2012; Jenkins, 2011; Norwin & Wall, 2010; O'Brien & Renner, 2002; Stanford-Bowers, 2008).

Solutions to attrition focusing on the instructor include better training, and screening for qualities: warm, caring, dedicated, non-judgmental, able to engage students, provide timely responses to students, model correct grammar, spelling and punctuation, provide feedback, flexibility to accept student comments, and able to provide interactive activities that challenge student's understanding (Brown, 2011; Stanford-Bowers, 2008 ; Herbert, 2006; Heyman, 2012; Jackson, Jones, & Rodriguez, 2010; Jones, 2010; Mandernach, Donnelly, & Dailey-Herbert, 2006; O'Brien & Renner, 2002; Yoder, 2005). Other studies have explored the impact of faculty attitudes on student retention in online courses (Brooks, 2003) or in face-to-face classes (Lundquist, Spalding, & Landrum, 2002).

Another body of literature addresses the role of the institution in online student success by carefully selecting courses to be taught online and availability of student support services (Anderson, 2004; Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004;

Heyman, 2012; Keegan, undated; LaPadula, 2003; O'Keefe & Newton, 2011a, 2011b; Willging & Johnson, 2009). Student support services are important for many reasons, including that they can play a role in decreasing attrition (LaPadula, 2003). College counseling centers are reporting a rise in the number of students reporting psychological problems, especially anxiety and depression (Irvine, 2011; Markey, 2012; Petersen, 2011; Sieben, 2011). In addition, large numbers of college students are reporting the reason for withdrawal from college as being mental health issues (Grasgreen, 2012; Markey, 2012).

However, college students are often unaware about the availability of support services at their colleges and stigma plays a role in accessing services (Markey, 2012). Faculty awareness and education are needed (Grasgreen, 2012) because the college professor is in an ideal position to identify students and link students with the services they need to succeed. While the literature is clear about how important it is for colleges to have student support services, it is not clear how about how well faculty make use of such services with online students.

Willging & Johnson (2009) wrote that the decision to persist or drop out of an online program is complex and cannot be described with quantitative variables, such as the demographics used in their own study. Since online student retention is a complex issue, with many variables and many unanswered questions, qualitative research could “put the flesh on the bones” (Patton, 1990, p. 32) by uncovering new information. This study is the first quantitative study that attempts to fill the gap in the literature on online student retention by exploring in depth the types of behaviors that made faculty concerned about online students, how faculty communicate with online students demonstrating behavior problems, and when faculty utilize the variety of student support services that are available at the college with online students demonstrating behavior problems and thought to be "at risk."

The findings to be discussed in this article are part of a larger study that used qualitative methodology, simple random sampling, and symbolic interaction theory (Maris, 1998, Patton, 1990, Reynolds, 1987) to explore ways to improve online student retention at the college. Due to space limitations, this article will focus on the study's findings about the kinds of behaviors made faculty concerned about online students, types of communication between faculty and online students at risk, and the types of situations when faculty could have made referrals of problematic online students to one of the college's student support services.

Definitions

For the purpose of this study, the terms "online courses" and "hybrid" courses are used interchangeably.

Online courses, are defined as at least 80% or more of the course content is delivered online. (Allen & Seaman, 2007).

Hybrid courses are defined as "those in which 30-80% of content is delivered online." (Allen & Seaman, 2007).

Course retention is "the number of students enrolled in each credit course after the course census date and the number of students who successfully complete the course with an A-D grade at the end of the term." (Center for the Study of College Student Retention, undated).

Attrition is when a learner leaves a course for any reason, while *persistence* is the act of continuing toward an educational goal (Martinez, 2003).

Student support services are parts of the institution that are designed to help and assist students, and it includes orientation, recruitment, admissions, advisement, registration, technical support, tutoring, the writing center, telephone support, the library, access to the

bookstore, financial aid counseling, and personal and career counseling (Anderson, 2004; Keegan, undated).

METHOD

Participants

The study population was 48 faculty, currently teaching online courses at a community college located in a large metropolitan area in the Northeast area of the United States in Spring, 2012. Each person was selected randomly from the population list and asked if they would participate. In all, 34 faculty were contacted and 16 agreed to participate, reflecting a 47% participation rate. Qualitative analysis of these 16 cases indicated that sampling was done to the point of "redundancy" (Patton, 1990, p. 186) or "saturation" (Creswell, 1998, p. 56-57), and that interviewing any more cases would probably not have added any additional insights. McCracken (1988, p. 17) says: "...less is more." Qualitative research allows the researcher to obtain the depth or detail of participant responses, while the breadth or the number of people studied is limited (Patton, 1990, p. 165). Similarly, McCracken says qualitative research is not about uncovering how many, and what kinds of, people share a certain characteristic, but to gain access to complex information by working longer, with fewer people. It "...does not survey the terrain...it mines it" (McCracken, p. 17).

All of the participants in the sample were full-time faculty. Seventy-five percent of participants were female. More than 50% of the sample had been teaching online courses for more than two years at this college. More than 61% had five years or more of teaching experience at this college. All online classes were taught by participants in a 16-week semester. No information was collected about participants' ethnicity or academic discipline, as there were not sufficient numbers of faculty from all of these categories participating in teaching online courses at this college. Future studies at other colleges may wish to identify

connections between faculty characteristics and utilization of student support services (See Table 1).

TABLE 1: Demographics of Faculty Participants

Faculty characteristic	Number	Percent
Gender		
male	4	25%
<u>female</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>75%</u>
Total:	16	100%
Age		
less than 30	0	0
31-40	4	25.00%
41-50	4	25.00%
51-60	4	25.00%
61+	3	18.75%
<u>unknown</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>7.25%</u>
Total:	16	100%
Teaching status at this college		
Full-time	16	100%
<u>Part-time</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0%</u>
Total:	16	100%
Number of years of teaching at this college		
less than five years	6	37.50 %
5-10 years	3	18.75%
11-15 years	2	12.50%
<u>16 years or more</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>31.25%</u>
Total:	16	100%
Type of class taught		
hybrid only	3	18.75%
online only	8	50.00%
<u>hybrid and online</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>31.25%</u>
Total:	16	100%
Number of years teaching online at this college		
less than two years	7	43.75%
2-5 years	3	18.75%
<u>6 years or more</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>37.50%</u>
Total:	16	100%

Materials

An e-mail was sent to faculty at their college e-mail addresses, with a subject line that read:

"Please participate in a study about online student retention." The e-mail contained the

research questions, the need for the study, and indicated that the researcher would follow-up with a phone call to schedule an appointment. If a faculty was not interested or was unreachable, another name was drawn. Telephone interviews were selected as the method of choice by the researcher due to the need of qualitative researchers to ask in-depth questions and develop questions in the moment. As per the nature of e-mail interactions and telephone calls, responses were not anonymous. Upon completion of the interviews, personal identifiers were removed and data was coded. Sampling was done to the point of "redundancy" (Patton, 1990, p. 186) or "saturation" (Creswell, 1998, p. 56-57).

Procedure

The interview began with a brief description about the purpose of the study that had already been sent to faculty in an e-mail. No written consent was required as per The Human Subjects Review Board at the XXX Community College which granted ethical approval for the methods and procedures. An informed consent was obtained verbally after the researcher read a consent script in which the participants were told that their name and all identifying information would be removed or disguised, that they were not obligated to participate, that they did not have to answer every question, and they were encouraged to ask questions about the study. Participants expressed a good understanding about the importance of the research and readily gave their verbal consent. Faculty were interviewed using a semi-structured, open-ended interview guide to ask the same questions to each participant, pay close attention to participant responses, while allowing for creation of new questions in the moment (McCracken, 1986, p.12). "Elaboration" or "clarification" probes, such as "please explain," or "give an example of" were used to get in-depth information (Patton, 1990). The interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and concluded with demographic questions. The validity of the questions rests upon the researcher's experiences, a doctorate, prior qualitative

study, publications, a thorough literature review, and feedback from colleagues. The college was not informed which faculty participated.

Analysis was conducted using tools from grounded theory methodology which constructs theory from the data (Strauss, 1987). Open coding (line by line), axial coding (grouping codes), selective coding (to organize the codes and core categories), and memos were utilized to develop core categories and themes (Creswell, 1998; Strauss, 1987). The interviews were typed up by the researcher verbatim as soon as possible after completion. Data analysis began simultaneously “in process” which allowed subtle revisions of the interview guide (Maxwell, 1996). “Saturation” (Creswell, 1998; Strauss, 1987) or “redundancy” (Patton, 1990) was reached at 16 interviews. The following conclusions and recommendations are based upon the themes that emerged from the data.

RESULTS

The participants generated a tremendous amount of information about types of online student behaviors that were of concern to faculty, methods of communication with online students, and faculty utilization of student support services, which have implications for online student retention. Themes will be discussed in this order: (1) behaviors that make faculty concerned about online students, (2) faculty communication with online students identified as having behavior problems, and (3) faculty utilization of student support services with online students having problems.

Reasons that faculty are concerned about online students

Participants pointed out several reasons during the semester when they would become concerned about online students in their courses. Missing Discussion Board postings, missing assignments, poor quality assignments, and low test scores were frequently reported.

While several participants focused on one particular student behavior, most described a combination of missing items that made them concerned.

Discussion Board. Missing the introductory posting during the first week of classes was critical to several participants. Missing two Discussion Boards in a row was a concern to several participants looking for consistency, while missing one or two Discussion Boards during the entire semester was not considered as serious. Poor quality of Discussion Board postings also made several faculty concerned.

Assignments. Faculty were concerned about online students who did not submit an assignment, those having difficulty following written directions, students with poor writing skills, low test scores, and changes in quality of student work. On changes in quality of student work, participants reported being concerned when students suddenly “slack off” (#5). Another participant is concerned about online students:

If I see a *drastic change* during the semester, like someone who regularly submits assignments does not submit assignments, or if *the quality of the work drops off* all of a sudden (#7, italics added).

Combination of behaviors. Many participants described a combination of student behaviors that made them concerned about online students, such as (a) a missing homework assignment and missing Discussion Board, (b) e-mails that bounce back and missing a Discussion Board, (c) e-mails that bounce back and missing a homework, or (d) e-mails that bounce back, being late with assignments, (e) not retaking a quiz when given the opportunity, and (f) a student that has not yet logged in who reports uses a cell phone to do homework, rather than a computer. For example, one participant said:

I am concerned about these things: (1) if students don't e-mail me at the beginning of the semester, (2) if they are not participating in the first meeting (in person that this faculty requires) before classes start, (3) if they are not participating in the first Discussion Board, or (4) if they miss the weekly quiz (#5)

Red flags. Several participants described online student behaviors that were of concern and labeled these behaviors with the term "red flag." Here are two examples:

I, myself, find that the first couple of weeks are very crucial and I make sure students understand the routine of my course that they have to complete assignments from time-to-time. If they are not submitting assignments, it is a *red flag*...(#6, italics added)

Early on, I am concerned if a student is not doing postings in Discussion Board, or if a student has not logged into a course, as the Performance Dashboard tells me. Two missing items are a *red flag* (#4, italics added).

How faculty communicate with online students demonstrating behavior problems?

The study found that faculty responded in a variety ways to online students who were exhibiting behaviors that made them concerned about the student. Themes arose in terms of timeliness of response to the student, and number and types of attempts to reach the student. E-mail and office hours seemed to be preferred. Conflict emerged among participants about contacting online students by telephone or a student's personal e-mail.

Timeliness of response. Faculty were remarkably different in terms of how quickly they noticed and/or attempted to make contact with online students demonstrating concerning behaviors. Several faculty reported that the time of the semester often plays a role in how they respond to students.

Some faculty responded immediately to problematic student behavior:

As soon as test scores come back, if I see a failing grade, I contact them by e-mail. I say, "please see me privately." I'm lenient. I drop one lowest grade. I say, "it's not a problem, if it is a first bad grade. One bad grade can't hurt you. I won't count it.....If they fail exams, I alert them *immediately*....I tell them they are having a problem. I am not going to pass them. I strongly recommend that they withdraw from the class or get help at the college tutoring center. (#2, italics added)

Sometimes participants indicated their actions are based on what point it is during the semester. For example:

Later in the semester, I don't do much. By mid-semester, they have to submit midterm paper. The midterm paper, is 1/4 of the total grade. If not submitted, it will have a bad effect on their grade. If they had an emergency, they'd approach me, and I would grant a deadline extension to this particular person. I don't have much experience with students having problems this late in the semester. (#6)

I usually don't have to discuss dropping the class because I've gotten to them early enough. If they've done the work and then they faded, I attempt to reach those more than others who never did the work. (#4)

At the other extreme of responses, some faculty noticed student behaviors that were of concern, but did not respond right away. One faculty revealed:

If they are missing one (homework), I do *nothing*. If they are missing two, I am concerned. If they are missing three, that's a major red flag (#1, italics added).

Number and types of attempts to reach the student. Faculty were remarkably different in the number and types of methods of outreach to reach an online student having problems. Some faculty used multiple methods, such as the telephone, e-mail, and announcements on the course page, while others only tried once. As one dedicated faculty member described to me, "The first step is an e-mail, the second step is a phone call, and the third step is an academic warning." (#3) Here are a few other faculty reporting using multiple methods of outreach:

I send them an e-mail... "I noticed that you didn't post this week. Remember the class requirements?" I ask them to come and see me in my office during office hours....I wait and see. Most jump back in the next week. I may not say anything again.... I post announcements on the course announcement page (Blackboard) asking students to contact me.... I check with the "registrar" (then names someone working at the e-learning center) who has their (student) personal e-mail addresses who can call the student for me. (#14)

I will e-mail them or go to e-mail the e-learning center adviser and say that "I cannot reach this student. He or she didn't log in for X amount of days.... I will write: "Hi. This is professor _____. I noticed that you didn't log in during the past ____ days. You didn't submit homework # and #. Is everything OK? Please let me know. Please contact me..." (# 15).

Conflict about using the telephone. When discussing the types of methods to reach online students with problematic behaviors, an area of conflict emerged among faculty about

contacting online students by telephone. Almost half of faculty (n=7) revealed that they do not use the telephone as a method of contacting online students with problematic behaviors. One faculty said, "...I call them back, if they call me, but I can't say that I always get to them in 24 hours...." (#11) Reasons given by faculty for not telephoning online students include not having time, preferring documentation from e-mail, not believing in it, not having thought about it, and not wanting to worry students.

I don't call students. I am not a phone person....It is hard to leave a message and get a call back because I don't have time for phone calls. I don't give out my personal cell number since my days as an adjunct....I'm an e-mail person. I like having the e-mail trail. I can prove the discussion and what it was. I save them to (some other personal file). It is my backup. I save them. (#8)

My personality about retention is the same in class as it is online. I am not someone who calls students. I'm about the course content. Let's talk about content. I am a college professor. I want to engage you. If I can make it interesting and personalize the content to individual students and draw them in, I will be successful in retaining students. I want to engage them with the content, not by calling them. (#7)

No. I never call them. I don't know why. Maybe because I never had an online class and if a professor would call me, I think I'd panic. I never thought about calling them. I might actually try calling them next semester. I guess I thought along the lines of a student and if a professor called, it would be like going to the principal's office and thinking what did I do? I think that when my department chair (name) calls me, even though I didn't do anything wrong. (#12)

Using e-mail. Most faculty prefer to contact the online students that they are concerned about through e-mail. However, a conflict arose regarding whether or not to contact students through their personal e-mail addresses. Many faculty will only contact the student through the student's college e-mail address that is in Blackboard. To get a student's personal e-mail address, faculty must request it from the student at the start of the semester or from the college e-learning center. Several faculty reported the importance of asking for students personal e-mail addresses at the start of the semester because not all students check their college e-mail regularly.

Faculty were asked to discuss a typical example of an e-mail written to an online student who is demonstrating problematic behaviors. Their responses can be divided into two different types of e-mails. Some e-mails only lectured at students about consequences of behavior, while some e-mails also gave students options, such as how to contact the professor to discuss the situation. Here are some samples of the various types of e-mails that participants discussed with me:

E-mails with consequences only: If you don't participate, you'll be in trouble. (#5)

I've noticed that you haven't begun your assignments. The deadline is... Please allow yourself enough time to take the quiz and to retake it. After I say this 2-3 times, I don't have to do it again. They get it. They get how my class works. (#9)

Samples of e-mail with consequences as well as options.

Dear Dr. Mr./Mrs. (I always address them formally.) I am concerned about your performance. You have not logged in. You have missed Discussion Board. You have missed X work. If you continue like this, you will do badly. Is something going on? Please come and see me or call me. (#5)

You are at risk of failing the class. It is helpful to meet with the professor.....you are getting closer to not passing the course. Please come in and chat with me. (#8)

Contacting students through the Blackboard course announcements page. Making announcements on the Blackboard course page is another way that many faculty deal with problematic student behaviors, especially when student e-mails is not working. Almost half of all faculty members reported having made announcements on Blackboard asking students to contact them and/or submit assignments, and here a few examples:

Thank you to those of you who turned in the midterm. The rest of you, please get it in ASAP or face consequences (#5)

They may not be checking their e-mails, but they are checking Blackboard. I will put an announcement on Blackboard saying, the following students have not activated their college e-mail. (#11)

If e-mail bounces, I make a class announcement on the course announcements page or post as a Discussion Board page that some of you have not logged in. (#12)

Faculty utilization of student support services

Faculty were asked about whether or not they made referrals of online students demonstrating behavior problems to the student support services available at the college. The types of available student support services at this college include the e-learning center, counseling center, tutoring center, career services office, one-stop center (handles government benefits), accessibility office (for students with disabilities), LGBTQ (for gay/lesbian issues), veteran's services, women's center, and the writing center.

While faculty identified many problematic examples of online student behavior in their classes, only a few faculty revealed that they referred students to student support services at the college. Of the faculty who made referrals to student support services, most reported having referred students to the e-learning center for technical assistance. Only a few faculty reported referring students to the counseling center, writing center, and tutoring center. Not one faculty member reported having referred online students to any of the other student support services mentioned above.

E-learning center. Faculty who made referrals made to the e-learning center aimed to help students with "technical" issues with Blackboard or e-mail, to outreach to students who are not responding to e-mails, and to outreach students not participating in Discussion Board.

For example, faculty said:

The first week Discussion Board introductions are very important. If someone didn't introduce themselves, either they didn't log in or something happened. I contact the e-learning center telling them the name of students who did not post and (name of staff) follows up to see that they log in.... (# 6)

So I will e-mail them or go to e-mail the e-learning center adviser and say that "I cannot reach this student." He or she didn't log in for X amount of days....(# 15)

Other student support services. Several faculty members made referrals to the counseling center, writing center, and tutoring center. For example, two faculty said:

If it is sickness or a legal problem, and if they identify the issue to me that they are having, then I send them to the counselor. (#9)

If I see problems with writing skills, I make comments on their homework and tell them to go to the writing center. If I feel that they didn't understand the topic, I would say you might need tutoring. (# 6).

Reasons for not referring online students to student support services. More than half of the faculty, reported that they did not refer online students with behavior problems to any of the student support services provided by the college. The reasons given by faculty for not making referrals of online students at risk to student support services, arranged in the order from most commonly reported to least commonly reported were: lack of knowledge about the types of student support services offered at the college, a lack of thought about the need to make referrals, beliefs that college students should be responsible, beliefs against "hand-holding" in college, lack of time to make referrals, and that making referrals is not part of the role of college professor. Most of faculty in this study who did not make referrals reported a lack of knowledge about student support services, and several faculty provided more than one reason for not making referrals of online students at risk to student support services.

Lack of knowledge. Most of the faculty who did not make referrals to student support services reported that they did not know about the variety of student support services available at the college. "I didn't know...." was the most common reason given by faculty for not referring online students to these services. For example, one faculty said: "I didn't know they (e-learning center) could call students for you." (# 8)

Several faculty said that they could learn more about student support services when those college offices outreach faculty about what they can do:

I didn't know they (e-learning center) had student advisers that can reach out. The advisors didn't reach me and offer their help....The E-learning center should contact instructors....to offer support, check with us to see if we need help teaching our course, and inform us of available resources. (#10)

Several faculty who reported a lack of knowledge about student support services seemed grateful to learn about the wide variety of these services available at the college from the researcher, and they gave enthusiastic responses about using student support services with their online students in a future semester.

Unfortunately, I can't say that I do anything else (other than to e-mail students who are having problems.)No, I don't use the e-learning center to call students. *I forgot they do that. That's a good resource!* You definitely changed my view! (#11, italics added)

No, I haven't used the e-learning center. *I didn't know* it's an action they can do (to give out student's personal e-mail). *I didn't know* that we had that as an option. I assumed students have to have college e-mail to be part of the Blackboard...*That's awesome! I'll use them (e-learning center) come the Fall....* I didn't know the e-learning center could help students with time management... (#12, italics added)

Never gave it any thought. Several faculty reported that they had not thought of referring students with whom they lost contact with, or students not doing their work, to student support services. As one faculty reported: "If a student doesn't respond to e-mail or phone, I ignore them." (#2) Likewise, another faculty said: "I see students drop out of my class.... I don't think about it anymore." (#1)

College students need to be responsible. Several faculty reported that they did not see making referrals to student support services as one of the roles of the college professor, and that college students should "take responsibility" for themselves. For example, a faculty member said: "I don't ask the e-learning center for help; I put the *responsibility* on the student." (#9, italics added) Another faculty said: "You're a college student. It's your *responsibility*." (#8, italics added) Similarly, another faculty said:

At some point, they (students) have to accept *responsibility*. I reach out to the

student by e-mail, and then I say I did what I can do. When they go to four year schools, it won't be like this. You will have to prepare to work independently. (#12, italics added)

I will not hold your hand in college. Another theme was that several faculty reported that they did not believe in referring college students to student support services.

XXX Community College students are babied and nurtured too much, so they can't think on their own.....I don't baby them. This is college. *I won't hold their hand...*They have to work themselves...We are doing too much for them. I'm not coming down to their level. I'm not trying to save the world. (#2, italics added)

I won't hold their hand. After they signed on for an online class, they had to go to do the e-learning questionnaire about their expectations regarding use of electronics, like computer technology. (#8, italics added)

I don't have the time to make referrals. Several faculty reported being "too busy" as another reason for not making referrals of online students having problems to the student support services at the college.

If they (students) need to contact me, then they should contact me. I'm concerned with the students engaging with the course. It is takes too much *time* to hunt down students 'missing in action.' (#7, italics added)

I cannot give them personalized attention. I have over 100 students. I write a comment on the writing piece. I give advice. If they are confused, then please contact me during my office hours..... I can't spend *hours* on this... (#10, italics added)

Making referrals is outside of my role as a college professor. Another theme revealed that faculty thought making referrals was not part of the role of a college professor. For example, a faculty member said: "...I would say (to the student), 'hey' you are missing this and that, and feel like I am becoming a *policeman*, which is something that I really don't want to do." (#2, italics added)

Discussion

This study provides evidence that faculty lack of knowledge and attitudes towards student support services negatively impacted utilization of student support services with online students, which ultimately impacts online student retention at this college. Similar to the

findings of Lundquist, Spalding, and Landrum (2002) about the role of faculty attitudes in student retention in the face-to-face teaching environment, the present study demonstrates that faculty attitudes also play an important role in online student retention.

Faculty that participated in this study described behaviors and combinations of behaviors that made them concerned about the online students, and how they responded to these students. Faculty were concerned about online students who did not submit homework, students who missed Discussion Boards, students who had difficulty following written directions, or students who had low test scores. The types of behaviors reported in this study were consistent with the literature on using student data from the course management system (Blackboard) to identify students at risk by looking at log-in frequency, and last log-in date, frequency of accessing course materials, use of Discussion Board (number of messages posted, read, responded to, quality of, word count, timeliness, use of English, missing postings during the first week), and missing assignments (Hung & Zhang, 2008; Kolowich, 2009; Morris, Finnegan, & Wu, 2005; Nickles, 2006; Parker, 2009; O'Brien & Renner, 2002). Training in "early warning" signs should be part of a training curriculum for online faculty (Parker, 2009).

Another theme that arose among the faculty responses was a conflict about whether or not the telephone was an appropriate way for faculty to contact online students. Faculty need to know that the literature supports a view that faculty should outreach online students who are demonstrating problematic behaviors by phone, e-mail, or Discussion Board, as well as contacting the student's advisor (Achillies, et al., 2011; Hayek, 2012; Kolowich, 2009; Jackson, Jones, & Rodriguez, 2010; Lorenzetti, 2008; Udas, 2011). Lorenzetti (2008, p. 2) wrote "...not to let a missed assignment pass without contacting the student...initial contact

might involve e-mailing the student...a call to an outside phone number, or even a text message." "If the instructor does not receive an immediate (one or two day) response to the emails sent to the student, the instructor should phone the student." (Achilles, et al., 2011, p.

4) Although Achilles is writing from a for-profit online organization, the need for caring to be demonstrated to students is applicable to students at a public university.

Perhaps, the most important finding of the study was that despite 100% of the participants in the sample being full-time faculty who should have familiarity with on campus services, most did not refer online students to student support services at the college, due to lack of knowledge about these services or not believing in the appropriateness of these services, which may play a role in the high attrition rate found in online classes (Bart, 2012; Brown, 2011; Jenkins, 2011). This finding is consistent with other studies that pointed out the need for faculty awareness about student support services due to large numbers of college students reporting a lack of knowledge about availability of mental health services or disability services, and how to access these services (Grasagreen, 2012; LaPadula, 2003; Markey, 2012). Moreover, LaPadula (2003) study of online students indicated that student support services should be available online for online students.

To change the negative attitudes expressed by the faculty towards using student support services, the administrators should inform online faculty that the literature supports "reaching out" to online students by phone or e-mail or face-to-face-meetings to answer questions, to encourage students to take tutoring and other support services, as well as involving a student's advisor (Achilles, et al., 2011; Ali & Leeds, 2009; Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Hayek, 2012; Kolowich, 2009; Jackson, Jones, & Rodriguez, 2010; Lorenzetti, 2008; Udas, 2011). Tippens (2012) points out the importance of online students getting to know a

"caring professor" through personal contact and dialogues, not just online lectures. Kaiser (2012) points out the importance of writing e-mails to students demonstrate an instructor's caring and willingness to help them to succeed, but that students must work hard and be responsible. Moreover, Jones (2010) found that academic caring is just as important in an online course as it is in a face-to-face course, for both women and men, and was the most important predictor of instructor rating in both online and face-to-face classes.

While this study was able to identify faculty attitudes and lack of knowledge about student support services that ultimately impacts student retention at the college, it did not obtain as much information about the interaction between faculty and students in the online environment when students are demonstrating behavior problems as was hoped for; faculty who participated in the study made few referrals to student support services and were unable to recall any success stories of students referred to student support services. Given the low utilization of student support services with online students exhibiting problematic behaviors that was reported by these faculty, it is possible that faculty not participating in the study are even less likely to utilize student support services with online students exhibiting problematic behaviors. Future studies could shed more light on the ways student support services could be utilized with online students by using purposive sampling that selects faculty with the best online retention rates and/or most online teaching experience, as well as collecting more information about faculty characteristics to see if that relates to their utilization of student support services.

The study's main finding that most faculty did not utilize the student support services that are available at the community college with online students demonstrating behavior problems, may play a role in attrition and retention rates found in online classes (Bart, 2012; Brown,

2011; Jenkins, 2011; LaPadula, 2003). The qualitative nature of this study allowed the discovery of this information and deep explanations for the reasons that faculty do not use student support services with online students. The findings of this study support prior researchers who have noted the need to continue to study retention in online classes and to improve student support services with online students (Anderson, 2004; Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004; Willging & Johnson, 2009). Thus, this study, “put the flesh on the bones” (Patton, 1990, p. 32) and contributed new information to the literature about faculty use of student support services and the implications for online student retention.

Although the study used random sampling, the sample size was small and had only a 47% participation rate, so generalization to other colleges is not possible. However, research generated by random samples can reduce a selection bias that only the best or worst of cases are being selected. Therefore, it is recommended that other institutions of higher education study their own online faculty to see the extent to which they utilize student support services with online students at risk. In addition, it is recommended that other colleges address online student retention by reviewing and/or updating faculty handbooks to make faculty aware about student support services available for helping online students demonstrating behaviors that put them at risk.

Recommendations

The results presented in this article suggest that student retention in online classes can be increased by the following strategies:

- (1) Improving the training for new online faculty. The e-learning training contains of online pedagogy and Blackboard technology, but it should also contain a unit on prevention of attrition in online classes. Online faculty need to be informed about the literature on the high rates of attrition found in online classes. Training needs to include educating faculty

about identifying possible student behavior symptoms that indicate that an online student might be at risk, such as missing items and last log-in date. Training should include informing faculty about the wide variety of student support services available at the community college, and how to make referrals. For example, faculty who are busy could refer students to the e-learning center counselor who can then assess the student's situation and direct the student to the services he/she might need.

(2) An online referral form is needed to refer online and/or any students for counseling services. Presently, there is a handwritten form that needs to be filled out and brought in person to the secretary at the college's counseling center, put into a folder and sent in the inter-office mail, or mailed using regular U.S. Postal Service mail. The current referral process is very time consuming considering that the college has several locations and some faculty, who teach more than one online course or only online, are not on campus every day. An online form would be immediate and bring faster results. Time is important when outreaching students thought to be at risk.

(3) A revised faculty handbook for new faculty. The college needs to list, describe, and provide contacts for all of the student support services available at the community college in the handbook. By listing all of the student support services, it would be informative as well as to indicate that the community college encourages and supports faculty actions to refer students to student support services. Student support services are mentioned during the orientation, but they need to be part of the handbook. Therefore, it will make it clear to faculty that referring students to student support services at the college is part of their role as a community college professor.

(4) E-learning department can outreach online faculty. The e-learning department should provide faculty with online student contact information (personal e-mail and cell phone numbers) to show administrative support for faculty outreaching students through a

variety of methods. In addition, the e-learning department can contact faculty several times a semester asking faculty to make referrals of online students of students thought to be having problems to the e-learning center counselor, who can outreach the student by phone and e-mail. This would encourage faculty to make referrals of students thought to be at risk. Moreover, it will make it clear to faculty that referring students to student support services at the college is part of their role as a community college professor.

These preventative strategies are based on the results presented in this article.

Conclusion

In-depth interviews with 16 faculty teaching online courses in a community college provided qualitative insights into the key role that faculty play in the online student retention issue. Faculty are in a central position to identify online students at risk and make decisions about whether to make referrals to student support services. The main finding of the study that most faculty who participated in the study did not refer online students to student support services available at the college is something that can be changed through a new prevention unit for the e-learning training, an online referral form for student support services, a revised faculty handbook, and more communication between the e-learning center and online faculty. Thus, this study adds additional insights to the complexity of the online student retention problem.

In speaking with the researcher, some of the faculty seemed to be happy to learn about the types of student support services available at the college, and they may more open to using student support services with online students in the future. As a faculty member pointed out, "...improving retention requires a lot of effort on behalf of administration, the registrar, and the e-learning center..." (# 15). Faculty need to know that their attitudes towards utilizing

student support services can impact online student retention. If only a few more students can be assisted, it is worth the time and effort. Administrators need to know that providing information to faculty about student support services can make a positive difference in online student retention.

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