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What factors contribute to online student success? (Part 2) [1]

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Last month I began outlining factors which contribute to online student success. I highlighted a few that I've seen over and over both through literature and in my own experiences as an instructional designer, doctoral student, and online instructor. To recap my first post on "What factors contribute to online student success?", good course design and facilitation, feeling a part of a community, and effective feedback loops are all factors which contribute to student engagement, motivation, and ultimately success online.

Online student success an important topic to understand, and to keep on exploring, due to the increase in online enrollments across the country. The BABSON Survey Research Group reports that during the past four years, overall enrollment in higher education has steadily declined, while online enrollment has continued a steady increase. Of all students in higher education 31.6% are taking at least one online class and this figure is expected to rise (Seaman, Allen & Seaman, 2018).

Given this continuous increase in online enrollment, we need to adjust our traditional assumptions of student experiences in higher education and consider the unique factors that get online students to the finish line successfully. Although many factors are indeed the same for both face-to-face and online student success, some of these same factors are intensified and more essential when learning online. For example, a student's ability to limit distractions, manage study time appropriately, and persist amongst challenges are essential online learning skills.

Ability to limit distractions

In a nutshell, the ability to limit peripheral distractions and persist in the face of obstacles is referred to as effort regulation. You can imagine how essential it is to hone this ability in the online learning environment, which often lacks typical classroom structure and is compounded by online distractions at our fingertips. The good news is that there are a number of strategies which can help distracted students : dedicating a time and place for coursework, turning off

social media (or other devices completely), or studying with an accountability group (Naidu, 2017; Winters, Greene, & Costich, 2008).

Appropriate time management

The flexibility and asynchronous nature of an online course also leads to a greater need for time management in order to stay on task and succeed. In fact, online learners must learn to manage study time and be self-directed at an above average level in order to be successful (Kauffman, 2015) I have found in my own interaction with students that one simple strategy of assigning a date and time a few days a week to an online course helps in managing time and workload, and the course then maintains a consistent placeholder on the students' calendar (similar to a face-to-face course).

Persistence

Online courses continue to see a lower completion rate than traditional face-to-face courses, so it's important to understand what causes students to persist amidst the (sometimes lonely) challenges of online courses or programs (Murphy & Stewart, 2017). A number of characteristics of online courses or programs have been linked to increased student persistence throughout an online program. The relevancy of a program to a student's professional goals, learning outcomes which tie directly to job market skills or competencies, superior technology support, and frequent interactions with instructors and peers (thus building a community of learners) all play positive roles in promoting student persistence online (Yang, Baldwin, & Snelson, 2017).

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