

Solutions to Factors that Contribute to Dropout Rate in Online Classes:

A Faculty Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

The goal of schools whether public, private, charter, or magnet is to graduate students with the aptitudes to survive the demands of modern life, workforce, and education. School's goal is to foster students the idea to attend college and obtain a degree. According to The Washington Post (2012), the population with the highest high school completion rate is the Asian with 91.8%, Whites 82%, Hispanics with 65.9 compared to a 63.5% to blacks. The trends in high school graduates completion rates demonstrate a change and from that positive change that many students enroll in college. The National Science Foundation (2012) reports that there was an increase in college enrollment from 14.5 million students in 1994 to 20.7 million students in 2009, and The National Science Foundation predicts more growth in the next 10 years. The National Center for Education Statistics, NCES, (2011), estimates that there will be an increase of 16% in undergraduate enrollment during the years 2008 to 2019. The United States Census Bureau forecast that by the year 2050 the number of students ages 20-24 will increase from 21.8 million in 2010 to 28.2 and that entering freshmen enrollment will increase 13% from 2008 to 2019. NCES (2011) suggest that there will be more students from minority groups attending college and the minority group with the highest number of students attending college will be Hispanic and an insignificant increase of Hispanic enrollment from 14% to 15%; also, it is anticipated a decline in White attendance rate 63% in the year 2008 to 58% in the year 2019. Fry and Lopez (2012) from The Pew Hispanic Center created a graph showing how the Hispanic enrollment rate has increased to a rough 3% in 1972 to 16.5% in 2009. Richard Fry in a Pew Hispanic Center report claims that the Hispanic enrollment rate in higher education grew an exponential 24% in from 2008 to 2010. Despite the increase that Fry and Lopez (2012) report, the number of Hispanics that drop out of college and do not finish a degree is as high as the numbers that enroll. The Hispanics (Latinos) education is known for its low graduation and high dropout rates (Kewal Ramani, Gilberston, and Provasnik, 2007). The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (2010) reports that Hispanic low graduation rate is a threat to the nation's goal to retain and graduate students. The foundation also claims that education after college is needed to keep the economy strong and families economically stable. Although this problem is not new, the government and education authorities are now paying close attention to this phenomenon.

Purpose of the Study

This study is important because it will shed light on reasons why Hispanic students drop out of college and what some possible solutions are. The study is important not only for the South Texas institution where the study will be conducted, but also to other colleges and universities for the common factors that contribute to low Hispanic graduation rate (Lopez, 2009).

Theoretical Framework

According to Tinto (1975), the reasons students leave higher education are social and academic. Applying this theory to the present study will present the opportunity to identify the factors that contribute to college students drop out rate at a Hispanic serving Institution in south Texas. Even though extensive research on the topic of higher education dropouts, much remained unknown during the early 70's because the literature failed to review the characteristics of college dropouts (Tinto, 1975). Also, Tinto (1975) noted that since previous literature on the

topic failed to adequately categorize and define the problem, research findings of the time were misleading and contradictory. "Failure to distinguish academic failure from voluntary withdrawal, for instance, has frequently led to seemingly contradictory findings that indicate ability to be inversely related to dropout, unrelated to dropout, and directly related to dropout" (Tinto, 1975). Whether in modern times or in the early stages of college dropout studies, not having a clear understanding of the problem potentially impacts policy in higher education because leaders will not be able to identify the student population in need of assistance (1975).

Tinto (1975) Theoretical Model of Dropout Behavior based on Durkheim's theory of suicide. Durkheim (1961) claims that suicide occurs when people feel they are not fully part of the fabric of society and that the possibility of suicide to occur is when the individual is missing insufficient moral integration and insufficient collective affiliation. Tinto's (1975) Theoretical Model of Dropout Behavior claims that when people see college as a social system that has its own values and structures, people can treat the problem of dropout rate as a social system and treated similar to suicide. Tinto (1975) suggests that "one can reasonably expect, then that social conditions affecting dropout from the social system of the college conditions affecting dropout from the social system of the college would resemble those resulting in suicide in the wider society." Tinto (1975) states that in institutions of higher education are composed of social and academic systems and that it is essential to know the difference between normative and structural integration of the institution from the social domain of the college. Tinto (1975) reports that knowing the difference between academic and social domains of a college means that an individual can achieve the integration of one area without integrating the other.

Tinto (1975) states that a student's decisions to leave college are not affected by events that take place off campus and those often social systems outside campus can affect integration with a more limited social and academic college system. Moreover, the theory suggested by Tinto (1975) takes into consideration the external forces that affect an individual's decision to stay or leave college.

Tinto (1975) claims that the application of Durkheim's suicide theory to the problem of dropout rate does not give in a possible theory or cause that helps understand how students adopt different forms of dropout behavior. Instead, according to Tinto (1975), the suicide theory serves as a model that provides specific conditions in which the different forms of college dropout occur. Moreover, Tinto (1975) makes the statement that if a person wants to create a theoretical model to explain college dropout long term process of actions that may have lead different individuals to different forms of persistence and dropout behavior, "one must build into the model sets of individual characteristics and dispositions relevant to educational persistence." Tinto (1975) claims that in order to do this, it is recommended that one must not only include student characteristics such as high school experiences, individual attritional and motivational attributes, social status, community residence, sex, race, ability, and ethnicity. In a few words, Tinto's (1975) model of dropout "argues that the process of dropout from college can be viewed as a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college during which a person's experiences in those systems (as measured by his normative and structural integration) continually modify his goal and institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or to varying forms of dropout." Tinto (1975) claims that students enter colleges and universities with different attributes like gender, ability, and race,

pre-higher education experience, and what Tinto (1975) labels as social and academic attainments. Tinto (1975) expresses the importance of student's background characteristics because they manipulate the commitment and educational expectations that students bring with them to higher education. "It is these goals and institutional commitments that are both important predictors of and reflections of the person's experiences, his disappointments and satisfactions, in that collegiate environment" (Tinto, 1975).

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

For this study qualitative study on the factors that contribute to dropout rate in online classes, this researcher interviewed three full time community college instructors that teach both face-to-face and online classes in a south Texas college. The online teaching experience of the participants ranges from one to four years. The naturalist approach used in this study aims to explore the factors that contribute to high dropout rate from the instructor perspective.

Research Design

Erlandson (1993) noted that naturalistic inquiry is connected to the context of the interview. "This stems from its fundamental assumption that all the subjects of such inquiry are bound together by a complex web of unique interrelationship results in the mutual simultaneous shaping described earlier" (p.16). Although naturalist studies do not fully explain a context, a good structured naturalistic study can provide a close explanation (Erlandson, 1993).

The design for this research is a case study. Baxter and Jack (2008) stated that "Qualitative case study methodology provides tools for researchers to study complex phenomena within their contexts. When the approach is applied correctly, it becomes a valuable method..." (p.544). Similarly, Neale *et al.*(2006) claims that "The case study gives the story behind the result by capturing what happened to bring it about, and can be a good opportunity to highlight a project's success, or to bring attention to a particular challenge or difficulty in a project" (p.3).

Participants and Site Selection

A community college in the south Texas border was selected because it is a Hispanic serving institution that faces a high dropout rate in online courses. The participants for the study included three full time college instructors. Each of the instructors have different experience teaching online classes ranging from one to four years teaching online. The first informant teaches education courses, the second developmental and academic English courses, and the third developmental Reading courses. The ethnicity of the participants comprised two Mexican-American females and one Middle Eastern female. Participants age ranged from 29 to 43 years of age.

Description of Participants.

Ms. Talula Banks. Ms. Talula Banks is an ABD from an online university in the Midwest and is scheduled to defend her dissertation this may for a Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction. Ms. Banks has been employed for the community college in the South Texas border for three years and has been imparting teacher preparation courses. She has two years of experience teaching online education courses.

Dr. Rodriguez. Dr. Maria Rodriguez has a PhD in Education with an emphasis in second language teaching. She has no prior experience teaching in the public school system. Dr. Rodriguez has a total of five years of teaching experience, four of those five years teaching online and face-to-face academic and developmental English courses.

Ms. Penelope Ann Hersey. Ms. Penelope Ann Hersey has a Master of Education with a concentration in Reading. She taught elementary for six years and has been teaching developmental Reading for six years. Ms. Hersey has one year of experience teaching online developmental teaching classes.

Data Collection

The instrumentation included semi-structured interviews. The interview consisted of 18 questions that aimed to explore the factors that contribute to high dropout rate in online classes. The interview's goal was to verify if ethnicity, social economic status, lack of academic preparation form part of the student, and lack of access to technology are factors that contribute to high dropout rate at a community college in the south Texas border. Interviewees signed a consent form prior to the beginning of the interview; interviews were recorded as soon as the consent form was signed.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and later analyzed, categorized, and codified to link themes and write up findings following the recommendations of Lincoln and Guba (1985). "...previously unitized data are organized into categories that provide descriptive or inferential information about the context or setting from which the units were derived" (p. 203).

Trustworthiness and Credibility of Study

In every qualitative study, it is essential to have trustworthiness. That is, that if the study demonstrate the value of the investigation. Erlandson et al. (1993) suggest that in order for a study to have trustworthiness, a qualitative study must be credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable, meaning that the study was on target and not bias. As a preventive way to avoid bias, the study was conducted on campus at each participant's faculty office as a measure to release anxiety and built trust. To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend to conduct a member check; that is, to go back to the interviewed to review the content of the interview. "The task is to obtain confirmation that the report has captured the data as constructed by the informants, or to correct, amend, or extend it, that is, to establish the credibility of the case" (p.236). Similarly, Jackson *et al.* (2007) illustrated that "Good qualitative research applies standards of trustworthiness such as member-checking, stepwise replication, and audit trails, each of which seeks to verify the substance of what participants said so that interpretations are not subjective iterations of the researcher's own belief system" (p.26). After member check was conducted, this researcher triangulated the themes and the results will be explained in the next chapter.

FINDINGS

Preliminary data in the study revealed five major themes that could contribute to solutions for high dropout rates among students of the faculty interviewed in this study. Themes of the conversations with faculty revealed the need for: 1. faculty professional development in online instruction, 2. enhanced campus support for online learning, 3. intensive curriculum

development and revision, 4. high school experiences for students that would bridge transition to online postsecondary work, and, 5. technology access both remote and as an improved student skill set.

Faculty Professional Development

The three faculty members shared their concern for the need for additional and ongoing professional development to support themselves and other faculty. For example, Dr. Rodriguez noted that in her experience that although she had been required to be certified to teach online by taking two certification courses from the college distance learning department, she said she wasn't sure all faculty have had that training from conversations she has had with them. Ms. Hershey said she too had that required training, but that since the Blackboard system has been upgraded, she attended the updated training but that the instructors who taught the training were not all adept at the upgrades themselves. Dr. Rodriguez shared that consistency is needed and professional development could provide that so that there would be clear policies and guidelines and a well-designed online program with course shell templates so that there would be consistency that would support student success.

Enhanced Support for Online Learning

Faculty whom were interviewed shared that both they and students need enhanced support from the campus distance-learning department. Ms. Hershey said that especially when she is wrestling with a technology issue, it is very frustrating when the distance learning department doesn't always respond promptly, so her strategy has been to persevere "because I had a pressing issue for me and my students, so I just persevered until I got an answer and figured out what I wanted to do." She noted,

For the week or so I did not get the answer I wanted, my students had to submit I had to figure out a different way for my students to submit their answers via email rather than having the shell open or the assignment or test that I had already created you know just copy over. So I think it directly affects our students when an issue is not addressed when you need it addressed.

Concern was also expressed regarding support of students and how that need for enhanced support could also support student success and improved student retention and decreased dropout rates.

Intensive Curriculum Development and Revision

Faculty shared their input regarding the need for intensive curriculum development and revision of courses that are provided online. For example, Ms. Banks shared her insight, saying

Well, think about it. Hmmmmmm. Our students have been sitting in a classroom for the last thirteen years face-to-face with a teacher. All of a sudden the class that they need it is only available online and it is going to be very, very difficult, so (as a student) I would rather much rather dropout than be lost and afraid that I am going to fail my class.

Dr. Rodriguez said

Sometimes the lack of instructor's involvement is the problem. The instructor is not there at all. You know some instructors just have online quizzes and that is it for their classes. There are no discussions. There is no material to read. They will tell students that the first quiz covers chapters 1 and 2 in the book and students should go read it in the textbook and then you take the quizzes. I know some instructors.

Dr. Rodriguez followed up saying that while she knows some instructors who use this approach, she believes that with professional development, instructors would be willing to improve but they just don't know how to teach online.

High School Bridge Experiences for Students Needed

Faculty interviewed in this study felt that students were struggling in college due to a lack of academic preparation, time management, and study skills both as factors that affect face-to-face traditional classes but elevate the challenges in an online learning environment. Ms. Hershey noted that

In face to face you can see the expression of a lost student. You cannot see that face of lack of understanding through the Internet unless the student actually self identifies and tell you he is lost in the course.

All faculty interviewed expressed concerns that these basic academic skills require the need for more honing to be successful in online coursework. For example, Ms. Talula Banks said,

I believe that it is their lack of self-awareness, time management and basic skills, basic skills, and what do we do about it? How do we convey this message to high schools that preparing students to succeed in online learning environments is another tool students' need in addition to all of the other skills many of which they are lacking?

She added that as instructors, we need to address these students needs up front and not wait until they fail a semester.

Improved Technology Access

Improved technology access for the population of students this south Texas institution serves. For example, Ms. Hershey noted

If students do not have the most updated technology their online classes will suffer. If they don't have, we are talking software. If they don't have the latest hardware they also suffer. But then, the student can have the newest computer with the newest software, but if they don't have the access to the proper internet settings if the student lives in a remote rural place such as those served by our college where internet connections are not available, then than is also going to be a factor.

Ms. Banks said,

Even though technology has been around for a long time, uhh in our area we are still not technology ready and that is one of our biggest obstacles that you don't have enough experts and you don't have students coming out of school ready to be online successful. So one of our biggest obstacles is not truly understanding technology and we are not keeping up with all the constant changes occurring in our technology systems and we just keep it seems getting farther and farther behind.

The perception of faculty was that if some of the challenges such as technology were addressed, students could be more successful and some of these are factors that the institution itself could work to resolve.

DISCUSSION

Tinto's (1975) model of dropout theory is considered integral to the field. Tinto's (1975) model of dropout

argues that the process of dropout from college can be viewed as a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college during which a person's experiences in those systems (as measured by his normative and structural integration) continually modify his goal and institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or to varying forms of dropout.

For the faculty teaching online that were interviewed in this study, various needs were cited that were contributing to the dropout rate including factors that the institution itself could work to resolve. The proliferation of data provided by the faculty informants in this study centered on technology concerns that in 2013 have a substantial impact on the academic and social systems Tinto elaborated on in 1975.

Interestingly, while academic and social systems (particularly as related to social media) are very different concerns in this decade, some factors shared by faculty interviewed in this study reinforced Tinto's (1975) words that expressed the importance of student's background characteristics because they manipulate the commitment and educational expectations that students bring with them to higher education. "It is these goals and institutional commitments that are both important predictors of and reflections of the person's experiences, his disappointments and satisfactions, in that collegiate environment" (Tinto, 1975).

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Preliminary data in this study on faculty perspective regarding factors that contribute to dropout rate in online classes provides significant data to the field. There is a gap in research on the topic, and it is important to study faculty perspectives on the factors that contribute to high dropout rate in online classes. Faculty input in the development in this topic provides a different point of view and provides the opportunity to further explore the topic.

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