

Challenges Online Students Face, and how their Instructors Can Help Them

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Abstract

The number of students taking online college or university courses is increasing dramatically. There are unique challenges to those who choose this learning platform for their postsecondary education. This article describes some of the challenges students and professors face, along with suggestions on how to address them.

Keywords: *Issues and Challenges; Online Learning; Online College and University Students; Postsecondary Education*

Introduction

Online learning has gone mainstream. The convenience of being able to study anywhere, without having to drive to class, arrange for child care, adjust work schedules, or even change out of one's pajamas, is deeply satisfying to many who want to return to college, or who are preparing to attend a postsecondary institution for the very first time.

Going to college is always an adjustment, however, and this adjustment does not lessen if prospective students lack the face-to-face experience of attending a more traditional college or university setting [1]. In fact, there are challenges that are unique to the distance learning platform, some of which I describe in this article.

The scope of online postsecondary learning institutions

The number of students enrolled in colleges and universities has increased at a staggering rate since 1947, the first year the National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] recorded data. In 1947 there were 2,338,226 enrolled students at all postsecondary institutions in the United States. In 1977, the total number of postsecondary students increased to 11,285,787. In 2017, the total number of college/university students increased to 20,972,000. The projected number of postsecondary students in the year 2015 is 23,290,000 [2]. These numbers reflect brick-and-mortar institutions.

Online postsecondary institutions showed a marked increase in the college landscape as a learning option in the 1970s. Returning to NCES' Digest of Education Statistics, the total percentage of undergraduate students taking online courses during the 2003-04 academic year was 15.6%, with 4.9% completing their entire degree program online. During the 2007-08 and 2011-12 academic school years, respectively, these percentages increased to 20.6% and 3.8%; and 32% and 6.5% [3]. Looking at only the percentages doesn't give as complete a picture. Let's consider the number of students, themselves, attending classes online.

Challenges Online Students Face, and how their Instructors Can Help Them

The total number of students enrolled in online courses at degree-granting postsecondary institutions is huge. The United States Department of Education reports in the fall 2013, 20,373,789 students were studying online. Of these, 13.1% were taking exclusively distance a decrease of just under 1%. The percentage of students taking their degree program courses exclusively online, however, increased the same amount, to 14.0%, which shows a net gain of postsecondary students in online programs of nearly 2% [4]. These data will only increase as more students choose to study online.

Addressing various issues

This list is by no means conclusive, yet it does address some of the more prevalent issues online learners face and how instructors can help them successfully address and overcome certain challenges. I've divided the list into four distinct sections: Issues unique to online courses; Electronic issues; Typical student issues; and Implications for potential issues, with both a challenge and at least one suggestion considering how to proceed.

Issues unique to online classes

Although some issues college students face are common across the board, there are a few things that are unique to the online learning experience. Muilenburg and Berge (2007) list eight factors that directly impact student success in an online learning platform. The list includes administrative issues, social interaction, academic skills, technical skills, learner motivation, time and support for studies, cost and access to the internet, and technical problems [5]. Many of these issues overlap to a degree, meaning, using concepts and best teaching practices that have worked for generations in ground schools can successfully be applied and implemented in an online course setting.

Challenge: Adjusting to the online paradigm

There is a myth that being an online student is somehow easier, in part because students can "do their work whenever they want". What many online students fail to understand is that everything within an online course is time-stamped, making it virtually impossible to hide in the back row of an online class.

Suggestion: "Choice architecture"

Clayton (2015) suggests that students are "more likely to succeed in programs that are tightly structured, with limited bureaucratic obstacles and little room to unintentionally stray from paths toward completion" [6]. By providing "choice architecture" in an online course, students are more easily led through the process of adjusting to the hidden pratfalls of being held accountable for every action (or inaction) that is made, with no face-to-face coaching on how to be successful.

Challenge: Student buy-in

Student buy-in goes hand-in-hand with adjusting to the online paradigm. If students do not choose (or are unable) to actively participate in an online class, they will fail.

Suggestion: Co-learning

Online instructors can help their students adjust to the rigors of online studies by making it as clear as possible that a virtual presence is necessary in a distance learning platform, even if there is no actual face-to-face interaction. This can be done in a couple of ways: by providing short video clips of welcome, mini-lessons; anything the professor (or students) deem important, that could reasonably simulate a ground school experience; and frequent written communications (texts, in-course messaging and emails, written announcements) that extend kind and respectful support to students.

According to Ransdell (2013), meaningful posts correlate to student learning in a distance learning platform. In her study she found that baby boomer students' posts were more meaningful, and that millennial students' posts were more factual [7]. Instructors can actively engage their students by asking direct questions. Students at the collegiate level typically have quite a bit of life experience of their

Challenges Online Students Face, and how their Instructors Can Help Them

own, and instructors can tap into that and incorporate what their students share within the parameters of what is being studied. Interaction is not enough, however [8]. It is important for online professors to provide structure and leadership and take a step further and gently encourage his or her students to support the assertions they're making, as well as the anecdotal evidence they're providing, with recent credible research that supports their conclusions. This can and should be modeled in the professor's own posts and responses.

Challenge: Personality conflicts

This issue isn't necessarily unique to the online learning experience, but communication between students and their instructors can be compromised when there is no body language to help support virtual conversations. As a general rule in the distance learning platform, nearly all communication is written. Exceptions are telephone calls, but time zone differences, as well as occasional resentment does occur if students don't want to be contacted, or if professors don't want to reach out in this manner.

Suggestion: Create a safe learning environment

Building a foundation upon mutual respect, providing lessons that are relevant to students' lives, allowing adequate time to practice and master concepts lead to motivating students to choose to want to learn. Any learning community requires these four pillars in order to promote and maintain a safe learning environment [9]. While this can be more challenging in an online class, it is certainly not impossible. Professors who are willing to share stories about themselves as they make personal connections to material they are presenting, can go a long way. If you're a storyteller, tell stories, either by text or in short videos. Allow your students to see you as an individual.

Challenge: Student feelings of isolation

It is a bit harder to be an online student, especially if you are used to face-to-face interaction with teachers and classmates.

Suggestion: Create interactive assignments/projects

Nearly every online course requires weekly discussion in a communal threaded discussion area. If the professor makes a concerted effort, especially at the beginning of the term, to model what effective, meaningful comments look like, the students will often take that to heart and follow suit.

Professors need to spend the bulk of their time consistently showing their online students how to effectively communicate in the threaded discussions. This can be done by asking direct questions, asking for clarification, comparing what one student wrote to what another student wrote and expanding on what was shared, as a springboard for taking the conversation to a different level.

Another way to alleviate feelings of isolation is to include journaling assignments that are interactive between the students and the professor, creating chat rooms that are tied to various assignments, or, and I would be careful with this, assignment group projects. If students are in different time zones, this can create an entirely different type of challenge.

Challenge: Netiquette issues

One of the problems of social media is the inherent lack of owning statements that are made; there is a high degree of anonymity available to those who participate. This, unfortunately, can lead to thoughtless, rude behavior at the least, and to cyberbullying, as the most offensive. There is no anonymity in an online class, so if some students are used to being, shall we say, less than kind and respectful in the atmosphere of an anonymous social media platform, they might need to be re-taught how to be civil in an online course room.

Suggestion: Address as a group; address individual students

Most unacceptable netiquette behavior occurs in discussion threads. Minor offenses can be dealt with in the threaded discussion area. The professor can create a new thread and use it as a mini-lesson on appropriate ways to respond to other learners' posts. There should be no calling out of individual students or quoting what was written. It could be that not every student even saw the offensive post.

For more offensive netiquette breaches, the professor can and should contact the offended party to learn his or her reaction to what was written, then base next steps on what the offended student said. If they aren't that upset, brainstorm with them what they would like to see done, then, if appropriate, follow through on the plan that was developed.

Challenges Online Students Face, and how their Instructors Can Help Them

If, however, the netiquette breach was severe enough to be considered an academic integrity issue, my advice is to follow the institution's guidelines. In many cases, professors will be required to delete the offensive comment after having taken a screenshot of the offensive comment(s) and send the screenshot, along with a report, to management personnel. Typically, a conference with the student making the offensive remark(s) would also be scheduled with documentation of the conversation being sent to management personnel.

Electronic issues

There are definitely challenges that are unique to an online course. Since the course is set up using electronic media, it is obvious that many of the challenges online students face will be due to electronic glitches.

Challenge: Student inability to successfully navigate web site

Many students, especially millennials, have excellent social media skills. They know and understand how to utilize their mobile phones and computers to access current events, tweets, photographs, and the like. Having this savvy, however, does not guarantee that they also know how to easily move around an online course room shell.

Suggestion: Instructor provided videos/written mini-lessons

If students have already gone through some sort of online boot camp to initiate them to the online learning environment, the nuance of navigating a course room shell is left to the professors. Providing multiple learning modalities for the same lesson is particularly helpful to students: for example, providing video and written instructions for the same activity.

Professors can, if allowed by the institution, host a meeting for the class that is live-streamed in real time. During this coaching session, the instructor can demonstrate how to find and utilize the various functions found within the course infrastructure. Items to consider might be how to attach a document to an assignment, how to open a report, or how to follow the guidelines included in a grading rubric.

Challenge: Misunderstanding written instructions

It is possible and likely that students might misunderstand written instructions in any class setting, yet the consequences of doing so in an online course can be more problematic because there is no easy way to clarify information or answer questions.

Suggestion: Clear and concise instructions; quality rubrics

For any student to be successful, they need to receive clear and concise instructions. This is imperative in an online learning environment, where it is much easier for students to think they understand expectations but in reality, do not. In addition to providing written instructions, professors can upload short video presentations that explain processes for completion of assignments.

Another way to increase the chances of students understanding written instructions is to provide grading rubrics that clearly identify the standards that will be used by their professor when assessing and grading their work. Typical standards in a grading rubric include Proficient, Acceptable, Needs Improvement, and Unacceptable, although this is not a comprehensive list of items you might find.

Challenge: Students accessing grading comments

Many, if not most, colleges and universities require their professors to insert comments directly into their students' submitted assignments. Students who cannot or will not, read the comments have a higher chance of making the same mistakes over and over again.

Suggestion: Instructor provides videos or written instructions--or both--to explain how to open documents that have graded comments

I admit, this has been one of my greatest challenges as an online professor. Students who make the same mistakes throughout the term tend to make me feel as though my efforts to help them are not wanted. Imagine my surprise, then, when I discovered at the end of a term that they were not aware they had the ability to open a document to see my comments!

Challenges Online Students Face, and how their Instructors Can Help Them

I immediately changed my tack, providing a short video that explained how to access their written assignments in the grade book, and how to open them to see the comments I had made.

Challenge: Testing

Testing, especially at the undergraduate level, can be problematic in an online course. Many tests are timed or require a proctor or have other challenges that are unique to the institution where you are working.

Suggestion: Institution dependent

Because testing is so important to the life of an American college or university's accreditation requirement, I can only point you to the policies that ensue where you work.

Typical student issues

Students attending any college class will face adjustments, and many of the challenges they face overlap between face-to-face and online learning platforms. Baum, Castleman, and Schwartz (2015) state, "Designing effective strategies for improving student success requires in-depth understanding of how students make choices, how their behaviors and responses to opportunities and circumstances affect their educational outcomes, how they process available information, and how the structure of the student aid system and the classroom might either interfere with or support their aspirations" [10]. Because online students don't have the benefit of constant face-to-face interactions with their professors--or even, their academic support network such as counselors or advisers--it is imperative that contingencies are put into place that help the students be successful.

Challenge: Time management

Time management is challenging for any college student, ground-based or online, unless the student as an individual already leans toward being organized.

Suggestion: Instructor as cheerleader

Something I do to help my online students meet their due dates is to provide near-daily updates in the weekly discussion thread mentioning what assignments are due, and when. These gentle reminders don't seem to be resented, provided I don't nag. For example, many online college courses have work weeks that begin on Monday mornings and end on Sunday evenings. Posting an announcement to the entire class on Sunday afternoon or evening that outlines all assignments due that week is usually appreciated by students.

You can also post updates throughout the week in the discussion thread that keeps students aware of what assignments are coming up. When posting either general announcements or more specific information, I would suggest you consistently point your students to the course syllabus for more information.

Challenge: Late work

Late work creates problems for students and teachers, alike, messing with timelines and schedules, and even scheduled days off. There is an old adage, "Your procrastination should not become my emergency".

Suggestion: Be as flexible as possible

Finding the balance between being flexible and being taken advantage of can sometimes be a challenge. Some institutions have extremely stringent policies about submitting late work; others may not have policies at all, but merely provide guidelines for the instructors to follow at their own discretion.

Challenges Online Students Face, and how their Instructors Can Help Them

A general rule about accepting late work firmly falls in the category of “It depends.” Is the student submitting late work typically on time with everything? Is the reason why the work was submitted late legitimate? Did Life get in the way? Did the student ask for an extension, or demand that you accommodate him or her? All of these need to be considered.

Challenge: Plagiarism

Plagiarism is rampant, regardless of the institution.

Suggestion: Review guidelines/policies/expectation; provide mini-lessons

I personally think plagiarism is less of an issue in an online course because there is typically an anti-plagiarism software package attached to every course as part of the institution’s academic integrity policy.

The thing about anti-plagiarism software is that it is a database that measures errors, not intent. It has been my experience as a college professor that the vast majority of high similarity rates (plagiarism) in students’ papers is unintentional, meaning, citations were cited incorrectly. I provide mini-lessons, both written and by video presentation, that show students how to correctly cite their source material, including quotes, paraphrases, and embedded and formal references.

Challenge: Inactive group members

Like ground-based institutions, inactive group members are a problem. Throw in the mix varying time zones, and lack of participation can really be a challenge.

Suggestion: Reflect individual effort in all projects

Personally, I’m not a big fan of group projects. In many cases, however, I’m required to include them in my course because the class had already been set up that way and I am not allowed to change assignments. There are a couple of things that can be done that can reveal who does and does not actively participate in an online group project.

Something I do when a group project is a required assignment is to also include a group chat room that includes written communication. This is not usually graded but is a wonderful tool to determine who joins the group chat, and how much each individual participates. This helps me to track and cross-reference if the students assigned to research a part of the project actually shares information with his or her group about that section.

I also have students create their own write-up of the group assignment for submission and grading. My students are allowed to share data, but they must create their own unique document to turn in. If there are four students contributing to the same paper topic, there are also four separate documents submitted that are written in each student’s own unique writing voice. In addition, each student must cite the work of their learning colleagues in the group project they submit.

Implications for potential issues

By virtue of being able to study literally anywhere in the world, students choosing to take online classes will only increase. This influx of students who, in the past, may not have felt they had the opportunity to attend college, are finding there are quite a few advantages to studying online. There are, however, some unique challenges that align with academic programs that are offered within the distance learning platform. Below, I list a few, along with some possible suggestions on how to address and overcome the issues.

Challenge: Increased number of online students

In Fall 2014, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] data show there were 5,750,417 undergraduate college or university students enrolled in at least one online course, which was 28.5% of all undergraduate students enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States [4]. That’s a lot of demand.

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Challenges Online Students Face, and how their Instructors Can Help Them

Suggestion: Hiring more instructors

An obvious solution to meet this challenge is to hire more faculty to teach online courses.

Challenge: Addressing predatory institutions

The United States does not have a national system planned by the federal government on behalf of postsecondary education; instead, it has a mix of public and private, for-profit and non-profit institutions that have been allowed to grow and change organically [11]. Because of this, it has been possible for abuse to occur, particularly within the for-profit sector.

Suggestion: Do thorough research; policy changes/advocacy

For-profit institutions [FPs] operate on a model of “more students equals more income,” and many have turned to illegal and unethical recruiting practices [12]. My advice to both students and faculty alike would be to consider carefully and do your research before signing on with a for-profit institution.

If a student is considering attending a for-profit institution, make sure the admissions counselors are being realistic in work load recommendations and timeline completion. Go into the process with eyes wide open understanding that online courses are often accelerated. Also, I would recommend that the student know and understand up front if she or he will be paying tuition by the course, or by the term, then weigh the subsequent work load against the academic expectations.

Challenge: Student demographics/cultural differences

Returning to NCES data, the total number of non-white students enrolled in all degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States in Fall 2014, was 8,969,933, or just over 43%. The categories listed are for Black, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, two or more races, or nonresident alien [13]. The combined number of non-white full-time and part-time faculty and instructional staff in degree-granting postsecondary institutions in Fall 20013 was 212,500, or 17.5% [14]. This marked difference in ratio can impact a student’s connection to his or her professors, if we consider relevance of content being taught and mastered important to how deeply students learn.

Suggestion: Diversity in hiring

Admittedly, these data are 15 years old, but show the most recent numbers available at the NCES web site. If we consider the higher numbers in general of students completing college programs, it can be inferred that more non-white graduates across the board are available for hire at colleges and universities in the United States.

Challenge: Ensuring high quality students/instructors

There are some students enrolled in online colleges and universities who are ill-prepared for the tasks that await them. Likewise, there are faculty and instructors working at online institutions who could do a better job of being engaged with their students.

Suggestion: Provide a stringent Boot Camp that enables higher success rates

Providing an intensive 3 - 4 week induction program for all incoming students and faculty members would help alleviate many of the challenges I’ve described. Allowing students and instructors alike a safe learning environment to practice the skills they will need to be successful should absolutely be employed by every online institution.

For students, I would recommend that the cost of the boot camp be off-set to be included in their tuition once they have successfully passed the course and have been accepted into the college or university. For faculty, I would recommend that they be paid for their participation but be held accountable to pass the training at a high level of success (say, 85 - 90%) and a recommendation from their trainer prior to being officially hired by their institution.

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Challenges Online Students Face, and how their Instructors Can Help Them

Conclusions

The advantages of attending online postsecondary institutions outweigh the disadvantages. Doing one's homework prior to signing up as a student (or teacher) to understand the expectations can ease students and faculty alike into the waters of this exciting learning environment.

Understanding that there is no way to hide in an online course room can encourage students to reach out to their professors when they are having trouble keeping up or understanding the material being taught and learned. Professors who consistently reach out to their students, and who effectively model through their own written and video communication, make it easier for themselves and their students to be successful.

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Challenges Online Students Face, and how their Instructors Can Help Them

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