

Calling for Success: Online Retention Rates Get Boost From Personal Outreach

BY MANDY ZATYNSKI

» By mid-term summer semester 2012, Gina Cannell was struggling with her online statistics course. After failing a few quizzes and an exam, she worried her C grade would get worse. She asked her professor for extra help, but couldn't work through sample problems alone online. She needed live instruction. For two years, Cannell, a 43-year-old senior test engineer for Delta Air Lines, had excelled as an online student, but now she was facing failure or having to drop out. Her full-time job, family responsibilities, and a side business in interior design put on-campus classes—as well as tutoring—out of reach. Cannell wasn't sure what to do. Then Julili Fowler rang.

"Your professor asked us to give you a call," Fowler told her. "Are you at a computer? Let's log in right now." Fowler guided Cannell to an interactive messaging program, Whiteboard IM, which allows professors and tutors to work through statistics problems and other equations with students in real time. It was exactly what Cannell needed: She finished the semester with a B.

Fowler is a student success adviser with eCore, the state University System of Georgia's online education portal. She makes these phone calls every day, contacting students like Cannell who have been identified as at-risk of dropping out. Fowler is one member of eCore's 14-person student success team, which was started in 2007 to boost online retention rates, or the percentage of students who finish a course regardless of whether they pass or fail. (eCore, and some other online programs, define this as "completion.") The thinking was first, get more students to stick with a course; then, help more students pass. For now, Fowler and her colleagues assist students with navigating

the online system, locating assignments, and finding online resources for additional help. Their efforts seem to be working. In 2012, online retention rates for eCore courses across all eight campuses reached 83 percent, up 11 percentage points from six years before. At the University of West Georgia, where the student success team was launched six years ago, rates are an impressive 92 percent, up from 68 percent in 2007. That campus also saw online course retention rates inch ahead of those of face-to-face courses (92 percent to 91 percent, respectively) for the first time this past summer.¹

A decade ago, online courses like these best served nontraditional students like Cannell—those who are older than 22 and balancing work and families. But today, the appeal of online courses extends to students of all kinds, including traditional students cut out of high-demand classes. Cheaper and more flexible than traditional courses, online courses allow students to work when they want and how they want—and in some cases, as quickly as they want. For the past nine years, online enrollments have grown faster than overall enrollment throughout higher education, and by 2011, the number of college students taking at least one online course surpassed 6.7 million.² And with increasing pressure from President Obama and many others—business leaders, taxpayers, policymakers—to produce a more educated and skilled workforce by 2020, universities are looking to online course work to help reach that goal. Officials in the California State University system will launch an entirely separate online university in 2013, ultimately increasing enrollment by 250,000 students.³

But the abundance of online course offerings won't lead to desired outcomes if students don't complete their classes. Generally, the retention rates for online courses are believed to be 10 to 20 percent lower than the retention rates for their face-to-face counterparts.⁴ A 2011 study of Washington's community and technical colleges found course retention rates among online



students to be 8 percentage points lower than that of students in traditional environments.⁵ The study also found that college freshmen who enrolled in an online course during their first term were more likely to drop out of college. The distance from—and lack of connection to—campus and its professors can be an inhibitor for the online student. Beyond that, technical difficulties, personal obligations, and lack of motivation can easily derail online learning. eCore's student success team, and programs like it, recognize these pitfalls and work to remedy them.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS

Melanie Clay, a 16-year veteran of online learning programs, is the brains behind the eCore student success team at the University System of Georgia. She started it as a three-person team on one campus and in five years, has expanded it to 14 people on eight campuses, with more in the works. eCore advisers assist students in any of eCore's 24 courses, which cover the general education requirements of a bachelor's degree. Most eCore students enroll because their jobs conflict with class schedules or the on-campus course equivalents are full. Some enroll to help speed their time to graduation. Whatever the case, online learning gives these students access they would not otherwise have. For example, the majority of spring semester students were logged into their classes between 8-10 p.m. on Sundays—an unlikely time for on-campus classes. At the same time, online learning also presents unique barriers to success that traditional, face-to-face students don't typically encounter. The lack of face-to-face accountability—and disapproving professor looks—requires online students to demonstrate more initiative and strong time management skills. And because half of eCore's students are 25 years or older, chances are school work is one chore on a long list of things to do—and thus, easy to push to the bottom if work or family lives demand more time.

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Clay aims to overcome these barriers by giving eCore students the reminders and tools they need to feel connected to campus and persist in their virtual worlds. Each week, professors flag online students who miss assignments, fail exams, or don't appear on class discussion boards. Members of the student success team, who are primarily full-time, university employees, then call students to see what's going on and connect them with tutors and counselors. From the first week of classes to mid-term exams, the team can make up to 600 calls in a day. This semester, team members made 1,071 phone calls and sent 1,126 emails to students who hadn't logged in by day three. The primary reason students hadn't shown up? They couldn't find or didn't know their password.

In addition to directing students to passwords, advisers help students find textbooks, register for proctored exams, or schedule make-up work around medical leaves—all things that would normally be discussed in a classroom or with peers. Christine James, who teaches an introductory philosophy course, sees the advisers as the "eyes and ears" for professors who likely never meet their students. She once reported a student to the success team for missing assignments and learned that the student had a medical problem that required surgery. "If it were an in-person class, I would be hearing from the student themselves," James says.

Beyond the technical snafus are more complicated life problems that disrupt chances for success. More than two-thirds of eCore students who withdrew from online courses in 2012, surveys show, did so for



personal reasons, including financial problems, illness, or work. In these cases, student success advisers serve more as counselors than technical support. “A lot of times, they’re discouraged or they feel overwhelmed,” says Michael Post, a student success adviser who is pursuing an online degree of his own. “So we try to be a calming force to keep them moving.”

“Sometimes, it’s hard for students to say to the professor, ‘I’m really lost,’” says Carrie McWhorter, an English instructor at the University of West Georgia. “Having someone they know who isn’t going to grade their work but is there to help them succeed . . . that little push is really valuable.” This summer, 76 percent of McWhorter’s students in an introductory online writing course finished. For that happy outcome—a retention rate 16 percentage points higher than the rate for the face-to-face course—she credits the success team. She even suggests that instructors of face-to-face courses could learn a few things about retention by paying attention to what eCore advisers are doing. “Our on-campus classes are realizing that if we can identify these students early on, who aren’t attending well—especially with freshmen—if someone can follow up with them, that can make a difference,” she says.

Marie Fetzner of Monroe Community College in Rochester, N.Y., has worked in and studied online learning for more than 15 years. She stresses the importance of one-on-one connections: texts, phone calls, emails—anything personal that shows a professor on the other end of the blank forum makes the student feel less like a screen name and more like a participant. In the first few days of her own classes, Fetzner makes a point of responding to every post, just to show students that she is keeping track. “If you can get them over the hump of the first two weeks, and they get into that whole notion of logging in regularly, checking course announcements . . . you’re more likely to keep students engaged,” Fetzner says.

Still, maintaining that engagement throughout the semester is essential, especially since students aren’t being constantly reminded of upcoming assignments and exams during in-class lectures. eCore adviser Post tries to fill that void by emailing reminders of assignments even when deadlines are clearly posted on syllabi. “I don’t always have time to pull up a syllabus, but I always have time to check my email,” says student Heather McMillan, an advisee of Post and a mother who works as a school clerk. “Even though you’re virtual,” she says, “you almost feel like you’re in a real classroom.”

These little nudges are such powerful motivators that a start-up is building a whole business around them. The company, called Persistence Plus, is planning a full launch in early 2013 and will contract with universities to provide digital reminders—text messages or notes through a mobile application—of assignments or

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exams. But the reminders are more than a string on an index finger; they require interaction. For example, “Your personal essay is due soon. When and where will you finish it?” The reminder will pop up again when the deadline is closer. If you actually get students to commit to what they promise to do, it can be a “really powerful type of nudge,” says Persistence Plus co-founder Jill Frankfort. “It’s certainly not a silver bullet that is going to change everything,” she says. “But it’s one strategy in a realm of strategies.”

Students sometimes wrongly assume that online courses will be easier than face-to-face classes; they think it’s a matter of posting once a week on a discussion board and taking an end-of-semester exam. Some



also think the courses allow them to go at their own pace, as long as they complete all the assignments by the end of the semester. In fact, online courses can be more difficult for the average student because they require much more self-motivation and time management than face-to-face courses. They can also demand considerably more reading to make up for the absence of class discussion, and some students aren't up to the task. "Some students just are not meant to take an online course out of the box," says Fetzner.

While researching her dissertation, Fetzner found that institutions do a poor job of communicating the expectations of online courses, particularly to new students. "It isn't necessarily intuitive for the students," she says. Over 10 years, Fetzner did three surveys of students who dropped out of online courses, and no matter how the institution tried to retain them, the students' reasons for quitting were always the same: Almost half withdrew from online courses because they fell behind and couldn't catch up, because they couldn't balance course work with other obligations, or because other personal matters intervened. (Smaller percentages didn't like the format or the course, had technical difficulties, or lost motivation.)

As with Georgia, some universities have begun to address this disconnect between student and professor expectations. Boise State University in Idaho requires an "online bootcamp" for first-year students and has seen retention rates increase by 20 to 40 percent, depending on the course.⁶ The bootcamp is an orientation that requires students to log into the software and encourages them to interact with each other informally before the course begins. Too many students don't turn in assignments or miss exams simply because they are not looking in the right places. Orientations like Boise State's show students how to navigate the online platform, where to find the syllabus, and how to post to the discussion boards. Likewise, about half of eCore students this semester took advantage of a similar class that helped them acclimate a week before

the semester starts. And this spring, eCore officials will pilot a 45-minute pre-assessment of students' technical and reading abilities, as well as some non-academic factors, to determine their readiness for online learning.

REMAINING CHALLENGES

While eCore has made big gains in student retention, its task is far from over. Clay wants nothing less than a 99-percent retention rate. She pushes eCore advisers to constantly self-evaluate and identify new ways to reach poor performers. Every day, they compare the current dropout rate to the same rate on the same day last year. If it's higher, they find out what's working and try to replicate it. If it's the same or lower, they pick up the phones. "We are relentless; that's our culture here," Clay says. They call students with low grades to offer guidance and support; they check with professors to see that they are reporting students who have missed assignments or failed exams; and, finally, they look at the success team itself. Are advisers using the right approach? It's a delicate balance, a combination of empathy and forcefulness. Fowler tells her students: "We're concerned about you because we want you to be successful, but we want you to commit."

Still, challenges remain. Retention rates in introductory math courses are some of the lowest and continue to make slow progress, despite extra attention and resources. Almost 70 percent of students who use eCore's online tutoring system do so for math. But this system is automated, which some students don't like, and accessed through an external website, which confuses others. In an attempt to tailor tutoring and make it easier to use, the eCore team this year added videos of professors working through problems within the classroom Web page, so students can more easily link to them at any time during the semester. The team also hired graduate students to tutor and address concerns in real time and reach out to other students with low grades. Other hurdles for Clay and her team are professors and processes. It's up to professors to



identify struggling students and alert the success team, but some don't buy into it. They see the team's efforts as "coddling" at a time when students should learn to be self-sufficient. These professors are generally not required to teach eCore classes, Clay said, and new ones are required to make a written commitment to participate. They are also trained to engage these students they never see. Just as professors have to adapt to the online environment, so do processes. eCore's success team operates independently of university protocol and calendars, so eCore and its employees are funded exclusively through student tuition payments. Because they get no funding from the state, they have no demands from the state. Clay says this is essential for any online learning initiative because of the industry's rapidly changing nature. Online learning programs must have the flexibility to make decisions quickly and easily—free of university and state bureaucracies.

Despite thousands of phone calls and just as many emails, the biggest challenge for eCore and its student success team hasn't escaped them. The number of students who actually pass the course is often far lower than those who finish—60 percent last year, for example.⁷ When Clay started the team in 2007, she first concentrated just on increasing the number of students who finished online courses. Now, with retention rates at 83 percent, she and her team are working on getting more students to pass. They are reviewing courses, materials, and instructional design for any potential to make the learning process more meaningful. Are student tasks redundant? Do they link directly with learning outcomes? Are instructions clear? And they've added support programs for specific populations, like first-generation college students, who are more likely to falter in an online environment. "We have to ... help people understand that you can do this. There is nothing to be afraid of. You can achieve this, and there are people to help you," says Clay. "And we are going to call you if we have to." >>

NOTES

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