Student Success of Underprepared Students in Online Education

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ETEC 674

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March 2, 2015
Annotated Bibliography


This article described a study of community college level developmental writers who were taking their pre-collegiate level writing class in an online section. 256 online developmental writing students participated. Data from a student profile survey was combined with college assessment scores, and final grades. Multi-level modeling was analyzed to compare face-to-face versus online students taking the same level of developmental writing. The study made the distinction between students who withdrew from the class and those who completed the course but failed.

This study proved to be surprising. The online students were actually more successful that the face-to-face students. Even though the drop rates were higher among online students (which is in line with national data findings in higher education), those who completed the course had higher grades than the face-to-face students (data not collected in any large studies). The findings also showed that full-time Caucasian female students were the most successful and likely to complete the course. Perhaps most interesting was that assessment scores had no relation to how well a student did.

This is a fairly large pool of students compared with similar studies, so it is worth taking a close look at the findings. It should be noted that ¼ of the students participating in the study were not true developmental writers based on their assessing directly into Freshman
English but self-selecting the pre-collegiate class. This may have affected the outcome somewhat. It’s important to notice that the findings of this study contradict a Menager-Beeley study which claimed gender and ethnicity did not affect student outcomes. Since this study was much larger than the Menager-Beeley, I would consider these results more useful. Overall, it is a study worth reading.


This article describes a study which analyzed how the online social networks students form may contribute to their performance and final grade, and how this information can help teachers design and evaluate online activities to improve student success. The study analyzed 1,026 students in hybrid university level classes. The results were extracted from CMS discussion boards using Social Networking Analysis (SNA) patterns. A program collected, organized, evaluated, and mapped student networking done on Blackboard’s discussion forum.

The study found that the highest graded students had much larger social networks of classmates that they interacted with while the students with the lowest grades had very small networks. Generally, students interacted with classmates with similar grades. Interestingly teacher presence was very low in discussion groups of low performing students. The author concluded that social connections (who you know) are predictors for how well students will do in online classes.

The article gave a good description of the study, but the study itself had some faults.
First, data was only collected in discussion boards and did not include email or face-to-face contact, so it doesn’t provide the full picture of student interaction. Secondly, the article didn’t address how group interaction was established. We can assume that students self-selected who they would interact with, but this is unclear. Instructional Designers can create student groups that would diversify abilities ensuring that all students are getting the same level of support. Overall, I think the article is useful because it draws attention to the fact that instructional designers do need to organize groups diversifying student levels, and teachers need to make sure they are providing information among groups equally.


This article summarizing literature that addresses low income and underprepared students in online education and makes recommendations to policymakers and instructors on how to best offer online programs. The literature review highlighted 36 studies from colleges and universities in the US and Canada completed between 2000 and 2010. The article compared studies that focused on higher education comparisons of online versus face-to-face students on the issues of completion, success, and subsequent college performance.

The students suggest that community college students are more likely to drop online classes and less likely to continue their college careers in subsequent semesters. Since the studies of university students did not focus on either of these areas, it is unknown if
the same is true at this level. For students who completed online college or university classes, their grades were comparable to traditional students. Interestingly, data from Virginia community colleges suggest that online classes are comprised mostly of continuing students and do not draw new students. Sadly despite the title, no studies looked at low-income online students and very few of the studies addressed underprepared students. These are areas where more research is needed.

For the most part, the studies reflected what I read in other studies. I found the Virginia data to be extremely interesting and wondered if the same was true in CA community colleges and universities? Given that President Obama has indicated online education is a chief solution in providing better access for non-students to earn degrees, it makes me wonder if online programs really are going to bring in new students? I would say that for-profit universities have built their degrees around fully online programs, and they certainly are bringing in large numbers of new students. I found it odd that the author recommended a number of financial aid benefits for low income students despite the fact that there was no research on low income students included. Also the author made recommendations on assessing readiness and enhancing student services, however, very little mention was made of these points in the literature review. It seems like this author had an agenda for making recommendations that weren’t necessarily supported by findings in the research. I’m not sure I would recommend reading the whole article, but I would recommend the reference page for further reading.

This article described a study to determine which students are most likely to succeed or fail in online classes by analyzing motivation and drop out rates. The study surveyed 59 online university students. Students were questioned about motivation of subject matter, and asked to provide demographics on first language, gender, ethnicity, and age. A quantitative study comparing student’ responses and course GPAs and completion were analyzed.

The findings of the article were interesting. Gender, ethnicity, and second language learners had no impact on how well a student did or if they completed the course. The most likely students to drop were older students and students with low cumulative grade point averages. The biggest impact on student success was related to students with high motivation to learn the course material. If students had a high TASK motivation and saw a direct correlation between the tasks for the class and their personal and professional goals then they were much more likely to do well in the course. While the TASK motivation isn’t surprising, the demographic information was somewhat unexpected.

This article’s correlation between demographics and success seems to conflict with other studies. I’ve read other studies that show that older students tend to me more successful in online classes because they are more motivated; of course most data defines older as above 24 and this study did not indicate how they defined older students. There was a fault in the study because although 150 students were asked to participate, the responses only included 59 who responded. Those 59 students showed better initiative and follow through which would suggest that potentially they might be more successful learners than the students who didn’t respond. Because the study was so small and didn’t get all of the students to participate, I wouldn’t discount its usefulness.

The article described a Summer Bridge program with an added online student success course for underprepared students who wouldn't be admitted until the spring semester; the goal was to improve student success skills, connect students to the university without them being on campus, and hopefully retain students for entering the college in the Spring semester. The program was initiated as a means for improving accessibility to diverse students.

Students in the program participated in a two week face-to-face Summer Bridge program on campus and then had just the online Student Success class in the Fall semester. Students were surveyed at the end of the program and data was collected on attendance and retention. Data in the study was analyzed using effect sizes and showed that retention was significantly higher in this program when compared to students who had just been part of the Summer Bridge but been allowed to enroll full time in the fall.

It’s odd that while the online program was reportedly for building students’ skills, there is actually no description of what the class covered. The students’ findings only refer to the social connections they established in student-to-student centered discussion boards and emails. In fact, the author noted that the program will expand the social interaction in future courses. Given that the program was also developed to provide access to a more diverse student body, it’s disappointing that the article makes no mention on how the program impacted this area. The one thing that readers can take away from this article is how important student centered learning is in an online format, and that students really
can feel a sense of connection with classmates online.