## SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT STUDENT LEARNING AND RETENTION IN ONLINE COURSES

Distance education has provided colleges throughout the country with an opportunity to increase their enrollments by serving the educational needs of students who have time and place constraints. Institutions are seizing this opportunity and are offering courses, as well as entire degree programs, online. The effectiveness of online instruction is being studied at institutions around the country.

At Atlantic Cape Community College, two instructors decided to examine several key elements that they found to be important to support both student learning and retention. The instructors incorporated the use of collaborative learning and on-going formative and summative feedback to support the cognitive development of their students. A three-tiered scheduling track was designed to support student retention.

The courses taught included an online psychology course, and The Internet and the World Wide Web—a computer course.

### Supporting Cognitive Development

Cognitive development theories—attempting to explain how students reason, think, or make meaning of their classroom experiences—abound, including some work around gender differences in how men and women develop and express their ways of knowing. Findings suggest that structural and stylistic differences may have implications for different ways of teaching, that higher education environments need to include dialogue and discussion so that teachers, facilitators, and students can work together to improve understanding of content and achieve a comfortable, supportive learning environment.

The basic premises of numerous theories were taken into consideration in the design of two online courses. The instructors developed collaborative learning activities as a way for students to hear multiple perspectives on a topic. Through these activities, students expressed their own voices, opinions, agreements, and disagreements. During some of the assignments, students worked in small groups, defended their responses, and eventually formulated a group response.

Also, students were responsible for reading each chapter and providing responses to questions that were related to their readings. The instructors provided a high level of support to the students by responding to their homework activities within 48 hours of submission.

The teachers were amazed at the level of exchange that took place online. It was apparent to the instructors that even though some of the collaborative assignments generated levels of cognitive conflict, the students were comfortable enough within their learning environment to share their thoughts.

### Promoting Student Retention

To enhance student retention, the instructors designed the course so students would have a choice of selecting one of three scheduling tracks. For one of the courses, the scheduling included the traditional 15-week track, an accelerated 12-week track, or an extended 18-week track. Students selected their track at the beginning of the semester and were allowed to change their scheduling track once during the semester with permission from the instructors. Each scheduling track had the same assignments, but the timelines for completion were different. The collaborative activities were interspersed throughout the class, and all students participated in the activities right up to the last date of the accelerated track.

A majority of the students initially selected the traditional track schedule. However, as the semester continued, the instructors found that at least one or two students in every class experienced unexpected problems. Because there was an option of requesting a change in their scheduling track, these students could transition into another track easily during a stressful time in their lives. However, even on the extended track,

there was a structure that provided due dates for assignments. In one case, a student who was progressing at a high level in the accelerated track had to request a move to the extended track as a result of an emergency medical situation. The student commented that without the scheduling track option, she would not have been able to continue the required activities with her class and would have dropped the course. Instead, the student had an alternative schedule option, moved to the extended track, felt a sense of belonging to the class, and still had the dates when assignments were due.

By the end of the semester, it became clear to the instructors that a three-tiered scheduling track was of value to online student retention. Generally, students are taking online courses because they need some flexibility in their schedule. The three-tiered scheduling track allows for this flexibility and still allows the instructor to organize the class so that students could meet timelines and participate in collaborative group activities. In contrast to typical online classes (an average 68% success rate), the student success rate exceeded 90% in these classes.

## Conclusions

The combination of strategies—collaborative activities, strong assessment and feedback mechanisms, as well as flexible scheduling—kept students supported and connected. These elements had a positive impact on student development and retention.

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