

# Ten Ways Online Instructors Can Improve Graduation Rates

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*Historically funding for universities has been enrollment based. By incorporating graduation rates into funding formulas, universities may become more accountable for students graduating. We need to examine what faculty teaching online can do to improve the likelihood of students graduating. Interventions for traditional teaching may be applicable to online teaching. However, are there considerations that may be more applicable to just online teaching, or need more emphasis online? The purpose of this paper is to determine what can be done by faculty who teach classes online to improve student graduation rates. Ten ways to improve student graduation rates are discussed.*

## INTRODUCTION

Legislatures across the country have or are considering different criteria for universities and colleges to receive funding. Historically funding has been based upon the number of students enrolled. The change is to hold the university or college accountable for the student graduating, by incorporating graduation rates into the funding formulas. Rather than debate the issue whether students or universities are accountable for the student's graduation, and in all probability, both students and universities share some of that responsibility, we need to move to what faculty can do as a part of the university to improve the likelihood of students graduating.

Faculty in traditional classrooms have ideas on what they can do to improve graduation rates, some of which has to do with face to face interactions and referrals for help based on classroom observations. Some of this may be applicable to online teaching. However, are there considerations that may be more applicable to just online teaching, or because of the nature of online teaching, need more emphasis? Students, especially those taking only online courses, may feel more isolated and feel they have less access to university resources and faculty when taking courses online. The purpose of this paper is to determine what can be done by faculty who teach classes online to improve student graduation rates. Ten ways to improve student graduation rates are discussed. Each was derived using the literature and the author's experience teaching online.

## METHOD

The literature has been reviewed and is discussed in each of the following ten ways determined to improve graduation rates. While empirical evidence supports relationships of interventions to constructs like student satisfaction and academic performance, there is little to tie these recommendations directly to graduation rates. However, promotion of interventions that have strong relationships to student satisfaction and academic performance would have some likelihood of contributing to improving

graduation rates. Although this connection is not empirically indicated, the suggestions and recommendations follow from the research cited.

## **WAYS FACULTY CAN FACILITATE GRADUATION RATES**

### **Facilitate Student Knowledge of the Course Management System**

Yukselturk (2008) found that online learning readiness showed a significant relationship with learner satisfaction. Students should, therefore, have the ability to submit assignments, participate in discussion boards, and take exams with confidence. They should be encouraged to demonstrate competence to use the software effectively and efficiently, as it should state in the syllabus. Faculty can encourage, facilitate, or arrange students to take tutorials or other training offered to learn the course management system. Instructors can offer ungraded discussion boards for students to meet others in the class, which helps participants learn how to engage in discussion boards. Similarly, less intensely graded first assignments should be required to be submitted into a “dropbox” rather than sent in by email. Taking quizzes before a full exam not only prepares students for course content, but helps them learn how to use the system.

### **Structure the Course, but Allow Flexibility, Except in Due Dates**

Not surprisingly the literature reinforces the idea that online students learn in different ways, much like traditional students (Graf, Liu, & Kinshuk, 2010). In their examination of learners navigational behavior and learning styles in online courses, Graf, et al. (2010) point out that students in online classes are like students in traditional classrooms; they do not all learn the same way. Braun (2008) concluded that graduate students’ desire for flexibility outweighed their need for instructor and peer interaction as reason for enrollment.

Where possible a student should find the course schedule of contents, assignments, exams, discussions, and due dates set out in the course management system by week or module. Some of this may be duplicated in the syllabus. This allows for planning ahead, working at one’s own pace to some extent, and offers a sense of confidence the instructor has done their part. Online instructors will suggest that unlike traditional classes, much of the work is required for the course before classes begin. While the content, assignments, exams, and discussions are content driven through the instructor, the speed and manner in which the students address the assignments can allow that flexibility to accommodate different styles.

A wide range of media and text assignments can be offered to accommodate the different learning styles of students. Where flexibility is not suggested is in accommodating missed due dates. Some course management systems allow for setting a closing time and announcement of that time in a calendar. Unlike the traditional class where a verbal ad hoc assignment may be missed, the online software system is more documentable, allowing for less flexibility on due dates.

### **Offer Open Book and Materials Exams with Time Limits**

There is no shortage of studies on online exam taking. Williams and Wong (2009) make an argument for open book and open web examination formats. On the other hand, Harmon, et al (2008) determined from their study using models that cheating had to have occurred in online, unproctored exams. Stowell and Bennett (2010) found online testing may reduce test anxiety compared to traditional in classroom exams. More relevant to the open or closed book issue Theophilides and Koutselini (2000) found that students in Cypress facing an open book exam consulted various sources and interrelated the information acquired, while those facing closed book exams postponed study until the end of the semester and focused more on assigned texts and memorized information. Brightwell, Daniel, and Stewart (2004) who included online exams in their examination determined that a suitably constructed set of questions could be used to discriminate student abilities in either an open or closed book environment.

Online exam taking may have advantages (Stowell & Bennett, 2010) to some students. It may promote a different kind of learning. (Theophilides and Koutselini (2000) Monitoring use of a book

during a closed book exam taken online is impractical. Allowing open book exams levels the field for all students, and does not disadvantage those with principles. The findings of Brightwell, Daniel, and Stewart (2004) support observable experience. Good exams can be created whether offered closed or open book. In online courses the open book exam eliminates cheating by definition.

Exams can take on more questions beyond learning facts and concepts. Exams can involve higher order skills like making application and reaching conclusions. An imposed time limit can also reduce the possibility for negative behaviors like those described in the study of students in Cypress. (Theophilides & Koutseling, 2000) While following the flexibility suggestion, a number of days may be allowed for students to sit for the exam, but a time limit does not allow much time to use the book. Students who have not read or studied will find they have little time to look up answers, especially if they presume a good understanding of the facts and concepts.

### **Use a Problem Based Approach to Instruction**

Cheaney and Ingebritsen (2005) found that problem based learning can be as effective online as in the traditional environment in promoting higher order learning among students. Students in a discussion board in a health care Economics course addressing the issue of how human organs should be allocated will readily learn that economics is the science of allocating scarce resources. Students will also deal with related problems like the advantages and disadvantages of the market versus a planned system, along with the proper role of government. Faculty can promote the problem based approach online by selecting texts with that approach and adapting discussion boards to problem solving. The intent is to challenge and engage students in the content of the course, which itself has inherent reward through the pursuit of the solution, not always in finding a correct result.

### **Be Forgiving when Technical Glitches Online Interfere with Student Performance**

While there is little research on the role glitches play in student performance and satisfaction, the suggestion is to reduce dissatisfaction. Allow the student the benefit of the doubt where the technology is likely to be the culprit. Rubin and Fernandes (2010) found online learning management systems can affect the communication and satisfaction of faculty and students. It seems plausible the malfunction of these systems can cause dissatisfaction. Failing to meet a due date for submitting an assignment into a dropbox is not a glitch. However, a student who fails to be able to access or post answers to an exam is already frustrated. That student is looking for support and accommodation from the instructor, not additional unfair treatment.

### **Grade on a More Objective, than Subjective, Basis**

The instructor should facilitate students having as much control of their grade as possible. Even where discussion boards and short answer assignments and quizzes have an element of subjectivity, the project should earn points toward a pre-set total. That total earned can be converted into a letter grade by the student based on a scale outlined in a syllabus. Instructors should use rubrics and outline how points are earned on assignments, especially papers and discussion boards. Where an instructor has convinced the student that the student is in charge of earning points, a student who comes away with a total of 399 of 500 points has earned a C, not a B, and has little basis to turn to the instructor for a point relief.

### **Timely Grade Assignments and Provide Individual Positive or Negative Feedback**

Research suggests students have greater satisfaction when feedback is delivered (Espasa & Meneses, 2010; Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008; Palmer & Holt, 2009). The presence of feedback is associated with improved levels of performance and higher levels of satisfaction with the general running of the course, according to Espasa and Meneses (2010). Gallien and Oomen-Early (2008) found that students who received personalized feedback were more satisfied and performed better than receiving only collective feedback. Palmer and Holt (2009) suggest instructors provide constructive, timely feedback and ongoing communication between student and instructor.

Faculty should resist the tendency to spend time offering corrective feedback to those students who do not do well on assignments, then ignore or bypass those who do better work. A good job or effort is appropriate to reinforce those doing well. Faculty would be advised to use the individually based dropbox system to convey individual feedback (see Gallien and Oomen-Early), even if using the announcement/news method available for comment on overall class performance.

### **Reduce Ambiguity on How to Do Assignments Successfully**

Palmer and Holt (2009) found many students in wholly online units were most concerned about the same things that would concern any student, things like what the student has to know or do to get a good grade and receiving useful feedback on their assignments. How satisfied students were in the Palmer and Holt study depended on their ability to communicate and learn online, having a clear understanding of what was required to succeed, and how well they thought they were performing.

While the outcome is the same for online and traditional students, the interaction in a classroom setting can minimize this problem online. An assignment that is complex or has only limited initial explanation from the instructor in the traditional classroom can be more fully explained informally with the group listening in to questions they never asked. Achieving that same end online would almost require a discussion board. Emails are generally individually managed. An instructor online who receives a number of questions requesting clarification on an assignment from a few students would be wise to make the responses available to all. Instructors should use rubrics for what is expected and how grade points are earned.

### **Respond to E-Mail Inquiries Within 24 Hours**

Given the nature of online instruction an e-mail communication can be more important to student satisfaction and success than in a face to face traditional classroom. A student in a face to face classroom will know they have been heard, but in a virtual world, unless there is a response, there may have been no connection. A standard practice for some faculty is to commit to a 24 hour turnaround on email replies. Some faculty include a caveat of 72 hours for weekend e-mail arrivals. Gorsky and Blau (2009) found quicker response time to emails by an instructor earned those instructors higher ratings. While higher faculty ratings is not our goal, one can generalize from the Gorsky and Blau study that those students who rater faculty higher were more satisfied at least in that area.

### **Be Willing to Be an Unassigned Advisor**

Drouin (2008) found that a sense of community was related to student satisfaction, but was not related to either course grade or retention in an online course of study. At the same time, some students, according to Drouin, do not desire an online sense of community, while others enjoy, need, and desire sound interaction. This echoes the findings by others like Graf, et al. In contrast Chang (2004) found a mentor model implemented in one university was key to ensuring course completion rates and Grade Point Averages in online courses were as high as traditional courses.

In that vein Ullmann (2009) describes how key the advising role became at Purdue's Calumet School of Nursing, which was composed of all online or hybrid courses. It began using the course management system to develop online advising courses, followed by a graduate advisor course. Later courses were developed using the course management software to help students learn about student organizations and computers. (Ullmann, 2009)

Clearly the research suggests advising is an important intervention. Much like traditional advising, students online have different needs, and some ask for more guidance than others. A traditional advisor may reach out at times, or just be available at other times. This would be similar for the online instructor. The difference may be that those students taking a few, mostly online courses may feel more connection with the instructor teaching the course they have than with an assigned advisor. Requests for help may seem odd and unrelated to the course, but should be considered genuine. An instructor may wonder if the student is lazy or even arrogant, asking about next semester's courses you do not teach, graduation, and campus resources. On the other hand, from the student point of view, the student has found a trusted,

reliable support on which they can depend. Faculty should be willing to be that unassigned, but chosen advisor.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The suggestions are certainly more easily listed than implemented. The expectation is the effort to put these in place should have long term benefits. Some suggestions have links to empirical research support and deserve emphasis. These are:

- Structure the course, but allow flexibility.
- Offer open book exams.
- Use problem based instruction.
- Timely grade and provide feedback.
- Reduce ambiguity in assignments.
- Be willing to advise.

Other suggestions, while important, have less empirical support yet seem likely to make a difference:

- Ensure student course management system competence.
- Forgive technical glitches.
- Use objective grading.
- Respond timely to e-mails.

Future research should include studies to test these suggested ideas applied to online courses to determine if these interventions relate directly to improved graduation rates or retention. In the absence of such research and given the reality of the implementation of new funding formulas that include graduation rates, these practices deserve our attention.

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