

Using Learner Readiness to Improve Online Student Retention

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Abstract:

In today's economy student retention is important – especially for distance education programs. In this panel presentation learn how colleges and universities measure learner readiness and how they use these measurements to identify at-risk students followed by interventions to help these students succeed.

Education has been described by some as being “recession proof.” History has shown that in prior periods of economic recession in the United States that enrollment at colleges and universities has increased. This is probably due to the fact that persons feel that they need to continue their education to get a new job or keep the job they currently have.

At the time of this writing, the United States is experiencing another period of economic challenge. Many schools, especially community and technical colleges, are reporting growth in their enrollments. One facet of the educational sphere which is present during this recession that was not present during other recessions is distance learning.

At the same time that many persons are feeling the need to continue their education to maintain or improve their situation in life; through distance education these same persons have a level of convenient access to higher education that has never been present before. Through distance learning, a person who is laid off from work with very limited funds even to commute to a college campus can take online courses from home.

Many of these new, adult students are enrolling in college for the first time or they are returning to college after several years. The vast majority of these adult students have never experienced learning online. Most of them are apprehensive about the experience and many of them do not possess the attributes and skills needed to be successful learning in this new electronic paradigm.

How can schools help these students be successful? How can schools identify students whose individual attributes may make distance learning a challenge? How can schools determine which students need technical support even to get started with their online courses?

Hundreds of colleges and universities use a tool called READI – Readiness for Education At a Distance Indicator to identify learners who are at-risk of not doing well in an online course. In this paper/presentation leaders from two of these schools will share their experiences and lessons learned from identifying learner readiness and then providing the recourses necessary for remediation and support. Research will also be revealed through which dozens of schools reported which methodologies of using READI work best for their institution.

Brief Literature Review About Online Learner Readiness

With the shift toward online learning, it is important to explore the adoption of online education. Previous studies found that among academic leaders, 64 percent believe that it takes more discipline for a learner to succeed in an online course (Sloan Consortium, 2006); therefore, placing additional responsibility on students to be self-directed learners. Before the start of an online program or course, it should be determined if a learner's instructional need can be resolved through a distance education approach (Willis & Lockee, 2004). Assessing the pre-requisite skills of the distance learner is critical (Hsiu-Mei & Liaw, 2004; Simonson et al., 2003). Learners need to have enough pre-requisite skills of technological proficiency and a strong motivation to learn by technology (Hsiu-Mei & Liaw, 2004). Because of the difficulty in accommodating a group of learners with a wide range of acquired skills, requirements for pre-requisite skills should be set (Falvo & Solloway, 2004). A researched method of examining the notion of online readiness is listed using three aspects: (a) Student's preference for online form of instructional delivery as compared to traditional face to face instruction; (b) Student confidence in using electronic communication for learning and competence and confidence in the use of Internet and computer-mediated communication; and (c) Ability to engage in autonomous learning (P. J. Smith et al., 2003).

Case Study One: Columbus Technical College, Columbus, Georgia

Ray Mercer is the Director of Virtual Learning for Columbus Technical College in Columbus, Georgia. Columbus Technical College was one of the first institutions to use READI and has been using READI for over four years. About 5000 students at Columbus Technical College have taken the READI assessment.

Columbus Technical College uses READI in three ways:

1. It is used as part of an online student success course, OLE' (Online Learning for Everyone). The results of the assessment are sent to the student success center, the CARE Center. Counselors review the results and recommend remediation as appropriate.
2. Individual online and hybrid instructors use it to get a snapshot view of their classes. Of particular interest to them are Reading Comprehension Levels and Learning Styles.
3. Developmental Studies faculty use it as an additional assessment of their students reading comprehension levels.

It is very important that in each of the three models in which we use READI that a person from our college review's the learner's readiness scores and communicates with them about their scores and the resources for remediation and support which we provide.

It is a fact that many adult students are not ready to study online. After these persons complete the READI assessment they could feel discouraged and thoughts of dropping out of the program could occur. It is at this point that we recognize that it is very important that a person from the college communicate with these students to encourage them to persist and to provide the support that they need to be successful.

We could "stick our heads in the sand" and not measure student readiness and as a result these same students who are not ready who very likely drop out of the program. But if we can identify their deficiencies early on and then support them there is a much greater likelihood that they will persist.

Case Study Two: Texas Women's University, Denton, Texas

Mike Simmons is the Assistant Vice President for Life Long Learning at Texas Women's University in Denton, Texas. Texas Women's University is completing their first year of using READI to identify learner readiness.

Texas Women's University began using READI in 2008 with two departments offering the service to their students: Health Studies and Health Care Administration. All new students in these two programs are required to take the self assessment during the program orientation course. At the time of this writing about

seventy-five students have completed the assessment. About a dozen prospective students for these programs have also taken the assessment.

At Texas Women's University we feel that the most appropriate usage of the instrument is in the advising process for students who are new to distance education. We feel very strongly that the READI scores should not be used as a gate keeper to prevent a person from enrolling in distance education courses. Rather our position is that we allow any interested person to take our distance education courses and we then use their readiness scores to help them be successful.

One of the things which we do to ensure that the departments which use READI use it in an appropriate way is to require them to sign an acceptable use agreement. The text of this agreement is pasted below:

READI Use Agreement

The Readiness for Education At a Distance Indicator (READI) is an online self-assessment tool to provide students with information on their ability to succeed in distance education courses. The purpose of READI is to help students learn more about skills and traits that have been shown to help students become successful in distance education, and as a tool for program and department advisors to utilize when working with new distance students. Program and departmental use of READI must be approved by the chair and dean.

- Student scores may not be used to impact their application to a university or program, or used in any way during admission decisions.
- The program or department will designate a representative to serve as the contact person, and the recipient of assessment information.
- Student performance data will be compiled in a spreadsheet report and the program or department representative may request this data from the READI administrator once per semester.

2008 READI Usage Survey

Dr. Mac Adkins is the Principal Consultant for DECADE Consulting, LLC which is the parent company which owns and provides READI through eLearningToolBox.com. In 2008 he conducted research through which all schools which use READI were surveyed to indicate how they use identifying learning readiness to help their students. Leaders from 83 schools responded to the survey.

The following findings emerged from that research:

1. The most common way that schools provide access to READI is through the school's website. The second most common way is through embedding READI as an assignment into an orientation course.
2. Most schools provide READI as an option to students but about 30% of schools do require that students take READI.
3. Most schools make READI available to all students but about 30% make it available only to distance education students.
4. About 30% of schools go over the READI scores one-to-one with students.

Comments made by schools about their experience in using READI to measure online learner readiness:

1. READI offers a realistic view of one's ability to navigate in an online learning environment. It also highlights the individual's potential conflict area, i.e., doesn't have a computer, etc. From our perspective, READI offers an unbiased, objective overview of the student's ability to succeed in an online learning environment.
2. Students are encouraged to use the data for their own benefit. Many report sharing the data with parents and friends, and say the data is helpful in their online studies.
3. We use the data to learn more about student demographics, learning styles, and preparedness for participating in online classes. The information we gather from READI informs the development of student services/tutorials.

4. READI addresses all the major problems that online students face. Even if a student takes an online class when READI seems to indicate that the student is probably not prepared, at least that student knows what to expect.
5. I believe that the students enjoy the ease of the testing and immediate results. I think it is a very easy and user friendly tool. I appreciate the fact that you allow storage of previous assessments.
6. READI is a great pre-assessment tool for those students who would have the intention to go through flexible learning. It allows both students and administrators to determine where the students stand in terms of the technical knowledge, competency skills and the personal attributes in order to achieve Student Success. Likewise, the READI is a good tool to develop a baseline for student demographics to better improve the institution effectiveness plan (IEP).
7. READI helped our department dispel some myths about student preparedness. It helps us bring look carefully at other variables that affect student success, rather than "lack of technology experience"

References

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