

Running Head: STUDENT SUCCESS IN AN ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Student Success in an Online Learning Environment

by

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Abstract

Enrollment in online courses is a growing phenomenon in American higher education. As enrollment increases there is recognition that indicators of quality must be established and evaluated. Course completion is one such quality indicator. There is considerable variability in course completion rates for online courses, and this contributes to the debate about whether online courses should have a completion rate comparable to that seen in face-to-face courses. It is recognized, however, that students who enroll in online courses tend to be older and are managing multiple competing priorities. This finding alone may explain part of the higher attrition rate in online courses. This project presents a review of the literature, identification of best practices in online learning, and a discussion of online learning at a community college in Massachusetts.

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## Introduction

Online education is a multifaceted phenomenon that opens new markets for institutions of higher education while simultaneously providing increased access to education for a population of learners who identify barriers to attending traditional, or face-to-face, classes. The decision to enter into the online education market, however, is not to be taken lightly by college administrators and faculty. Administrators and faculty must complete a feasibility study to determine if the institutional resources are adequate to develop, implement, and maintain an online program. Cost considerations include not only substantial capital expenses associated with obtaining a course management system (CMS), but also staff and faculty development costs – including real dollars and opportunity costs. A high-quality online program can address a myriad of educational needs, ranging from providing access to home-bound children in primary and secondary education up to and including just-in-time professional development for a highly evolved and technical workforce (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacke, 2003). On the other hand, an online program that is implemented without adequate planning and support not only fails to address educational needs, but also adds to the ongoing dialogue about the inadequacy of the American educational system as a whole.

Online educational experiences are enhanced when the institution assigns one individual primary responsibility for insuring the quality components of online course offerings, not the least of which is to provide adequate professional development opportunities for faculty in the area of asynchronous pedagogy (Shelton & Saltsman, 2005). In fact, administrators must recognize that staffing is both the key to a successful online program and the source of the most complaints about online programs (Shea, Motiwalla, & Lewis, 2001; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2003). Staffing for an online program includes administrative and technical

personnel to maintain the CMS, as well as instructional designers who can assist faculty as they convert existing and develop new courses using pedagogical principles appropriate for a distance education model of instruction (Shelton & Saltsman, 2005; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2003).

New student markets improve the institution's revenue stream; however, additional income will be offset by costs associated with implementing and maintaining a functional CMS; providing comprehensive technical support for faculty and students; and, providing professional development for faculty who wish to engage in developing and implementing online courses. All members of the institution's leadership team must participate in maintaining the balance between the business and academic components of online education. Sound business plans and management practices provide the framework within which attention can be paid to learning outcomes and pedagogical strategies. It is within an effectively managed institution that the focus can be directed to "the experiences of the student, instructor and institution" rather than to the bottom line (Shelton & Saltsman, 2005, p. 49).

Enrollment in online courses continues to grow. During the academic year 2000-2001, 56 percent of two- and four-year, degree-granting institutions in the United States offered online education. Another 12 percent of two- and four-year, degree-granting institutions anticipated implementing an online component of their academic programming by 2004 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). As enrollment increases, completion rates in online courses are now attracting attention from a variety of institutional and government sources, and are used as a measure of quality and accountability (Howell, Laws, & Lindsay, 2004; Varughese, 2005). It is well documented that student retention in online courses is frequently lower than that found in comparable face-to-face classroom courses (Bolliger & Josephson, 2003; DeTure, 2004; Dupin-

Bryant, 2004; Howell, Laws, & Lindsay, 2004; Lorenzetti, 2005a; Morris, Wu, & Finnegan, 2005; Roach, 2002; Stover, 2005).

This paper uses a review of the literature to describe the issue of student retention in online courses. Best practices related to student success in an online learning environment are presented. The project concludes with an exploration of factors that lead to student success in online courses at a community college in Massachusetts as perceived by faculty who teach online courses; professional advising staff; and professional staff in the Center for Instructional Technology.

### Review of the Literature

Students who enroll in online courses report a variety of factors that influence their decision. There is considerable tension between students' desire to enroll in face-to-face courses if they had no barriers to free choice, e.g., work and family commitments, and their need to enroll in online courses if they are to have access to education (Lorenzetti, 2005b; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2003; Smith, Murphy, & Mahoney, 2003). The quality of online courses and programs is undergoing scrutiny by various regulatory and governmental agencies (National Education Association, 2000; Office of Postsecondary Education, 2006), and student retention in online courses is used as an indicator of quality (Howell, Laws, & Lindsay, 2004; Varughese, 2005).

#### *Defining retention in online courses*

Retention in online courses is generally accepted as lower than in face-to-face courses; however there is considerable variation in retention across institutions. Some institutions report retention in online courses consistent with retention in their face-to-face offerings, while others

report drop out rates as high as 50% (Howell, Laws, & Lindsay, 2004; Morris, Wu, & Finnegan, 2005; Shelton & Saltsman, 2005). Part of the difficulty in assessing retention in online courses stems from lack of a consistent method for measuring retention, resulting in variation in the way retention is measured across institutions both regionally and nationwide. The issue is further complicated because institutions apply different methods for course completion when evaluating face-to-face and online courses, resulting in internal inconsistencies in managing the data that describes retention (Howell, Laws, & Lindsay, 2004).

Students who enroll in online courses tend to be older and are managing multiple competing priorities, including family, work, and academic obligations. Consequently, adult learners are part-time students at a rate higher than found in the traditional 18-24 year old college student group. This finding alone may explain part of the higher attrition rate in online courses. Bolam & Dodgson (2003, p. 181) assert that adult students are “most likely to leave the university because of ‘facts of life’ reasons, the most significant and influential of which is finance,” a finding that is supported by Morris, et al. who found that the availability of financial aid is a significant factor in predicting course completion (Morris, Wu, & Finnegan, 2005).

The absolute rate of retention may be of less importance than what institutions do with the information once administrators and faculty become aware of drop-out rates in online courses. Institutional thresholds for retention can be established, and course completion rates analyzed both for absolute, or semester-by-semester completion rates, and for trends indicating that course and program completion rates are declining which is an indicator of a quality concern (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2006). The adoption of best practices in online education can improve retention, and ultimately student success, in an institution’s online distance education component.

*Best practices in online student retention*

A literature review was conducted to identify best practices in enhancing student success, which is defined as retention in online courses. Four general categories of best practices were identified, with each category containing several elements.

*Determine student readiness for online learning.* Smith, Murphy, and Mahoney (2003) argue that students who are successful in online courses are (1) prepared to engage in online learning by deliberately choosing the methodology over face-to-face instruction; (2) competent in the use of technology, including the ability to access and navigate the Internet; and, (3) able to learn autonomously. Pre-enrollment assessment of readiness to enroll in online courses can reduce the number of students who subsequently choose either to withdraw from or abandon the online course (Dupin-Bryant, 2004; Lorenzetti, 2005a; Gaide, 2004). Factors associated with success in online courses include grade point average (high school or college); student age; gender; and, locus of control, which is an indicator of motivation (Dupin-Bryant, 2004; Morris, Wu, & Finnegan, 2005).

Assessment instruments tend to focus on cognitive style, self-efficacy, and technical literacy. Advisors must use caution, however, when interpreting the results of a pre-enrollment student assessment. DeTure (2004) investigated the attributes of community college students who were enrolled in general education courses in order to develop an understanding of the student characteristics associated with successful online learners. Six (6) general education courses were selected from among the 231 online courses offered, and the total population of 161 enrollees in these courses was invited to participate in the study. While the sample was relatively small (73 students elected to participate), DeTure's findings indicate that cognitive style and self-efficacy indices were not useful predictors of student success in an online course. Advisors who

rely heavily on cognitive style and self-efficacy score may unnecessarily steer students away from taking online courses.

Advisors do, however, have other assessment information that can be used to assist in determining a student's readiness to enroll in online courses. Students who are taking their first online course, especially those with low grade point averages, are at risk for not completing the course. The number of years that a student has used a computer does not appear to predict successful completion of online courses; however, certain skills associated with technical competence (e.g., the ability to search the Internet for needed information, an understanding of operating systems and how to manage files, and the ability to use Internet applications) can be used as predictors of successful online learners (Dupin-Bryant, 2004).

*Orientation activities.* Face-to-face orientations, when possible, enhance the students' feeling of community within the institution (Gaide, 2004). Bolliger and Josephson (2003) assert that orientation, which can be presented in an online format, is one of the most critical elements in student success. Students who enroll in online courses must be provided with information about institutional policies, procedures, and resources. An institutional orientation can address this information need. Orientation content may also include familiarizing the student with the Internet and its power as a learning tool; resources to assist online learners with time management; activities to begin engaging the students with each other and the institution; and, resources for technical and academic assistance.

An orientation specific to the course serves as the vehicle for disseminating information about the instructor's requirements for postings and responses in the threaded discussions. Students report that the initial experience with online learning is frequently an overwhelming and isolating experience that improves as one becomes an effective and efficient learner in the online

learning environment (LaPadula, 2003). Orientation activities can facilitate the development of effective and efficient learners by addressing the strategies associated with success in the online environment, including time management and self-confidence.

*Establishing a sense of community.* Success among online learners is enhanced when there is a feeling of connectedness to the institution, their instructors, and other learners. Using the available technological resources, colleges and universities can create student government forums for online learners; establish learning communities that include peer tutors and online study groups; and, create vehicles that allow online learners who live at a distance from each other and the college to communicate with each other either synchronously or asynchronously through the use of chat rooms and threaded discussion boards (Bolliger & Josephson, 2003; LaPadula, 2003). The college's website can serve as a focal point from which to develop a virtual community where academics and student services intersect, similar to the interconnection experienced by ground-based students (Kretovics, 2003). The current popularity of "one-stop services" for student services (e.g., registration, financial aid, academic and career advising) can also be offered using web-based technology, thus contributing to the ability of the online distance education learner to establish a sense of connectedness with the college or university.

Rovai and Baker (2005) demonstrated that women tend to develop a stronger sense of community in online classes than men. Women enroll in online courses at a higher rate than men and they classify their experiences as "socially richer" and "educationally more effective" than men (Rovai & Baker, 2005, p. 40). These findings may explain the finding that women are generally more successful in online courses than are men.

Students who are motivated by the online course instructor tend to be more successful as a result of their engagement with the online teaching and learning process. Learning activities

that will be used during the course need to be appropriately challenging, and progress from simple to complex; include a variety of presentation methods; require the student to engage in active problem solving; and include activities that relevant to the students' learning goals. Within the framework of the course outcomes, students can be allowed to design activities that are meaningful to their career goals and personal experiences, thus providing the student with some control over his or her learning experience (Beffa-Begrini, Cohen, & Miller, 2002; Notar, Wilson, & Montgomery, 2005). These strategies are consistent with contemporary adult learning theories associated with practical learning experiences (Tennant, Pogson, & Brookfield, 2005); consequently, the success of adult students enrolled in online courses can be enhanced by applying adult learning theory.

Communication between the course instructor and students, and among the enrolled students themselves, can be used to enhance the feeling of community while simultaneously serving to allay anxiety associated with the initial experiences with online learning. Effective instructor-led communication provides the framework within which there is structure to the learning process; scaffolding activities promote progression from simple to complex materials; and collaboration among students is facilitated (Beffa-Begrini, Cohen, & Miller, 2002; Havard, Du, & Olinzock, 2005)

*Institutional support.* Institutional support can be described from the perspectives of establishing and maintaining a functional technology platform, the ongoing professional development and support of faculty who engage in online teaching, and support of the students who enroll in online courses and programs. The CMS represents the interface between the student and the institution, with both students and faculty relying on the functionality of the CMS throughout the course. An unstable platform that results in frequent disruptions or lack of ability

to access the course room results in student frustration and dissatisfaction with the online methodology and may result in course abandonment. Quality is enhanced when the institution centralizes the system for supporting and maintaining the online academic component (The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2000; Shelton & Saltsman, 2005).

Faculty who engage in online teaching require professional development in the principles of asynchronous pedagogy if they are to transition successfully from the traditional model of the “sage on the stage” to the “guide on the side.” In contrast to their role in a ground-based classroom, faculty who teach online often assume “the additional roles of instructional designer, technology specialist, and administrative advisor (Restauro, 2004, p. 32). In addition to mastering the pedagogy of online learning, faculty need technical training to develop proficiency in using the CMS (The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2000; Shelton & Saltsman, 2005). Faculty also benefit from understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the CMS and how these impact the teaching and learning process. Dynamic online course presentations enhance student retention by creating a learning environment that motivates students, resulting in increased engagement with the course materials and, ultimately, increased student retention (Beffa-Negrini, Cohen, & Miller, 2002; Havard, Du, & Olinzock, 2005; Notar, Wilson, & Montgomery, 2005).

Faculty who teach in online courses also recognize the additional workload associated with developing and maintaining a quality learning environment. Preparatory time is significantly increased when initiating an online course, although the preparation time does seem to decrease after the first two semesters of offering a specific course in an online format (Pachnowski & Jurvzyk, 2003; Restauro, 2004). Institutional support for faculty who are facilitating online courses impacts the degree of satisfaction perceived by those faculty, and may

contribute to the ultimate success of the students who are enrolled in these online distance component of the institution.

Students who enroll in online courses deserve institutional support services on an equitable basis with the face-to-face student population (Kretovics, 2003; LaPadula, 2003; Restauri, 2004; Shelton & Saltsman, 2005; Office of Postsecondary Education, 2006; The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2000). General information about enrollment, tuition and fees, books and other materials required to support the learning process, and institutional policies can be provided to students using print and electronic media. An orientation to student support services and how to access them from a distance is necessary to promote student success. During the online courses students need access to technical support, including an orientation to the CMS framework and how to navigate it during the teaching and learning experience. A process for handling student complaints and to provide access to due process is required (The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2000).

Distance inarguably presents institutional challenges to providing student support services; however, it is not necessary to create new services for the online student population. Existing student services can be examined to identify ways in which the needs of online learners can be addressed through policies, procedures, and resources that are in place (Floyd, Casey-Powell, 2004; LaPadula, 2003). Many student services can be provided in an online format. LaPadula (2003) identified three categories of student support services that have been made available using online methodology: (1) advising services; (2) personal, mental health, and career counseling; and (3) community building activities. College web sites contain online resources including catalogs, registration and enrollment systems. E-mail and telephone communication can provide timely information to specific, individual questions while frequently-asked-questions

(FAQ) sections can service large numbers of students when the questions are of a more general nature (Kretovics, 2003).

Knowledge of the target, or student, population is essential not only for the institution but also for faculty. Novice online learners require more support from faculty in terms of responding to questions about assignments, issues related to technical support and access to course materials, and group discussions (Restauri, 2004). Adult learning theory can provide the framework for incorporating social learning by allowing students to support each other as they develop responses to assignments and to each other during the threaded discussions. Student success can be enhanced when the instructor develops a learning environment that stimulates independent and critical thinking by the student, thus promoting deep and enduring learning of the subject matter (Havard, Du, & Olinzock, 2005).

According to the American Association of Community Colleges, approximately one-half of the total college student population is enrolled in the national system of community colleges (AACC, 2004). The community college student body is deeply diverse, ranging from the traditional 18-year-old recent high school graduate who intends to transfer to a four-year institution to adults who are seeking access to terminal vocational education so they can either enter, or re-enter, the workforce with solid technical training. Academic advising to assist in course selection based on curriculum requirements and career goals, pre-entry academic skill assessment to determine the appropriate course placement, and access to tutoring services to provide academic support are essential services for community college students. While these services are in place for on-ground students, community colleges are now exploring ways in which to identify the needs of the online student population and to provide academic services in

a format that meets the needs of this unique segment of the institution's constituency (Floyd, Casey-Powell, 2004).

### Online Learning at Northern Essex Community College

Northern Essex Community College (NECC) is one of the fifteen (15) publicly supported community colleges in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. NECC launched its online course offerings in the fall 2001 semester, with an inaugural offering of six (6) courses with 115 learners enrolled. There has been steady growth in the online course offerings, with 47 courses and 1,277 learners enrolled in the fall 2005 semester (NECC Office of Institutional Research, 2006). Since the inception of the online course offerings, NECC has provided strong faculty development in the area of online pedagogy. Faculty who have an interest in teaching online are encouraged (but not required) to attend WebCamp, a one-week long workshop in curriculum design, developing an online presentation method, and the use of WebCT. The college's decision to install a Director of Instructional Technology who has primary responsibility for the quality of the online course offerings, and to provide significant opportunities for faculty development, is consistent with Shelton and Saltzman's description of best practices (2005).

There is increasing concern at the senior administrative level about the online course completion rate. While the online course completion rate has increased from 52% in fall 2001 to 64% in fall 2005 (NECC Office of Institutional Research), there is increasing concern about the gap between course completion rates in face-to-face and online courses (74% vs. 64%, respectively). This project explores the factors that lead to student success in online courses at NECC as perceived by faculty who teach online courses; professional advising staff; and professional staff in the Center for Instructional Technology.

An open-ended survey instrument was distributed via e-mail to four constituency groups at NECC: (1) faculty who teach online courses; (2) Center for Instructional Technology (CIT) staff; (3) professional staff who work as academic advisors; and, (4) faculty who advise students as part of their instructional workload. The open-ended questions were developed based on best practices identified in the literature review. The surveys and cover letters (Appendix A) were approved by the NECC Director of Institutional Research.

The CIT is staffed by a full time Director of Instructional Technology and two instructional designers. All three individuals responded to the survey. There was a high degree of congruence between the answers provided by CIT staff and faculty who teach online. This is not a surprising finding since all faculty who teach online at NECC, with the exception of one individual who completed her masters degree in Distance Learning at Capella University, attended WebCamp and worked with the CIT staff during the transformation of their face-to-face courses to an online format. CIT staff consistently responded in ways that embrace the concepts of best practices as exemplified in the literature.

#### *Perceptions of faculty who teach online courses*

Surveys were distributed to 32 faculty who taught at least one online section during the spring 2006 semester, or were scheduled to teach at least one online section during the summer 2006 semester at NECC. Fourteen (14) responses were received by the deadline of June 19, representing a 44% response rate.

71% of the faculty responses indicate that students spend more time completing the activities associated with online learning than the students in face-to-face sections of the same content. The faculty who responded to this question are well experienced in online teaching, having taught between two and 20 sections in an online format.

Faculty were asked to describe the three factors that lead to success in an online course. Content analysis revealed three dominant themes: (1) presence of the faculty; (2) time management, and (3) self-sufficiency. Two other themes emerged, though not to the level of those found dominant: (1) computer/technology skills, and (2) reading and writing skills.

Faculty were subsequently asked to describe the three most common reasons that students drop, abandon, or fail online courses. Content analysis revealed three dominant themes: (1) belief that online courses are easier (take less time) than face-to-face courses; (2) inadequate time management; and, (3) lack of self-direction. Two other minor themes emerged: (1) lack of instructor interaction in the course room or feedback on assignments/postings, and (2) life events.

All faculty responses indicated that the institution provided adequate support through WebCamp and the ability to work with the staff in CIT.

Faculty responses indicated that they are extremely active in the course rooms, ranging from logging in several times daily to at least four days each week. In addition, faculty indicated that they respond to student e-mail within a two to 24-hour timeframe.

#### *Perceptions of professional staff who serve as academic advisors*

Surveys were distributed to 18 professional staff who serve as academic advisors in the NECC Career Planning and Academic Advising Center. Fourteen (14) responses were received by the deadline of June 19, representing a 78% response rate.

Academic advisors appear to have a knowledge gap with regard to the amount of time required when students enroll in an online class. Six advisors (43% of responses) reported they have no knowledge of the time commitment required in online courses. Of the remaining eight responses, two indicated they believe less time is required for an online course than a face-to-

face course; two indicated they believe the time commitment is equivalent for online and face-to-face courses; and, four indicated they believe an online course requires the student to commit more time than when enrolling in a face-to-face course.

Advisors were asked to describe the three factors that lead to success in an online course. Content analysis revealed three dominant themes: (1) time management, (2) computer skills, and (3) self-sufficiency. Two of these themes, time management and self-sufficiency are consistent with the dominant themes identified by faculty who teach online courses.

Advisors were subsequently asked to describe the three most common reasons that students drop, abandon, or fail online courses. Content analysis revealed three dominant themes: (1) lack of instructor interaction in the course room or feedback on assignments/postings; (2) inadequate time management; and, (3) lack of self-direction. Two other minor themes emerged: (1) belief that online courses are easier (take less time) than face-to-face courses, and (2) inability to use the technology.

Academic advisors appear to have a knowledge gap with regard to the factors associated with success in an online course as well as the barriers to success when enrolling in an online course. Approximately 30% indicated they did not identify factors that lead to student success in an online course, nor could they identify factors that are associated with students who drop, abandon, or fail online courses.

Advisors tend to use two criteria when determining if an online course is an appropriate selection for a student who asks for information about this instructional methodology. Primarily the advisors tend to determine if this will be the student's first experience with an online course. If the answer is affirmative, most advisors recommend that the student speak with either a peer who has taken an online course, or to an instructor who teaches an online course. Advisors also

recommend that students' complete the self-assessment found in the college's Distance Education website, and to use the information gained as a result of this activity to self-select an online experience.

*Perceptions of faculty who serve as advisors but do not teach online courses*

Surveys were distributed to 30 faculty who do not teach online courses, but do provide academic advising as part of their contractually-mandated workload. The time of the survey distribution was such that faculty are off-campus for the summer and tend to check their e-mail infrequently; therefore, only five (5) responses were received by the June 19 deadline. Consequently the results were not analyzed for inclusion in the project.

### Conclusion

NECC is committed to providing online courses and programs for its student body. The online courses have now reached a critical mass, and both faculty and staff recognize that it is time for the college to consider how this instructional methodology impacts the academic culture of the institution. There is concern about the course completion rate for online courses, since at 64% it is approximately 10% lower than the completion rate for face-to-face courses. The course completion rate for both online and face-to-face courses has remained stable for the past four years.

NECC currently uses an optional self assessment tool to allow students to determine if they are a good candidate for success in an online course. The results of this self-assessment are known only to the student, and pre-enrollment advising is optional as well. Online course completion could likely be enhanced with an improved pre-enrollment system for assessment and advising.

The academic advisors exhibit gaps in their knowledge about online courses, specifically related to the amount of time needed to be a successful learning in an online environment. There is a need for professional development for the professional staff who serve as academic advisors. As a follow-up activity to this course project, this learner will develop an orientation module for academic advisors to improve their knowledge about this teaching and learning methodology.

Other follow-up activities include resubmitting the survey instruments to faculty who provide academic advising as part of their contractually mandated workloads. This activity will be scheduled for mid-to-late September 2006 to enhance the return rate. It is essential to establish the base of knowledge for faculty who advise students, and to provide professional development activities appropriate for faculty advisors.

In addition, students who are currently enrolled in online courses will be surveyed during the month of July to determine their perspectives about online learning. This learner is currently working with the Dean of Institutional Research to determine if a survey of students who enrolled in online courses but failed to complete them successfully (e.g., drop, abandon, or fail) can be conducted. The findings from analyzing the student surveys will be incorporated into the professional development activities for faculty and professional staff advisors.

Online learning opportunities provide access to higher education for students who could not otherwise take college courses and potentially earn a college degree. The success of online learning depends on a triangulation of responsibility for student success: the institution, the faculty, and the student.

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APPENDIX A

June 10, 2006

Dear Colleague,

I am currently enrolled in a doctoral program and this quarter I am taking a class in “Administration and Leadership of Distance Education Programs.” We are required to complete a capstone project. After reviewing the retention data published by Tom Fallon describing the gap between the retention rates for students in our online courses and our face-to-face courses, and a discussion with David Kelley to determine how I could develop a capstone project that would be valuable to NECC, I have elected to explore the characteristics of faculty, students, and institutions that enhance student success in online courses and programs.

To this end, I am surveying faculty who teach online courses at NECC, students who enrolled in online courses at NECC, staff in CIT, and academic advisors – including staff in the Academic Advising Center and a sample of faculty who teach at NECC. The ultimate outcome of this project will be the development of a chapter that I will submit to Grace Dimmick with a request that it be considered for inclusion in the NECC Academic Advising Handbook. I will also explore with David Kelley, and Paul Bevilacqua and/or his successor, ways that I can share my findings with faculty and the administration at NECC.

I am interested in learning more about your perceptions of the factors that enhance, and deter, student success in online courses at NECC. The information you provide will be held in confidence. I will analyze your comments for themes and compare those themes that are identified to the literature on student retention in online courses. No identifying information will be included in my project, and I will commit to sharing my findings with any of you who participate before I reveal them to any other constituency at NECC. I will also commit to modifying or eliminating any information that you believe could either be used to identify you individually or could potentially be construed as evaluative.

My experience at NECC has shown me that we all share a common goal of identifying ways to help our students succeed in their academic endeavors. You may be aware that a Process Management Team is being established to explore the issue of student retention in online courses, and I hope that my project will provide some useful background material for this team.

As always, your participation in my course project is completely voluntary. I will greatly appreciate your contributions should you decide to complete the short survey that I am attaching to this communication. Thank you in advance, and if you decide to participate please return your survey to me via e-mail by **Monday, June 19**.

Sincerely,

Jackie L. Long-Goding

**Role: Academic Advisors (Faculty and Staff in the Academic Advising Center)**

1. A student is interested in enrolling in an online section. How do you determine if this is an appropriate selection for the individual student?
2. What do you see as your role in enhancing student success in online courses?
3. What do you see as the three most important factors that lead to student success in an online course?
4. What do you see as the three most common reasons that students drop, abandon, or fail online courses?
5. In general, do you believe that students in online sections spend about as much, more, or less time on course activities as students who enroll in a face-to-face section of the same course?
6. A student tells you she needs to enroll in an online section because she is working full time, enrolled in four face-to-face sections, and cares for three young children; therefore, she cannot fit another class into her schedule. How would you advise this student?
7. What strategies do you recommend that students use to minimize anxiety about the online methodology, course requirements, and mastery of the academic material?
8. What strategies do you recommend students use to stay on schedule when they are enrolled in an online course?
9. If you could communicate only one piece of information about online learning to students who are considering enrolling in their first online course, what would you say?

**Role: Faculty Who Teach in Online Courses**

1. How many online courses have you taught at NECC?
2. Do you teach online courses for any other institutions of higher education?
3. How did you learn to teach using an online methodology?
4. What do you see as the three most important factors that lead to student success in an online course?
5. What do you see as the three most common reasons that students drop, abandon, or fail online courses?
6. Do students in your online section spend about as much, more, or less time on course activities as students who enroll in a face-to-face section of the same course you now teach (or have taught in the past)?
7. How often do you log in to your course room each week?
8. How long does it generally take you to respond to a student question or posting in the threaded discussion area?
9. How do you establish an appropriate challenge level for the variety of students in your online courses? For example, how does the course progression lead from directive activities to independent work?
10. What kind of variety do you include in your course room assignments and activities?
11. What strategies do you use to minimize student anxiety about the online methodology, course requirements, and mastery of the academic material?
12. How do you promote interaction among the students who are enrolled in your online courses?
13. If you could communicate only one piece of information about online learning to students who are considering enrolling in their first online course, what would you say?

**Role: Staff in CIT**

1. What attributes do faculty need to transition from the traditional “sage on the stage” to the role of “guide on the side” as the facilitator of an online course?
2. What is your role in promoting success for faculty and learners who choose to engage in an online learning experience?
3. What do you see as the three most important factors that lead to student success in an online course?
4. What do you see as the three most common reasons that students drop, abandon, or fail online courses?
5. In general, do you believe that students in online sections spend about as much, more, or less time on course activities as students who enroll in a face-to-face section of the same course?
6. How often do believe that faculty need to log in to their course room each week?
7. What is a reasonable length of time between the student posing a question and receiving a response from the instructor, or for the instructor to respond to student postings in the threaded discussion area?
8. When working with faculty who anticipate implementing an online course, how are they assisting in establishing an appropriate challenge level for the variety of students enrolled in the online courses? For example, how does the course progression lead from directive activities to independent work?
9. When working with faculty who anticipate implementing an online course, what kind of variety do you advocate using in the course room assignments and activities?
10. What strategies do you recommend that faculty use to minimize student anxiety about the online methodology, course requirements, and mastery of the academic material?
11. What strategies do you recommend faculty use to promote interaction among the students who are enrolled in online courses?
12. If you could communicate only one piece of information about online learning to students who are considering enrolling in their first online course, what would you say?

July 15, 2006

Dear Student,

I am currently enrolled in a doctoral program and this quarter I am taking a class in “Administration and Leadership of Distance Education Programs.” We are required to complete a capstone project. I am interested in learning more about the characteristics of faculty, students, and institutions that enhance student success in online courses and programs.

To this end, I am surveying students who have enrolled in online courses at NECC, faculty who teach online courses at NECC, and academic advisors. I hope to develop an understanding of the online community at NECC from many perspectives, and to use that understanding to enhance student success.

My experience at NECC has shown me that we all share a common goal of identifying ways to help our students be successful in their academic endeavors. I am interested in learning more about your perceptions of the factors that help, and hinder, your success in online courses at NECC. The information you provide will be held in confidence. I will analyze your comments for themes and compare those themes that are identified to the literature on student retention in online courses. Responses will be displayed only in summary form. No identifying information will be included in my project, including the use of specific course names.

Your participation in my course project is completely voluntary. I will greatly appreciate your contributions should you decide to complete the short survey that I am attaching to this communication. Thank you in advance, and if you decide to participate please return your survey to me via e-mail by **Monday, August 7**.

Sincerely,

Jackie L. Long-Goding  
Dean of Health Professions

**Role: Student Who Has Taken an Online Course at NECC**

1. How many online courses have you registered for at NECC? Of those, how many have you completed with a grade of “C” or higher?
2. Have you taken any online courses at other colleges or universities? What was different between that experience and your experience at NECC?
3. Why did you choose to enroll in an online course?
4. What do you see as the three most important things that help you succeed in an online course?
5. From your own experience, what three things cause you to consider dropping or abandoning an online course? If you have earned a grade of less than “C”, what contributed to that experience?
6. Do you spend about as much, more, or less time on course activities in work for your online course as you spend (or have spent) in other similar courses taken in a face-to-face format?
7. How often do you log in to your course room each week?
8. How quickly does your instructor respond to questions you send, or to your postings in the threaded discussion area?
9. How does your instructor provide challenging learning experiences in your online course? Do assignments progress from simple and supported activities to independent work by the end of the course?
10. What kind of variety does your instructor include in your course room assignments and activities? Which are most helpful to you in learning the course material?
11. What activities does your instructor use to minimize student anxiety about the online methodology, course requirements, and mastery of the academic material?
12. How does your instructor promote interaction among the students who are enrolled in your online courses?
13. If you could communicate only one piece of information about online learning to fellow students who are considering enrolling in their first online course, what would you say?