

# Orientation Programs to Increase Retention in Online Community College Courses

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## INTRODUCTION

Learning is part of human nature, but formal learning is not always intuitive and needs guidance. This is especially true for learning at a distance. As the need for education increases, distance education is becoming a way to meet the growing demand (Hachey, Conway, & Wladis, 2013). Currently, 83.6% of colleges with 1,000–4,999 students offer distance/

online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2015). One definition of distance education is “institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors” (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012, p. 32). Teaching online is not as simple as posting a syllabus and videotaped lectures on a website; there should be intentional instructional design to transition a course from face to face to distance (Ko & Rossen, 2010). The basic day-to-day activities such as interactions between instructors and students or students and students; course handouts and syllabi; assignment submissions and assessments; and how to ask questions are different than in the traditional face-to-face classroom. For these reasons, instructors are expected to have pedagogical training as well as technical training to teach online courses at a distance (Ekstrand, 2012). Students must be shown how to navigate this kind of classroom too. Students need to be guided in order to know what is expected and those expectations need to be clearly articulated in more than one location (Simonson et al., 2012). Student support services and administrators must address the distance student’s specific needs by orienting students to this different type of classroom and format of



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learning. This should address everything from technical issues and the technical requirements of online learning, to course expectations, etiquette, and course procedures (Ko & Rossen, 2010).

### **ONLINE EDUCATION**

Reports from higher education institutions claim there is an increased demand for online courses over face-to-face courses (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Even though there is still resistance from faculty (who question the validity of online learning), more than 70.8% of chief academic leaders say that online learning must be part of their strategic planning (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Although distance education and online courses can be seen as a delivery method offering greater availability of education, there is a price associated with this increased access. Distance education is speculated to have lower completion rates and higher attrition rates than face-to-face courses. Retention is a concern because student failure can lead to less chance of enrolling in future courses, whereas student success increases these chances (Simonson et al., 2012). Currently, 7.1 million students are enrolling in online courses and 35.5% of all students have taken at least one online course in their career (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Considering these figures, retention for online courses needs to be a focus for administrators and student support services. Retention rates for distance education are cited as being much lower than their face-to-face counterparts (Gascoigne & Parnell, 2014; Taylor, Dunn, & Winn, 2015). There are many factors listed for these attrition rates, ranging from underestimating the time commitment involved in online learning to the difficulty of the courses (technical and subject matter). If the increase in enrollment of distance courses continues, then retention of students in these programs must be a priority.

### **COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

Enrollment at community colleges continues to grow. President Obama's proposed initiative to expand community college graduation rates to 5 million by 2020 means this increase will continue (Obama, 2010). The greater demand on community colleges is being met by offering online courses. In fact, approximately 61% of all community college students have taken an online course (Pearson Foundation, 2011). The increase in students taking online courses, combined with the research indicating that attrition rates are higher for online courses, is a cause for concern (Hachey et al., 2013). Community college students are already at greater risk of attrition in on-campus, face-to-face courses. Community college students are often considered nontraditional students with full-time jobs, children, and commitments (Hachey et al., 2013). According to the research, nontraditional students are at greater risk of noncompletion (Rovai & Downey, 2010). Nontraditional students tend to be older, may be first-generation college students, attend college part time, work, or be from minority populations. These nontraditional students often take advantage of online courses because they require less time commuting or actually sitting in class. Their reasons for attrition range from work and family commitments to being unprepared for college in general (Hachey et al., 2013). These are the students most at risk of dropping out (Pearson Foundation, 2011). This means community college students taking online courses should be a focus for retention interventions and suggestions.

### **RETENTION SUGGESTIONS**

There are a host of studies surrounding retention dating back to as early as the 1800s (Hachey et al., 2013). These studies suggest that there are many factors affecting attrition and retention. Some of these reasons may be out of anyone's control;

however, a few of them may be within the control of college administrators. Misunderstandings of the time and effort involved to complete an online course; having the skills for dealing with the technical aspects of online learning; the quality of interactions and relationships with faculty and peers; and the areas of grading, feedback, and communication are all aspects where administrators can work to improve student success (Cho, 2012; Karp & Bork, 2012). Administrators can provide guidance for both students and faculty to improve the learning experience. Also in these studies, suggestions for overcoming attrition and increasing retention included expanding the types of support systems offered to students, such as intervention and advising, and communicating high expectations (Hart, 2012). Likewise, giving students a way to acclimate to school and providing a sense of community were suggestions to encourage success (Cole, Shelley, & Swartz, 2014). These suggestions are especially true for online students, where there is a greater feeling of detachment. (Ekstrand, 2012; Rovai & Downey, 2010) Lastly, bolstering the quality of interactions between faculty and students, gaining faculty acceptance of online learning, and testing student's autonomy are also ways to raise retention rates (Ekstrand, 2012). Many of these suggestions can be part of an orientation that administrators use to help guide students as they begin taking courses. Adequately preparing students for online learning should be the first step to ensuring their success.

The special population of community college students requires attention too. The Pearson Foundation (2011) suggested community college students do not feel their high school experiences adequately prepare them for college courses. Research shows that this preparation is not simply academic related, but also the behaviors of the students such as skills, attitudes, and habits. These behaviors can be guided by setting students' expectations before they

begin school (Karp & Bork, 2012). This guidance is necessary for many students and can be provided by the college to help them understand how to be a college student. Students need to know how to be organized, how to study, and how to be proactive in advocating for themselves. Communication can be a barrier, but it can be overcome by clearly setting expectations and explaining unspoken rules and roles to students. The expectations, as well as the role the student plays in the learning process, can be unknown to students and often misunderstood. An orientation is one way to set clear expectations and help students understand their role as a student (Karp & Bork, 2012). The orientation should address the issues of study habits, communication, and time management, as well as the basics of online learning, navigating the specific course management systems, and assessing overall readiness for learning online (Cho, 2012).

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Theories surrounding attrition and retention span decades and help administrators understand some of the reasons why students do not succeed, as well as provide guidance when looking for ways to help. Tinto (1975) and Bean and Metzner (1985) created models that attempted to explain why some students were successful. Tinto focused on two factors: social and academic integration. He theorized that successful persistence involved individual characteristics and experiences prior to college along with experiences after admission. Tinto called these experiences after admission *integration variables* and broke the variables into two parts: academic experiences and social experiences. He theorized that a student is more likely to persist when he or she is more integrated. He calculated integration by grade point average and the frequency of positive interactions with peers and faculty. Rovai (2003) wrote that Tinto's theory was somewhat

limited for explaining the persistence of nontraditional students because they often do not have the same integration. Bean and Metzner's model added features that describe the persistence of nontraditional students. The model helps explain the characteristics of students older than 24, who do not live on campus, attend part time, and gain support mostly outside the institution. Rovai (2003) said Bean and Metzner's model was more appropriate for explaining the persistence of students learning at a distance. Their theory incorporated more of the environmental influences effecting nontraditional distance students such as employment and family responsibilities. The Bean and Metzner model was divided into variables called academic outcomes and psychological outcomes. Several models use a combination of these two theories to create more holistic approaches. Rovai (2003) merged the two theories for his model of student persistence. Rovai (2003) created a new model to explain student persistence in online distance education programs, which combined student characteristics and skills prior to admissions with external and internal factors affecting students after admission. Rovai (2003) recognized that there is no simple formula for success and that many factors are involved in a student's desire to persist.

Rovai (2003) created a category called factors prior to admissions which combined student characteristics, both demographics and academic performance, with student skills. He merged external and internal factors mentioned by Tinto (1975) and Bean and Metzner (1985) with students' needs and pedagogy to create a classification called factors after admission. These factors all affect a student's decision to persist in a course. Using Rovai's theory, the idea of using an orientation as a means of encouraging success for online community college students makes sense. A comprehensive orientation is the beginning of integration (social and academic), estab-

lishes the skills necessary for success, and promotes self-efficacy/autonomy. Figure 1 details the information in Rovai's model of his theory.

## ORIENTATION PROGRAMS

Studies have shown that students drop out for reasons that may be divided into three categories: factors related to students, factors related to courses or programs, and environmental factors (Lee & Choi, 2011). Factors related to students included academic background and grade point average, relevant academic experiences, skills, and study habits. Factors related to courses or programs included the design of the course, institutional supports, and interactions in the course with faculty and peers. Environmental factors included family commitments, work commitments, and the presence of external support. In fact, 75% of the reasons why students drop out can be resolved by having a greater understanding of students' challenges and by providing well-structured supports. Many of the specific factors listed earlier can be addressed by the school, at least partially, thus helping to reduce attrition rates. Some examples of strategies to promote retention include offering an orientation, providing academic advising throughout the semester, offering computer training, assessing student readiness before they begin courses, offering a cohort, and utilizing tutors (Hart, 2012; Lee & Choi, 2011). The orientation itself can even include several of these suggestions. Clearly, the best way to increase retention is to add several of these strategies. However, the orientation can be a first step that combines factors like assessing readiness with training and advising.

Several factors are important for a quality orientation program. The orientation must be easy to use, must be offered at the right time, and must be specific to the learning management system (LMS) being used. Basic information such as an intro-

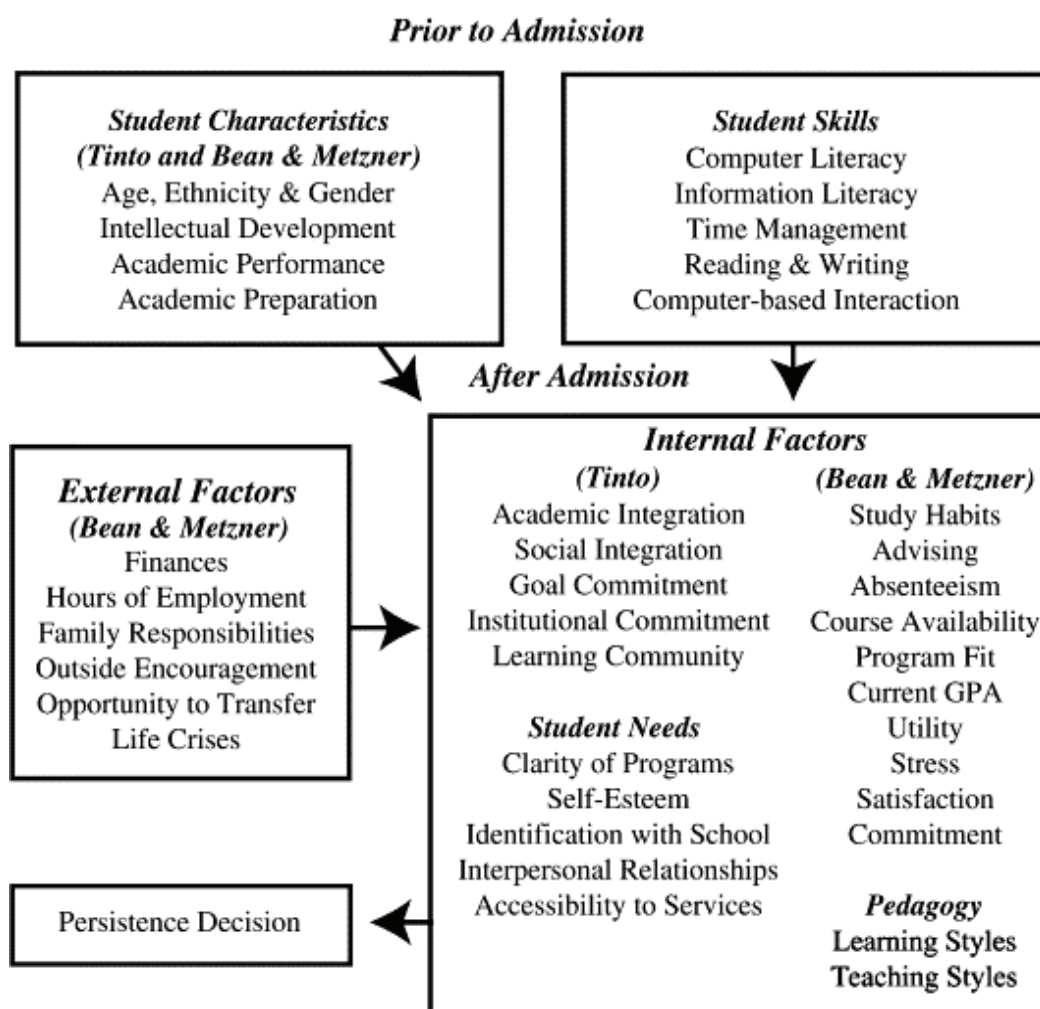


Figure 1. A conceptualization of Rovai's (2003) composite persistence model (p. 9).

duction to the campus, registrar, financial aid, the library, and key personnel are great, but not enough. Some important factors to include are: a clear communication of the expectations of the student (everything from assignment due dates to how many words should be in a discussion post), clear instructions on using the LMS (where to turn in assignments, where to find information, etc.), a chance to work out technology barriers (interacting with the LMS before class starts), and how the course and its materials are organized (Harris, Larrier, & Castano-Bishop, 2011;

Karp & Bork, 2012). By discussing two models, a much clearer idea of how to implement a comprehensive orientation, using Rovai's (2003) persistence model, can be understood. Neither model was designed specifically for community college students, but both have qualities that would be useful to that particular demographic.

### ORIENTATION EXAMPLES

Taylor et al. (2015) implemented an orientation for online courses that helped raise

the success rate of several courses. The orientation was made available to a few courses that either had a high dropout rate, were often the first online course students enrolled in, or were seen as having high enrollment. The orientation consisted of videos embedded into the courses on the LMS and covered: how to get started, basic navigation, how to post in discussion threads, how to submit assignments, and how to check grades and instructor feedback. Two pieces of this orientation stood out. First, the videos were interactive and allowed for students to check their learning. Second, the videos were left in the LMS for the duration of the course. This left the video as a “just-in-time” asset for students that needed to review the video at any time during the course (Taylor et al., 2015). This feature helped students have information on demand in multiple locations, as advised by Simonson et al. (2012).

Cho (2012) designed a four-part orientation that included: the nature of online learning, how to use the course management system, the technical requirements of an online course, and the learning skills and motivation required for online learning. The four parts were set up into modules, each allowing users to navigate through the course management system. Short videos and tutorials were followed by short quizzes to ensure students understood the material. The first module discussed the expectations of the students, how to communicate to faculty and other students, time management, and how to seek help and resources. The second module discussed the specifics of the LMS, how to navigate it, and how to turn in assignments and add discussion posts. The third module went over various technical requirements, but kept the information basic. The last module of the orientation consisted of a short self-assessment test for students to take stock of their understanding of the learning skills and motivation necessary to complete an online course.

The key features of this orientation (besides the tutorials on how to use the particular LMS) were the background knowledge it gave students and the self-assessments students took to understand what traits they needed to succeed. The background helped set student expectations and the self-assessment makes students reflect before committing to online learning.

Both orientations use elements of Rovai’s (2003) persistence model. Taylor et al. (2015) focused on student skills such as computer literacy and information literacy. They also tried to relieve some stress by making the videos accessible throughout the course, which also counts toward a type of advising and accessibility to services. Both orientations help students feel welcome and help with academic integration. Cho (2012) focused on making students aware of the commitment online learning requires, as well as time management and study habits. His orientation even mentions the distractions that external factors can pose on learning and some tips to avoid those pitfalls. Both orientations are useful examples of how students can be guided as they begin their online journey. However, these are just two examples. Many more exist and are worthy of exploring. There is no “correct” way to organize the orientation. It should be a comprehensive combination of materials that will guide students and increase success (Cho, 2012; Taylor et al., 2015)

## CONCERNS

Orientations are one way to give distance students an introduction to what online learning is and some skills necessary to succeed. However, orientations are not mandatory everywhere, for every student. Some programs or colleges only offer voluntary orientations for online students enrolled in fully online programs. What happens to students not fully enrolled in an online program? Students who take one

online course during their degree or students who are not matriculated and take just one online course may not have access to an orientation. These students may fall through the proverbial crack. If studies show that orientations increase retention, should they be mandatory for every student before enrolling in an online course of any kind? These questions can only be answered through further research on both student retention in general and orientations themselves.

Orientations are not the only answer. As previously mentioned, other strategies include high quality academic advising, computer training, assessing student readiness, offering a cohort, and utilizing tutors (Hart, 2012; Lee & Choi, 2011). More research needs to be conducted on the value of orientations, along with these other strategies to determine what elements offer the most promising results for increasing retention. Additionally, more studies need to focus on the special characteristics of community college students taking online courses and how those characteristics influence retention and attrition.

## CONCLUSION

The problem of retention in online courses, specifically community college online courses, needs to be given attention. As colleges offer more online courses and enrollment increases, strategies must be implemented to encourage the successful completion of these courses. Online orientations are one way to promote success. Actively trying to prepare students for the unique nature of online learning, orienting students to the LMS, and giving students an adequate idea of the expectations in an online course are just some of the benefits an orientation can provide. Orientations should be constructed using theoretical perspectives such as the Rovai (2003) model of persistence theory and it may be necessary to make them mandatory. An orientation is not the only answer to reten-

tion issues, but it is one piece of the puzzle that can increase success. A mandatory orientation before enrolling in an online course is a concrete step administrators can take toward improving retention rates. There is no correct way to organize an orientation, but a comprehensive, mandatory guide tailored to the individual college, which is accessed by all students before beginning their first online course is an asset and a viable way to increase retention and success.

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