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A Dozen Strategies for Improving Online Student Retention

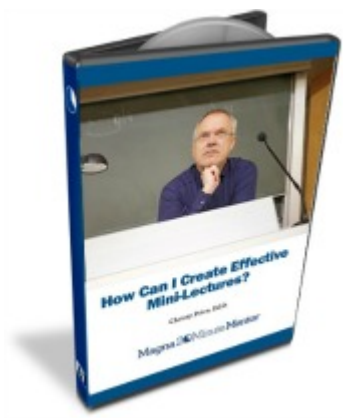
By Al Infande, EdD

Online student retention is one of the most critical components for the success of any college or university. The key to a successful online retention program is the realization that student retention is everybody's job.

The main objective of a well-established online retention program is to maintain a student's enrollment and to keep him highly satisfied with the level of education he is acquiring in an online environment. This is not an easy task since there are many reasons why a student might need or want to withdraw or leave the program of study.

Below are a dozen strategies for improving online student retention for administrators and faculty:

1. Make a good first impression. The first day of class should be both welcoming and informative. The instructor should create a welcome letter with a few details about herself and the course and have students introduce themselves as well. After students post their introductions in the discussion board, the instructor should respond to each and every student. These first-day activities help set the tone for the course as a community of learners.
2. Never underestimate the importance of instructor presence. Providing students with immediate feedback and being highly visible in the classroom and online threaded discussion boards will improve the online experience for learners.
3. When grading student assignments, it's best to provide constructive recommendations for improvement that are highly motivating and encouraging. It's easy for attempts at humor to fall flat or words to be misinterpreted in the written word, so be sure reread your comments before hitting submit.
4. Answer all questions posed by students in the faculty forum section within 24-48 hours, and communicate this feedback window to students so they know what to expect. A student could be encountering a discouraging issue or a personal emergency that could lead him or her to withdraw from the program, so a timely response is critical.
5. Make students feel they are a part of the program by letting them know how important their contribution is to the class. One of the most important factors impacting retention is whether students feel they belong to part of a larger community, which can affect whether they continue on a course of study or drop out (DeVries and Wheeler, 1996; as cited by Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap, 2003).



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6. Let students know they were missed when they return from being absent. This gives awareness to the student of how important they are to the class, that their classroom contribution was greatly missed, and that you're aware of their absence.
7. Practice proven adult learning principles and strategies in the classroom. For example, students should perceive that the goals of their learning experience are directly related to their own personal goals. Also, their learning experience should be organized around what they see as relevant to the "real world." The student is provided with self-directed and independent learning activities. The faculty should ensure that the learning environment is characterized by mutual trust and respect, freedom of expression, and acceptance of differences.
8. Introduce collaborative learning techniques in the classroom. The famous Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978), who contributed to the later formation of constructivism, theorized that students learn more effectively in a collaborative environment where they can share their ideas and experiences.
9. Engage students by hosting live webinars. In addition to the classroom experience, introduce a variety of career skill topics that will provide students with learning tips and other strategies that will help them in the future.
10. Establish an early alert system. Identify and assist underperforming students who are at risk. Recommend to the students to seek assistance with the appropriate support staff.
11. Help students establish specific goals for attending the program and each course. At the very beginning of the course, in the announcement section, the instructor should establish the course expectations. This ensures the students know early on what is required of them for a successful completion of the course. If the student does not meet their weekly goals, the faculty should contact the student and remind them of the course goals and help to get the student back on track.
12. If you're an administrator, be sure to involve faculty in student retention matters. Because faculty have the most interaction with students, they serve as a tremendous resource for helping improve online student retention and success.

Dr. Al Infande is the online human resources lead faculty at Columbia Southern University in Orange Beach, Ala. He also serves as a professor at several colleges and universities where he teaches courses in human resources management. He can be reached at al.infande@columbiasouthern.edu.

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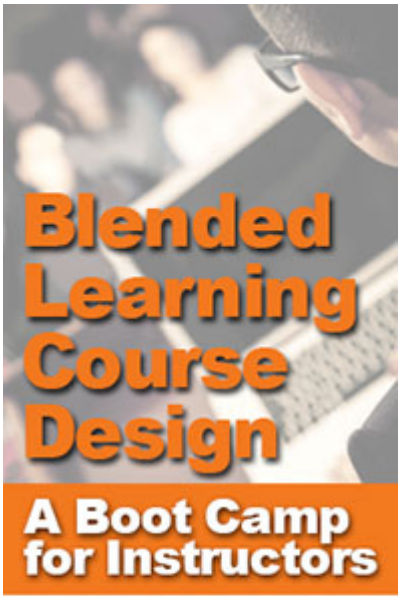

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