

Recommendations for Reducing Dropout from Distance Education Courses

Abstract: The purpose of this study was to identify the significant characteristics of distance education students who have dropped-out or continuously and successfully progressed in the distance education program at the NOU of Taiwan. The major focus was based on the found factors which might relate to the students' decisions for dropping out or staying in the distance education program to establish a set of strategies to reduce dropout from distance education courses. The participants in the study were undergraduate students who originally enrolled in the distance education undergraduate program at the National Open University of Taiwan. The instrument used in this research was a mailed questionnaire for investigating the factors of dropout or retention for distance education students, demographic variables, goal commitment, social integration, and academic integration. Results indicated that the factors of external attribution, intrinsic motivation, and students' perceptions of distance learning showed significant relationships with students' decisions of dropout or retention. Based on the findings, the researcher made certain recommendations to institutions for reducing student's dropout rates from distance education courses. (Contains 31 references)

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the number of programs and schools offering distance education as a cost-effective and as an educationally-efficient learning system in higher education has increased rapidly in many developed and developing economies. The need to keep up with technological advances, job training or retraining, and below par literacy skills are among the many reasons that adults need more education and return to school. Mature adults need an educational system that has the flexibility and diversity to provide advanced education for everyone (Huang, 1997). Fortunately, distance education is the most obvious and efficient solution. Distance education reaches across geographic boundaries and provides opportunities

for higher education and technician level training to those unable pursue traditional programs (Sherritt, 1996). It provides flexible access for the traditional student and an educational "second chance" for adults who were previously denied opportunities (Rumble, 1986; van Enckevort, 1986; Garland, 1993).

However, many of the recent distance education studies do not adequately address the learning experience of distance education students in a higher education while they have focused on student outcomes, such as academic achievement and intention to enroll in other distance education courses. Glatter and Wedell (1971) state that the dropout rate in distance education classes is much higher than would be expected in full-time courses and could reach 70 percent. According to Kember (1995), Rumble (1982), Wichit Srisa-An (1984), and Fleming (1982), the dropout rates in some distance education schools are higher than expected. In the distance education university in Venezuela, the dropout rate was 79%; at the Open University of Thailand, 62% of the students were no longer enrolled after two years; in Pakistan's distance teaching university, the dropout rate was 99.5% as early as the first semester. These examples show that distance education institutions generally lose half or more of their enrolling students.

This lack of retention is also the situation at the National Open University (NOU) of Taiwan. It is recorded that only about 5% of the students who completed the registering process at the NOU obtained a degree. Therefore, this study aims to identify the significant characteristics of distance education students who have dropped-out or continuously and successfully progressed in the distance education program at the NOU of Taiwan. The major focus of this study was based on the

found factors which might relate to the students' decisions for dropping out or staying in the distance education program to establish a set of strategies to reduce dropout from distance education courses.

Literature Review

Studies (Drummond, 1989; McKinnon-Slaney, 1994; Sheath, 1965; Tinto, 1975; Bean & Metzner, 1985, 1987; Kember, et al., 1992 & 1994) have indicated that the factors of support and encouragement (such as family support and encouragement), external attribution (such as insufficient time, financial difficulties), and motivation (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Wlodkowski, 1985a & 1985b; Knowles, 1984, 1970; Maslow, 1970; Kember, et al., 1992 & 1994) were related to the student's learning experience.

Many of the factors of dropout and retention research in distance education include demographic characteristics of the individual learner over which the educational institution has little or no control. However, for the institution, it is significant to consider these individual characteristics. Several studies (Fjortoft, 1996) identify the reasons which lie behind student dropout as an important task in order to provide trends to an institution. In fact, student dropout is usually costly to the institution and the individual (Metzner & Bean, 1987). Furthermore, a high dropout rate also suggests a failure to solve a larger social issue, the equality of educational provision (Belawati, 1998).

An interactive process between the individual and the institution may also relate to students' dropout rate in higher education (Tinto, 1973; Bean, 1985; Metzner

& Bean, 1987). Cable television is currently being used as the delivery media at the NOU. Researchers Ritchie and Newby (1989) found that in a television classroom environment, students experienced less involvement, less ability to ask questions, and less overall enjoyment in the learning experience than did students in a traditional classroom setting.

Methodology

Research Design

A descriptive survey method was used to collect data. The study used a mailed questionnaire to gather data from distance education students at the NOU of Taiwan related to their enrollment decisions of dropout or retention. The questionnaire was designed to answer the research questions and consisted of closed-ended questions.

Subject Selection

From the target/accessible population (N = 10,133) who first entered as full-time freshman four years ago at all of the distance education centers in mainland Taiwan, a proportional stratified random sample of the NOU distance education students from eleven distance learning centers was selected to arrive a representative sample size at a total sample (n) of 375, as recommend by Krejcie and Morgan (1970).

Findings

External Attribution

The responses to the research question, "How do the factors of External Attribution (Insufficient Time, Events Hinder Study, Distractions, and Potential Dropout) relate to the students' decisions of dropout or retention?" was analyzed using the point-biserial correlation coefficient. The results indicated that a significant relationship existed between the enrollment status and *External Attribution* ($r = -.257$, $p = .000$), which included subscales of *Events Hinder Study* ($r = -.346$, $p = .000$), *Potential Dropout* ($r = -.215$, $p = .000$), and *Insufficient Time* ($r = -.140$, $p = .000$) at the .01 level. The external attribution means negative social integration and is sub-divided into four subscales in the instrument.

Emotional Encouragement

The responses to the research question, "How do the factors of Emotional Encouragement (Enrollment Encouragement, Study Encouragement, and Family Support) relate to the students' decisions of dropout or retention decisions?" were analyzed using the point-biserial correlation coefficient. The results of the point-biserial correlation coefficient indicated that no significant relationship existed between the factors of Emotional Encouragement (Enrollment Encouragement, Study Encouragement, and Family Support) and the students' decisions of dropout or retention.

Motivation

The responses to the research question, "How do extrinsic and intrinsic motivation factors relate to students' dropout or retention decisions?" were analyzed using the point-biserial correlation coefficient. The results of the point-biserial correlation coefficient indicated that no significant relationships existed between extrinsic motivation and students' enrollment status as dropout or retention decisions. However, there was a significant relationship between students' enrollment status and intrinsic motivation ($r=.186$, $p=.001$) at the .01 level. It indicated that as participants had more intrinsic motivation, they were more likely to stay enrolled or complete the program compared to those with less intrinsic motivation. However, it was only a low relationship between intrinsic motivation and enrollment decisions of dropout or retention.

Perceptions of Distance Learning

The results of the point-biserial correlation coefficient indicated there was a significant correlation with enrollment status based on Negative Impression of the Program ($r= -.183$, $p= .000$) and Positive Interaction($r= .207$, $p=.000$) at the .01 level. The results indicated that participants who expressed more dissatisfaction with the program and its support tended to dropout from the program more frequently than those who expressed less dissatisfaction with the program. In addition, the results also indicated that the participants who gave more positive feedback tended to stay enrolled or complete the program more frequently than those who did not give

positive feedback. The positive feedback referred to course materials, tutoring, assignment marking and administration.

Summary of Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the researchers make the following recommendations.

1. The institution should offer flexibility within units and wide choice of units to form a course in order to maximize intrinsic motivation students.
2. As suggested by Landtroop (1998), students' grades can be influenced by each professor's teaching/learning philosophy and the instructor/student interaction. Therefore, the institution should create some constructive ways to involve the students in learning and encourage instructors to interact with the students.
3. Every distance learning center should have enough staffs to assist students. The employment of counselors is also recommended.
4. Counselors at each distance learning center should be able to assist students in integrating study demands with work, family, and social obligations.

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