Making the Connection:

A Hybrid Distance Learning Program for Underprepared College Students

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Abstract: This research project focuses on a program that combines the traditional classroom approach with the capabilities of distance learning. The August Spring Program at Kutztown University admits a population of remedial students for the spring semester only after they successfully complete an intensive one-week preparation course in the preceding summer. The students are required to take a two-part course: (1) an intensive one-week classroom-based course in the summer semester, (2) an interactive web-based classroom community (using Blackboard software) that runs throughout the fall semester when the students are not on campus. The course concludes with on-campus advisement for the spring semester. This research will provide a description of and rationale for our program and will show qualitative, quantitative and student survey data documenting the program's effectiveness. In addition, this research will contain an analysis of the program's components through the lens of instructional theory and explain how state funding was obtained and helped to get the project started.

Key words: distance-learning program   underprepared college students   connection

1. Introduction

"Necessity is the mother of all invention." Certainly, the growth in distance education in the United States and around the world during the past decade has reflected the necessities of new student populations: working students (both traditional and non-traditional), students who are unwilling or unable to commute, and students who are outside of a reasonable commuting distance. As such courses have proliferated, they have also begun to attract traditional, residential students who prefer the flexibility and the modalities of distance learning. Indeed, the success of distance education has been a direct result of distance educators to—with a tip of the hat to the business world—reinvent the product to meet the changing needs of consumers.

A few definitions are in order. First, there are many types of distance education courses, such as the following: (1) courses conducted by mail with prepackaged lessons, (2) courses that use video packages along with scheduled readings, (3) courses featuring a live lecture to remote locations with videoconferencing technology, and (4) online courses. Finally, there are various permutations of any and all of the above along with technology-based courses that incorporate live class and one-on-one meetings. The trend toward distance education has accelerated to include many new formats (McGrath, 2004).

The challenge facing these authors was to create a new one-week summer program for remedial students that would: (1) serve as preparation for university-level work and (2) as a link to our university in particular, since these students would not be readmitted to the university until the spring semester. An additional challenge for the program was that, in order to be cost effective, the one-week program would also have to be a three-credit course (so the students could be charged for three-credits). Three credits at our university equates to 45 hours of class

time, and it was determined that it should be ineffective to try to force 45 hours of class time into five days, particularly for remedial students. The students needed time to read and reflect. The first part of that dilemma (time to read) was solved by mailing out a copy of our course text, The Hot Zone (Preston, 1994), a month ahead of time and sending letters with reading prompts and reminders of where the students should be. We also told the students that there would be a quiz on the first day of the program. The other parts of the dilemma (reflection and class contact hours) were trickier. After researching many possibilities, we reached a solution: a hybrid course featuring pre-reading, traditional class meetings, and reflection through the use of online technology featuring Blackboard, a course software program. As Lorenzetti (2004) notes, the hybrid online/classroom course is a significant future trend. A $2000.00 state "TEACHnology" grants was procured that provided initial training and technical support for setting up this course. The combination of traditional and online classes became the August Spring Program (ASP).

2. Rationale

As with any program, it was important in this instance to document the effectiveness of the structure and performance of the August Spring Program. One new element of this particular program was combining an online component with a program for underprepared students. The other new element was the idea of bringing students into the university in the summer and then not fully admitting them until the spring semester when more spaces were available. Based on the current experience, particularly with the high retention, this portion of the program has exceeded expectations.

The primary data for this research was collected in the form a Student Satisfaction Survey conducted as the final piece of the Blackboard portion of the course. Students were not required to fill out this survey nor were there a grade attached to it. In the end, 32 out of 49 students (65.3%) responded to the online survey. The survey, which was conducted anonymously, included both objective and subjective feedback.

3. Background

In order to understand exactly how this particular program was developed, some background information is necessary. The August Spring Program was initiated this year, in August of 2004, and could not have existed without online classroom technology. Though this program is new to Kutztown, summer programs for underprepared students have been part of Kutztown University since the early 1970s. Its original purpose, and one that continues, was to serve as a catalyst for diversity on campus, something that Boylan, Sutton, and Anderson, (2003) point out is a typical function of developmental education programs. Giroux (2003, 1988) also makes it clear that educational access (through programs such as these) is an important function of such programs.

The original program is the Summer Start Program, a five-week program with a target of 140 underprepared students per summer. In this program, as that in the August Spring Program, students are conditionally admitted to the university. After successful completion of the five weeks, they are admitted for the fall semester. Success, in this case, means a passing grade in all three of their classes, and proof, through their attendance record, that they are prepared to enter university life.

Attendance is mandatory in both programs. During the Summer Start Program, students can have no more than two excused absences. If they have three or more, they are dismissed from the program. In addition, the policy addresses concerns of tardiness. Being late twice is equivalent to an absence. In 2004, two students were

dismissed due to attendance policy violations. These policies are explained in the contract that students sign at the beginning of the Summer Start and August Spring Programs. A large percentage of students live in the residence halls during the Summer Start Program, and students are required to live on campus during the August Spring Program. Their behavior in the residence halls can also lead to dismissal from the program. What will most likely occur, if they violate residence hall policy, is that they will not receive housing for the fall semester. Due to the low number of available rooms, most students that do not have housing for the fall do not return to Kutztown. Though off-campus housing is available, it is usually with upper class students who may or may not relish the idea of living with a first year student.

The August Spring Program was formed to serve the increasing number of students who were not admitted to the Summer Start Program due to a rise in applicants and a lack of space. The average August Spring Student has an SAT score between 800 and 880 and a rank in the bottom half of the class, leading to a predicted QPA of 2.0 or less. The decision was made to develop a program that would serve these students, while keeping in mind that housing would not be available to them until the spring of 2005.

In order to receive three credits for a class, students must log 45 hours of contact time. During that week the students lived in the university, they were in class for 6.5 hours a day for a total of 32.5 hours. These students were then required to learn the skills, which were needed to complete on-line journals for the first eight weeks after the program concluded. Students did not receive their grades until their journals were completed. These journal entries would be posted on Blackboard.

Blackboard offers space for discussion boards, tests and quizzes, grade books, instructor profiles, and a chat room. Our decision to use Blackboard was based on our belief that the ASP students would benefit from a sustained on-line community after the on-campus portion of the program was completed. Students can access Blackboard through the university webpage. During the first day of the program, students were guided through the process of registering for their Blackboard class, entering a username and password, and completing an in-class journal.

We primarily used the discussion board capability in Blackboard. Every two weeks, a journal assignment was opened to the students. The topics included reflecting on their experience at Kutztown, preparing for the fall semester, and campus involvement. The journals were posted in an open forum so students could read and respond to their classmates' journals.

4. Student Satisfaction Survey

One objective at the end of the first year was to determine students' satisfaction with all elements of the program, including making a determination as to whether recent high school graduates could adapt to a combined online/on-campus course. One of our concerns, investigated by other researchers (Goodfellow, 2004; Lapadat, 2003; Swan, 2002; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001) was how well students would acclimate to the unique qualities of online discourse. The survey was posted on the course website after all other assignments were completed. As noted before, out of 49 students, 32 responded to the survey, 65.3% rate of return. On the objective part of the survey, the results are as follows:

1. To what extent were your August Spring Program instructors prepared for class?	Responses (%)
Always	84%
Most of the time	16%
Less than half the time	0%

Hardly ever, if at all	0%

2. Did your instructors organize the course material effectively?	Responses (%)
Always	81%
Most of the time	19%
Less than half the time	0%
Hardly ever, if at all	0%

3. To what extent were your instructors clear in presenting course material?	Responses (%)
Always	59%
Most of the time	41%
Less than half the time	0%
Hardly ever, if at all	0%

4. Did the instructors maintain good interpersonal relations with the class?	Responses (%)
Yes, generally	100%
No, generally	0%

5. Were the objectives and student responsibilities of the program made clear either orally or in writing at the beginning of the program?	Responses (%)
Yes	100%
No	0%

6. All things considered, how do you rate the instructors' performance?	Responses (%)
Excellent	56%
Very good	41%
Good	3%
Poor	0%
Very poor	0%

7. To what extent was the explanation of how to use Blackboard clear?	Responses (%)
Very clear	78%
Clear	22%
Unclear	0%
Very unclear	0%

8. Were you comfortable using Blackboard?	Responses (%)
Very comfortable	75%
Comfortable	22%
Uncomfortable	3%
Very uncomfortable	0%

9. To what extent do you feel that the August Spring Program prepared you for college?	Responses (%)
Greatly prepared me	56%
Prepared me	44%
Underprepared me	0%
Did not prepare me	0%

In addition to the quantitative data, the survey also asked for constructed responses, a sample of which follows (a complete list of questions and responses is contained in the Appendix). The answers below were selected because they were representative of the answers as a whole. The representative responses below have not been edited; the students were told that all responses on Blackboard were informal, and that spelling and grammar

would not be evaluated.

> Please explain your perceptions of the Blackboard component of the August Spring Program. For example, let us know if you found it beneficial or not beneficial. If it was beneficial, tell us the manner in which it helped you. Please explain your answer thoroughly.
>   1. I think it was beneficial. At the time when Blackboard was introduced, I didn't really care for it too much. But then when I learned all the things it could do, I liked it. I liked how I read that other people were thinking the same things I was and I wasn't much different. It also prepared me for the fall semester at my school. We use the same programs for tests.
>   2. I have found the Blackboard component of the August Spring Program very beneficial in helping me succeed in the summer course. I found the Blackboard very helpful and very interesting. I enjoyed writing essays every other week and then reading other students essays after I was finished mine. The Blackboard helped me in staying focused throughout the rest of the summer and it kept my mind busy by writing essays and thinking about my time up at Kutztown. The Blackboard helped me very much because when I got back home to my local community college I tested out of a reading class and got into a higher class which then I was allowed to take Psychology and public speaking. The essays that we had to answer here on Blackboards had also helped me because the first day of my classes at Bucks I had to write an essay about college success. I was well prepared because I had already written that same essay here on Blackboards.
>   3. I found it beneficial to link the Blackboard component with the August Spring Program. It gave me a sense of schoolwork, even though I wasn't attending any college. It told me repeatedly that I had work due and that it needed to be done. Sending me notices and reminders contributed to helping me and allowing me to complete the scheduled assignments. I think this program was needed just to show both the students and Professor who was ready and who wasn't.
>   4. I felt that the Blackboard component was beneficial to be. I liked the way that you were able to read others thoughts on the different topics that we were given for that week. I also liked it that you were able to go back into Blackboard later on and remind yourself of what the topic was just in case you'd forgotten what the topic was about. I also liked the way that you were able send your essays in without having to look up email addresses. I felt that Blackboard was very convenient, and I like how the program was set up.
>   5. I found Blackboard was beneficial to myself. I feel that it was easy to be able to log on and get the assignments that I needed each week. It was great to be able to just copy the assignment into Blackboard and know that that's where the assignment will be so that the Professor was able to read it. Blackboard is a very well organized website for students. I was able to see any announcements that there may be as well as pictures from the program. It was neat to be able to read other classmates responses to the assignments. I was able to get in contact with a Professor just by getting into Blackboard.

Although a few students found the online portion of the course to be difficult, the overwhelming sentiment among students was that the online component was helpful. It allowed them to stay in touch with one another and with faculty, and it gave them a sense of connection to the university during the five months between the program and their enrollment in the spring semester.

> What components of Blackboard did you enjoy? Why? (Selected answers)
>   1. I enjoyed the fact that I could view my peer's journal entries to see how they felt about the course. That was really nice because I could get an inside look to how they felt and I could also see if they had the same feelings towards the course and college that I do. Again, I liked how we could find all of our assignments in one spot. Blackboard is also a good way for our professors to get hold of us by putting announcements up.
>   2. I enjoyed the Discussion Board because it gave us a chance to read other's journals and I also enjoyed the pictures that were taken so it helps me remember everyone I got to meet.
>   3. Since many of us could not keep in touch, I really enjoyed reading other people's posts to see how they were making out. Also I enjoyed looking back by going through the pictures that the instructors took over the course. It's a good way to bring up pleasant memories. The Blackboard was very easy to use. I wish high school would have used it because, like I said it's an easier way to keep in touch with your teachers.
>   4. The components of Blackboard that I enjoyed were that it was very descriptive about what you needed. I also like how it keeps me in touch with some people who were at Kutztown with me.
>   5. I liked how I could look and read other classmates' essays they wrote in because it gave me a feel that how I was feeling compared to everyone else in the program. I also liked how I could see pictures of me and my classmates so if I forgot someone I could just look them up. Also, I liked how it gave my classmates email addresses with their essay so we could all keep in touch.

One of the features students seemed to enjoy the most was having the ability to easily stay in touch with friends they had made in the program through the e-mail feature. In addition, they liked being able to see how

other students responded to the discussion questions.

> What components of Blackboard did you dislike? Why? (Selected answers)
> 1. The one component I did not like about Blackboard was if I ever had a problem with my computer, I was not able to log in on Blackboard. For instance, if my Internet was down, I wouldn't be able to obtain the information I needed for class.
> 2. The only thing I didn't like about Blackboard was that it took too many steps to access the journal entries.
> 3. The only components of Blackboard that I disliked was when I posted my essay the paragraphs of my essay would not indent. This made me very annoyed because I tried getting my essay to look perfect but I could not because it would not let me indent properly. Since it would not let me indent properly I then had to space my paragraphs instead of indenting.
> 4. The only thing that I didn't like about Blackboard is that you cannot spell check inside the program you must do it outside then you have to paste it back in Blackboard. The other thing that I didn't like about Blackboard is that the page is too plain. It needs more colors and more different icons to make it prettier. They should updated it and change the colors.
> 5. I disliked that it did not have spell check. I did not like to type my essay in another document than copy and paste. I also did not like how the email addresses showed when you clicked on one's paper. I did not like that because of the fact that anyone could get my address and I might not want to talk with him or her.

Generally, students were favorable about the accessibility of Blackboard. One of the biggest things students disliked in Blackboard was the fact that essays typed elsewhere and then pasted into the program would be reformatted. If they typed directly into the program, however, they could not use a spell checker, and they risked losing their work. Some students also found it a bit tedious to go through all the steps necessary to get to the function they wanted.

> How can we improve this course for the next group of students?
> 1. I really don't think there was too much to change, I found everything great and ran very well. The only thing that could be changed is to give a quick tour of the campus so the students could be aware where all the classes would be held and where to eat.
> 2. If you were to improve the August Spring program I would say you could have a longer test that would count more towards the course. It wouldn't necessarily improve it but it would focus more on the book.
> 3. I thought that this course was laid out very well. The book was interesting, we had free time to meet people, we learned key components, and we had a good time. Everything we needed was there. This program was a great idea and should be continued.
> 4. I think the only improvement I would make would be to make the course longer and more in-depth. I felt as if I would have enjoyed being in class for a longer period of time.
> 5. Have more after class activities. This would allow the students to get to know each other better.

For this question, some students commented (in a typical college ritual) that the thing they disliked most was the food. Other comments, perhaps more substantive, focused on students were that they want more feedback for the journal entries and more contact during the fall semester so they did not feel as if they were "left high and dry", as one student noted. Students generally seemed to enjoy the structure of the week, although a number of them felt that the study skills component was too easy or too dry. That feedback will be helpful in terms of how that material is presented next year. Another helpful comment was that students wanted more after-class (and presumably non-academic) activities so they could get to know each other.

> In this space, please feel free to comment on any part of the August Spring Program.
> 1. Overall, I feel that the August Spring Program was rather effective. I think it aided to helping me prepare to attend college in the spring. I don't feel as nervous about living in a strange place ever since I got to for the week.
> 2. Thanks for making this program it was awesome! I feel like I got a peek at what college is like, and I feel I am better prepared for my college career! Also I enjoyed meeting all new people and everyone bonded so well. Thanks again!
> 3. Before I came, I really wasn't looking forward to taking a week out of my summer, but I ended up having a really good time. I learned a lot of important things in my classes that I wouldn't have thought about if I hadn't gone to this program. It really did help me prepare to be a freshman in college and I think that is the most important thing I could have gotten out of this whole experience. I also thought everything was put

> together really well by all of the professors. I met a lot of nice people and had a great time with all of the other students who participated.
> 4. I loved the August Spring Program. It made me even more anxious to get to college. I loved how relaxed the professors were and how nice everyone who worked there was. I found that the program allowed everyone to relax and excite to be going, instead of being nervous for the spring.
> 5. Having three different classes rather than one set class was a good idea. It really gave me a feel for what it will be like when be in college actually.

The students' responses to the program as a whole were positive. The responses to this question included a few more complaints about food, but overall students focused on the good things, particularly bonding with other students and with faculty and also with feeling a connection to the university. That last part was a key part of our initial goals: we wanted the students to feel a connection to the university so they would be motivated, even after a five-month break, to continue their education at this university.

5. The Program

One of the biggest surprises of the program has been the retention rate, the percent of students who have registered to return to the university in the spring semester. Based on reports from other universities with similar programs, we were expecting as few as half of the students to return in the spring semester. The reasons for that are numerous, ranging from among the following: a change of interests, satisfaction with the college where they took classes in the fall, lack of connection with our university, and so forth.

In fact, however, out of the 49 students who participated in the program in the summer, 46 returned for the spring semester, retention of 93.9%. Of the remaining three students, two have expressed an interest in returning but have been prevented by restrictions, and the one remaining student has announced her intentions of returning in the fall of next year. That would be a very high retention rate even between summer/fall start programs. One factor that has been a key, though, has been our continued connection to the students through the online class.

6. Conclusions

Overall, our initial assessment is that the combination of a one-week academic program with an online follow-up has been successful. This assessment is based on three factors: (1) student feedback, (2) faculty and staff feedback, and most importantly, (3) percentage of students who return to the university for the spring semester. Because this is the first time through the program, there are some lessons to be learned. The study skills class will be fine-tuned to focus more on active learning strategies. In addition, students have expressed an interest in more social activities. Although the program has been developed to focus on academic needs, the social side of college life can have a direct effect on the academic, and these needs will be addressed as well. Overall, this first experience with the combination of traditional and online approaches to work with underprepared students has shown enough promise to warrant continuing with the program. Furthermore, this initial evidence suggests that a hybrid approach might be the best way of retaining students in what are primarily distance education programs, whether in the United States, in China, or anywhere else in the world. This spring, we are working on just such a hybrid program linking students in the United States with students in Hong Kong, and we will certainly share the results of that project as they become available.

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In a word, we should not falsely profit that country authorizes to make students' proper infringement of legitimate rights and interests already, and should not cater to safeguarding the rights of students and give up the authority that country grants schools to manage students. Proper enforcement of power must be in accordance with the law, too.

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