Online Credit Recovery: Benefits and Challenges

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School leaders are faced with selecting programs to support at-risk students in high schools across the United States. Increasingly, supplemental online learning is being selected as an innovative way to assist these students. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand stakeholders' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of high school supplemental online learning for credit recovery. Participants included twelve high school students who had been enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery, two content teacher monitors, and four graduation coaches. The perceptions of these respondents provide insight for school leaders selecting online credit recovery programs and policy makers.

Introduction

School leaders face the challenges of a significant drop out rate. In fact, there are more than one million American high school students who drop out each year (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006). Increasingly, schools are utilizing supplemental online learning to assist students with credit recovery (Holstead, Spradlin, & Plucker, 2008). Critics of online education are concerned that some online learning options risk moving students through a course without their having received true educational benefit. However, others laud distance education for providing a highly engaging instructional environment that is self-paced, personalized, and facilitated by certified instructors who provide individualized support (Natsu, 2011; Trotter, 2008). Ultimately, school leaders are responsible for evaluating the process of credit recovery and supplemental online learning in order to improve at-risk student success and more effectively manage resources. One source of information that may be useful to school leaders is feedback from students and staff who work in this environment. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study is to identify the benefits and challenges of supplemental online learning for credit recovery from the perspective of students and staff.

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Growth of Blended and Online Learning Background

Learning experiences can be classified by the amount of control that the student has over the content and nature of the learning activity. In traditional didactic or expository learning experiences, content is transmitted to the student by a lecture, written material, or other mechanisms. Such conventional instruction is often contrasted with active learning in which the student has control of what and how he or she learns (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009). In their foundational work involving autonomy and self-determination, Deci and Ryan (1985) stated that students demonstrate the need for autonomy when they approach a task that warrants some degree of control and choice in the situation. They suggest people resist pressure from external forces such as rules, regulations, orders, and deadlines imposed on them by others because it interferes with their need for autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Sometimes a person even rejects help in order to remain in control (deCharms, 1983). An understanding of students' perceptions of support in online learning may equip teachers (both site-based and online) with strategies to promote autonomy and increase self-determination.

Individual autonomy can be developed by activities and programs that emphasize setting realistic goals, personally planning goals, accepting personal responsibility for actions, and developing self-confidence (Woolfolk, 2007). A significant amount of research in distance education has been conducted with adult learners who exhibit these attributes; however, there is a need to more effectively identify the traits that are necessary for adolescents to be successful in online learning environments and to provide remediation and training for students lacking in these qualities (Cavanaugh, Barbour, & Clark, 2009). Exploding advances in technology, and the need to support struggling students on limited budgets, are moving many school leaders toward supplemental online learning.

Distance education in the form of online courses and programs which serve the K-12 community are often referred to as *virtual* or *cyber schools* and operate in a variety of ways (Clark & Berge, 2005; Rice, 2009; Watson, 2011). The three dominant delivery models that have emerged for virtual schooling are independent, asynchronous, and synchronous (or a combination of asynchronous and synchronous). A student who is taking a course from a virtual school with an independent method of delivery is similar to a student who would take a traditional correspondence course with the added benefit of submitting assignments electronically (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). Asynchronous online instruction occurs at different times and in different places, where learners choose when and where to access instructional materials. Using a synchronous method, teachers can facilitate an audio or text discussion with students in real time. Instruction and feedback occur immediately (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). These delivery models may be utilized to offer a full time curriculum or as a supplement to a full program.

Supplemental Online Learning

In K-12 public education, there are two types of online education programs: full-time schools and supplemental programs. The goal of supplemental online programs is to give students the opportunity to take online courses in addition to the classroom curriculum offered by the local school. Supplemental programs typically do not give credits or diplomas, as the local school is accountable for oversight and assessment of student progress and the provision of special education services**.** The majority of supplemental programs serve high school

students; they are more numerous than full-time online schools and are operated at either the school district or state level (Holstead, Spradlin, & Plucker, 2008; Watson, 2011). Most of the new online credit-recovery options are offered by online schools and commercial curriculum providers who often tailor their programs for at-risk students (Trotter, 2008). Some of the benefits and challenges of online learning are discussed in the following sections.

Benefits of Online Learning

Advances in technology allow at-risk learners multiple opportunities to receive credits to graduate on time, as well as provide them with different avenues to learn and have their learning assessed. Existing virtual learning programs differ from traditional education in a number of significant ways, one of which is the range of students served. Online learning programs can serve students of all ages, ability levels, and learning backgrounds. Most K-12 online learning programs focus on serving older high school students. A survey of district administrators reported approximately 64% of students in fully online programs are in grades 9-12. The reasons reported for online learning were to offer courses not otherwise available at the school, to offer advanced placement courses, and to offer credit recovery (Lips, 2010).

Proponents of online learning claim that it offers high-quality, engaging courses for students. The teachers are purported to be highly qualified, licensed professionals who deliver the online instruction and track student progress; and, online program features expand educational opportunities for students regardless of geography, family income level, or background (Holstead, Spradlin, & Plucker, 2008). Additionally, new formative assessment models provide performance-based virtual learning environments with tools to individualize instruction in ways that are impossible to replicate in traditional classrooms (Holstead, et al., 2008).

Shea, Pickett, and Petz (2003) reported on the relationship of pedagogy, design, and faculty development issues to students' satisfaction in e-learning courses in addition to proposing a conceptual framework for student learning in e-learning environments. As with traditional programs, the quality of instruction and course design, and how technology is adapted to promote them, is more important than the technology itself (Rovai, 2003). A more clear understanding of K-12 online at-risk students will enable courses to be scaffolded and adapted appropriately to bimodal student populations and will afford multiple avenues for students with different learning preferences. Specifically, research should examine the relationships among student needs, course design, and support services (Cavanaugh & Blomeyer, 2007; Watson, 2007).

In some online credit recovery programs courses are designed in such a way that students take a pre-test and only complete the sections of the course in which they were unsuccessful. In this way, students are able to complete the course and experience success much more quickly. Acceleration methods are used for vocabulary development, and there is a text-to-speech option for students who read below grade level (Natsu, 2011).

Another program takes the student through a critical mistakes framework, which discusses why an answer is wrong. This helps guide the student to the correct answer by reviewing content and giving hints on where the student might look. This is also used for Response to Intervention (RtI) to develop individualized learning paths and tutorials for students who need remediation on a particular concept (Natsu, 2011). Providers claim they

tailor learning to individual students by using flexible pacing and schedules, extra practice, frequent assessment, and robust monitoring and reporting on participation and progress, while also allowing openings for personal interaction with teachers. In many cases, the programs are billed as ways to enable students not only to salvage credit for a class but also to develop skills and work habits that will contribute to their continued academic success (Natsu, 2011). While Barbour's (2007) qualitative study involved a small number of participants, the preliminary guidelines included strategies to build student skills and increase independent learning. It also included the concepts of embedding directions, adding visual cues, and using interactive activities.

In their evaluation of highly effective high schools, Bottoms and Anthony (2008) described one high school that offers a virtual academy that students access online. Each course has a posted syllabus with lesson plans and assignments. Students use email to send completed assignments to the teacher and take tests online when they have finished a unit or course. Students do not have to pay fees to take courses, and they can receive full credit. The advantage is that students work on missing credits outside of the typical school day--even from their own homes.

Although benefits to online learning have been reported, challenges also exist.

Challenges in Online Learning

Along with the benefits, there are also a number of challenges associated with virtual schooling. Researchers Barbour and Reeves (2009) have listed studies which show that the students who are typically successful in online learning environments are those who are independent learners, intrinsically motivated, and who have proficient time management, literacy, and technology skills. These characteristics are typically associated with adult learners and are the very characteristics that at-risk students generally lack (Oliver, Osborne, Patel, & Kleiman, 2009). Most research into distance education has been targeted toward adult learners. Recommendations for further studies include evaluating the factors that account for K-12 student success in virtual school environments (Barbour & Reeves, 2009).

Online learners may still face some real barriers even if they have a faculty who design interactive, engaging online learning environments and utilize user-friendly course management tools. Although the promise of online learning suggests enhanced flexibility that provides an educational opportunity to anyone with Internet access, not all students have the same abilities to access and engage in online learning (Blocher, Sujo de Montes, Willis, & Tucker, 2002). Most online learners work within an asynchronous setting where they choose the time and location for their study to a much greater extent than students enrolled in traditional courses. Consequently, the students' ability to self-monitor and garner resources independently is vitally important. Without these qualities, success in an online learning environment is less likely (Blocher et al., 2002). This is especially relevant given researchers suggestion that at-risk students need genuine motivation through validation and meaningful social interaction (Archambault et al., 2010; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007).

In a mixed-methods approach using online surveys that included open-ended questions, Oliver et al. (2009) evaluated how high school students responded to the experience of being enrolled in online courses during the school's first year. The study focused on students who had failed a course and were enrolled for credit recovery. It also included students who were seeking challenge through accelerated coursework. A survey was

distributed to all students and teachers in the state who were involved in the summer 2007 session. Ninety teachers and 706 students responded to the surveys for a response rate of 86% (Oliver et al., 2009). Teachers stated that the opportunity for students to self-pace and access course materials from any location at any time were two of the most positive aspects of the online courses. Additionally, the teachers were able to integrate web-based resources into content material without difficulty. This afforded students individualized and unique learning opportunities. Academic proficiency, technical skills, and self-direction were reported by the teachers as weaknesses for the students in credit recovery (Oliver et al., 2009). Recommendations included ensuring course design and alignment to national standards, providing more worked out examples, especially in math, and more use of embedded videos. Credit recovery students were reported to be less motivated and less interested in taking another online course. Issues related to low self-efficacy in the online context were also noted. Credit recovery teachers stated that their students required more supervision and mentoring from an instructor to succeed (Oliver et al., 2009).

The evaluation of effectiveness of student supports is vital in the K-12 context, especially when considering the alternative nature of the online educational experience, and the proclivity for at-risk student populations to seek this option for credit recovery (Rice, 2006). The characteristics identified as successful to at-risk students-- instructional environments that are self-paced, personalized, offer diverse instructional methods that are facilitated by competent caring adults (Rice, 2006) are the very characteristics that are praised in distance education circles. In a comprehensive evaluation of the literature surrounding K-12 distance education, Rice reported the need for further research that examines the relationship between student supports and at-risk student needs in distance education. This is essential in answering questions about the benefits or drawbacks of distance education for all students.

Some critics are concerned online credit-recovery options run the risk of simply shuffling students out the door without their having received the full value of a high school education. The undeniable fact is that some students succeed in the virtual education environment and some fail, just as they do in traditional classroom environments. The key is to better comprehend the critical components in an educational context that enhance success for all students not the platform used to deliver the instruction (Rice, 2006). The "No Significant Difference" (NSD) literature in education can be interpreted in two ways. First, the NSD findings demonstrate that delivering instruction or academic content at a distance is not an inferior method of providing an education. There is much more to the learning process than just the delivery method of instruction. Further, the NSD findings indicate that converting a traditional course into an online or technology-mediated distance delivery course does not necessarily improve student outcomes. Achieving gains involves more than adapting content to the medium; it involves a course redesign which maximizes the use of technology (Russell, 2001).

Students who are behind academically when they enter ninth grade require special supports from caring teachers and courses designed to help them acquire the content knowledge and learning skills that they missed in earlier grades (Herlihy & Quint, 2006). Without this, their risk for dropping out of school and experiencing unemployment is increased exponentially. Once students experience academic failure, for whatever reason, it is difficult to reroute them and get them fully engaged in their education. Because course failure may lead to delinquency or other school failures, this can begin a decline that results in

dropping out of school (Nastu, 2011). Online learning gives students an opportunity to get back on track. Online learning is a learning platform which is more about supporting the improvement of teaching practices and student achievement opportunities than it is about innovative digital technologies (Blomeyer, 2002).

The majority of K-12 students learning online participate in supplemental virtual schooling programs sponsored by school districts, universities, consortia of schools or, as is often the case, state departments of education (Tucker, 2007). Because students can integrate courses from these programs into their traditional brick-and-mortar high schools, supplemental programs allow students to take online courses in addition to their regular school-based courses. Supplemental virtual programs offer the most important information to public school reformers (Tucker, 2007).

The question for educational research is how to optimize instructional designs and technology in the online context in order to maximize learning opportunities and student achievement. Specifically, promising practices for promoting K-12 online success for credit recovery have not yet been fully evaluated (Oliver et al., 2009; Rice, 2009). Most research has been conducted on adult learners enrolled in virtual courses and/or distance education programs, and there is a disconnect in K-12 between policy decision makers and those who are charged with implementation and support of online credit recovery programs (Rice, 2006). It is imperative that leaders have the ability to accurately measure and analyze virtual education in order to discern the positive and negative impact on student achievement. This information will help determine and recommend promising practices in the online learning realm (Holstead et al., 2008). Little research into the effectiveness of K-12 online learning has been published, and there is a need to evaluate the quality of lower-performing student virtual learning experiences (Cavanaugh et al., 2009; Means et al., 2009). An examination of at-risk students' experiences with online learning for credit recovery may contribute to recommendations for how they are supported in their virtual coursework. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand stakeholders' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of high school supplemental online learning for credit recovery.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research question: What are stakeholders' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of high school supplemental online learning for credit recovery? The following sub-questions were used to answer the overarching question:

1. What are the students' perceptions of the benefits of supplemental online learning?
2. What are the students' perceptions of the challenges of supplemental online learning?
3. What are staff member perceptions of the benefits of supplemental online coursework for at-risk students?
4. What are staff member perceptions of the challenges at-risk students encounter while enrolled in supplemental online learning?

Methodology

Given the research questions, this study was implemented with a qualitative approach using the case study method, which is appropriate when the researcher intends to generate a clear understanding of people or to capture the characteristics of events (Yin, 2009). Additionally, the case study method is an effective method for gathering information when the phenomenon to be studied is descriptive in nature, especially when describing why or how a phenomenon occurred or when an event is bounded by time and place (Creswell, 2007). This study probed into the relationships between students and their online coursework and between students and the teachers who support them on site while they are engaged in online learning. This method provides a rich, deep description through multiple means, two of which are a review of archival data and interviews in the participants' natural context at a given point in time (Borg, Gall, & Gall, 2007).

Sample

This study employed purposive sampling (Borg, Gall, & Gall, 2007). The primary participants were twelve 10^{th}- 12^{th} grade students who were previously enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery at a large suburban high school. The student participants were considered at-risk for not graduating with their peers due to the fact that they had failed two or more courses in high school. Students requiring credit recovery take six traditional 50 minute course in addition to the supplemental online course which is completed at the end of the school day or on the students' own time. To ensure confidentiality, all study participants were assigned pseudonyms. From the population of at risk students, twelve agreed to participate in the study. There were four male and eight female students. Six out of eleven students were designated as economically disadvantaged and qualified for free or reduced lunch. One of the students was served in special education under the category of specific learning disability. Three of the students had been retained in middle school. Ten out of twelve had been retained in high school due to insufficient credits. All are in danger of not graduating in four years. Five out of eleven students have had more than fifteen absences in any high school year; (for one student no data are available). Nine out of eleven students (one – no data) are at or below the 20th percentile for class rank. Eight out of nine students failed math in ninth grade, three out of nine failed math and literature in ninth grade. Ninth grade data are only available for nine out of twelve participants. Overall, given the available information, the twelve student participants failed 78 classes (one half semester course) in high school and only two are currently classified as twelfth graders.

Teacher participants included the two content teachers who supervised and supported students on site as they completed their online coursework. Additional participants included a focus group of four graduation coaches from four of the five high schools in the county. These graduation coaches, who are certified high school teachers or school counselors, provided support and supervision for the supplemental online programs in each of their respective schools. As recommended by district leadership, the researcher made initial contact with the graduation coaches through a face-to-face meeting. A brief summary of the project was described and a request for their participation was made. They were not expected to decide at that time, and they were reassured of confidentiality and the option to decline without repercussion if they chose. Once approved, the researcher met with the school

principal, the two teachers, and the graduation coach who support supplemental online learning at the selected school in the study. Students requiring credit recovery maintain six traditional courses at 50 minutes each in addition to the supplemental online course. The lab is open at the end of school day three days a week for one hour. The students are strongly encouraged and expected to complete the majority of their online coursework at home or other location away from school.

Data Collection

This study employed face-to-face structured interviews of 12 students and two teachers. It also included a 50 minute focus group interview with four graduation coaches from four out of five high schools in the district. Additionally, content analysis was conducted on data related to the academic history of the students in the study. Further, in order to gain a broad perspective of student achievement related to online coursework, available data involving the success or failure of all students enrolled throughout the county in supplemental online learning for credit recovery program was reviewed from the previous school year. Interview protocols were used for all participants. Face validity was established through a review of the protocols by a panel of three experts. Participant feedback regarding the interpretation of their perceptions of the benefits and challenges of supplemental online learning for credit recovery was given. By interviewing a number of participants, validity was established as the comments of participants were connected and evaluated against each other. The goal of this process was to comprehend how the participants developed and made meaning of their experience (Seidman, 2006).

Data Analysis Procedures

Following each recorded interview or focus group session, the recording was transcribed to create a preliminary coding list and gain an overall sense of the ideas and tone present (Creswell, 2007). Further coding was used to identify central themes by examining phrases and words that were repeated (Glesne, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). From these central themes, iterative sub-themes emerged and were organized into categories. Historical academic data of student participants, as well as the success or failure rate of all students enrolled in supplemental online learning in the county in the previous school year were analyzed for common patterns and themes and to gain a broader perspective of students involved in the supplemental online context.

Limitations and Delimitations

The purposive sampling of this study limited the generalizability of the findings. The students in the study self-selected or were encouraged by teachers, counselors, or parents to enroll in supplemental online learning. The self-reporting nature of the data collection was an additional limitation. Teachers and graduation coaches were self- selected to support students in the online learning lab or assigned by their principals to this role. The results of this study will not be generalizable to all students enrolled in online learning for credit recovery, nor will they be indicative of all supplemental online learning programs. There are many variables in this case study which could not be controlled, such as how many and

which students enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery during the semester in the study and which staff members were assigned to support the students. The personal experiences of the researcher, the students, and the teachers are additional variables. Nonetheless, this method was selected to allow the researcher to gather data from several perspectives and sources, adding to the vast description of the case.

This study is delimited to one large suburban, southeastern Georgia high school. This school was selected because it is the largest in the district, and it represents a diverse population of students and academic programs. This study was also delimited to 10^{th} - 12^{th} grade students who were previously enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery and does not represent all students engaged in online learning in the school. Additionally, as this was a qualitative endeavor, the experiences of the participants delimit the findings to their responses and render the findings unique to the perspectives and situations of the students and teachers involved. Furthermore, as the researcher is the instrument for collecting data, an element of bias and subjectivity is acknowledged. Finally, in keeping with case study methodology, which notes that cases are bound by place and time (Yin, 2009), the content analysis of student data was delimited to the students' high school careers. Data related to the pass/fail rate of supplemental online coursework was delimited to the 2010-2011 school year, and the interview data was delimited to the semester in the study.

Findings

Analysis of data from student interviews revealed four major themes related to the benefits and challenges of supplemental online learning for credit recovery. The first was the expectations of themselves, others, and their online coursework. As students began their online coursework, they soon realized that it was all about them and that their success or failure rested with themselves. Secondly, student responses and historical data demonstrated the complicated situations students were in and that they were at risk for more than academics. The negative academic history, economic disadvantage, and home life all impacted their school performance. Next, students described the significance of having choice and control as they took ownership of their online learning. Finally, students reported the lasting benefits and the impact of online coursework.

Benefits – Student perspectives

A review of data from student participant interviews revealed benefits and challenges to online learning in three of the major themes. The first reflected the students' perception in regards to the expectations of self, others, and their online coursework. All students acknowledged personal responsibility for success or failure in their online coursework. Although coursework was not especially difficult, it did require effort that involved taking notes, reading, and memorizing. In addition, they felt supported by friends, family, and school staff.

Students cited several characteristics of online learning and circumstances that promoted choice and control. Students experienced ownership of their learning, and options as to when, where, for how long, and in what way they would complete their online coursework. Distraction was reduced and learning enhanced as students conveyed their positive experiences with online learning. One student noted:

> It' all me and I learn at my own pace; it's just more helpful. I don't have to decode what a teacher says because I can read what the screen in front of me says and if I don't understand it then I can try to turn it into my own lingo, my own wording, and I can understand it better. It's you and the work, and you can focus on that.

Students also indicated that their experiences in online learning carried over into other areas of their lives. They described increased skills and how those skills were applied in traditional coursework. For example, they felt more effective taking class notes and had a better understanding of core course content. Students also gave specific examples of improved grammatical skills, writing ability, and mathematical conceptual understanding. In addition, they felt more resourceful in their ability to locate information and study assistance on the Internet. They can scan texts more efficiently online and in the classroom that saves them time and reduces frustration. Hope and encouragement that that they might graduate as a result of their online learning success was an additional benefit.

Challenges – Student perspectives

Interview responses revealed challenges with coursework, motivation, technology, and internal/external struggles. Data also revealed recommendations to others, and how support of a teacher continues to impact student success in online coursework. Students described difficulties with academics, primarily in math. Lack of self-motivation and poor time management impacted their lack of success in both traditional and online classes. All students endorsed use of technology daily and several anticipated careers in the field; however, participants also described that technology was confusing and frustrating at times.

Students enrolled in online courses with online teacher support described poor interaction and complications when attempting to communicate with online teachers. Foe example, one student stated, "I had someone I could call and talk to on the phone and stuff and she was supposed to help me. But it was just really complicated to get answers. I had to wait days to get any information back. That was probably the worst part about it." This sentiment was reinforced by other students that participated in courses that were fully online.

Students who attended lab sessions after school described the limited role of the monitor and lamented the teachers' ability to assist with specific content. Online learning was also not compatible with every student's preferred learning style. Work, attendance, cost, discouragement, and poor time management placed students further at-risk for not completing their online coursework and dropping out of school.

Data from the interview protocols supported the third theme which described the importance of choice and control. This was evidenced as students acknowledged their individual experiences regarding working at their own pace, managing their time, managing their learning by reading thoroughly and taking notes, and making themselves work on their online coursework even when they did not prefer it. Students acknowledged personal consequences when they made poor choices. Overall, students revealed a self-awareness regarding the expectations of experiencing success in online learning; but the majority of them expressed the need for teacher support –both online and on site. They described needing a teacher who knows the specific content they are working on. Teachers are also needed to answer questions, to clarify confusing vocabulary or learning expectations, to

assist when they get stuck, or to be available online at various hours. The students acknowledged the benefits of online learning, but admitted, "We are not there yet."

Benefits – Staff perspectives

According to staff members, content teachers and graduation coaches have very different roles, purposes, and perspectives. Content teachers, who function as monitors for students working on site on their online coursework, stated their role is one of objective separation. They have a narrow, immediate goal of assisting students in their current online coursework and stated that acknowledging student failure freed students to admit need and seek help. This contributed to positive community.

Graduation coaches have complex roles and work with students more often and on a deeper level. They are concerned about everything going on in the students' lives, not just their academics. All staff members described how the online environment is more positive for students than the traditional classroom. Mastery is required in an online class, and students found motivation in that.

Staff members described how online learning promotes success, even though the students were at-risk for more than academics. The students had jobs and outside activities that caused conflicts for them. They experienced a sense of accomplishment because they had to work hard in online coursework. Staff members described how students have a limited perspective and that "they've never had it easy." Students were described as grateful, humble, and appreciative. As a result of being enrolled in online courses for credit recovery, students built positive relationships with staff members and peers.

Interview protocol data also revealed benefits of choice and control for at-risk students. Staff participants described how options promoted student ownership and autonomy. When students had increased opportunities for success, they began to mature and manage their own time more efficiently. Staff members saw their role as one of a partnership where they facilitated and supported students, not controlled or directed them. Positive student examples promoted and motivated other students to be successful in their online coursework.

The positive impact of success in online coursework carried over to other classes and their lives. Students began to believe they can graduate. They developed good memories of school, and they celebrated each others' successes. Because students had to work for their own success, it was more meaningful. Mastery is required in online learning, and that impacted students' perceptions of success and failure.

Challenges – Staff perspectives

Staff participants described the challenges encountered with online learning for credit recovery by their at-risk students. They reported providing technical support and collaborated with content providers regarding problems with course materials. They also described the need to be frank and forthright with students regarding student personal responsibility for their online coursework. Staff served as advocates and intermediaries for students with parents, teachers, and administrators. When trust was established the students sought them out for support and shared their successes. These are some of the challenges they identified.

Many classroom teachers had limited understanding of the role of the graduation coach, and the coaches reported that teachers could be easily taken advantage of. Staff members described that the students as at-risk for more than academics, distracted, and unmotivated. They had limited parental support or involvement. Further risk factors included attendance and outside responsibilities. To communicate with students and overcome some of these challenges, texting was reported to be the most effective method.

The graduation coaches described 'life changing experiences' that had a significant impact on the students' academic performances. Some students had lost a parent or sibling to death, had a parent incarcerated, or had a parent deployed overseas with the military. Having a limited understanding of the challenges at-risk students face was a challenge associated with this experience.

According to staff responses, students experienced anxiety, severe pressure, and feelings of being overwhelmed, which lead to shutting down or seeking destructive outlets. Staff members described students as being poor time managers and that cost was a big factor in whether students chose the option of online coursework for credit recovery.

The need to continue to seek online options for credit recovery was reported. They experienced frustration over policy makers who are slow to regard online learning as a viable option and described online learning as rigorous. Staff members described the need for stakeholders on the ground and directly responsible for the implementation of online learning to be a part of the decision-making process.

Discussion

Studies have shown that the technical, organizational, and academic abilities of students may limit their access to the proposed benefits of online learning (Cavanaugh et al., 2009;Clark & Berge,2005). At-risk students specifically, are described in the literature as displaying weaknesses in academic proficiency, technical skills, and self-direction (Blocher et al., 2002; Oliver et al., 2009), but online learning can help struggling students interact with academic content in a new and different way. Online learning is set up in such a way that it places control of the learning in the hands of students. Students for the first time begin to develop self-efficacy and experience control over their learning. Individual autonomy can be developed by activities and programs that emphasize setting realistic goals, accepting responsibility, and building self-confidence (Woolfolk, 2007). Students in this study described how they soon realized that the responsibility for their online course success rested in them. Support was generally available, but they had to seek it out. Not all of them were able to garner the resources they needed, and a few were unsuccessful in their online coursework as a result. It would be expected that these millennial students would be 'digital natives' and comfortable with all facets of technology. However, while all students reported daily use of technology for personal and social reasons, some described it as confusing and frustrating. Moreover, students reported that they generally had control over the time, place, and effort involved in their online learning. Many described a passive learning experience where they read a predictably organized learning module and took tests. For some students, this structure and sequential presentation of content contributed to greater understanding and lasting learning because it reduced distractions and allowed them to track their progress and know what more was expected.

Students also endorsed the benefits of embedded design elements. This finding aligned with Barbour's (2007) research on effective asynchronous course design for high school students. Specifically, students commented on the benefits of frequent summarization, worked-out examples and models, especially in math, the use of visuals and video, the avoidance of excessive text, and an accessible readability level. This supported similar recommendations made by Oliver et al. (2009).

Much has been described in the literature regarding the benefit of individualizing the online learning environment for at-risk students (Holstead et al., 2008; Natsu, 2011); however, the students in the study reported no such benefit. The students were using four different online platforms, and none of them were adjusted or altered in any way to meet the needs of individual learners.

As in traditional instructional practices, giving frequent and meaningful feedback to students is a critical component to student academic success. Further, providing an engaging instructional platform and active learning opportunities are highly effective components in both distance and face-to-face environments (Cavanaugh et al., 2009; Barbour, 2007; Rice, 2006). Several of the students in the study took an online course through a state-run virtual school. These students had the benefit of an online teacher to support them. However, participants described poor interaction and complications when attempting to communicate with the online teacher. It should be noted that some participants did not have computers in the home. Further, the lab at the school was only open and available to students Monday through Wednesday. Therefore, a problem or question emailed to a virtual teacher on Wednesday would not get to the student until Monday afternoon when the student reported to the lab. Attendance issues and employment responsibility further complicated this interaction.

Staff members reported several features of online learning that promoted student success and suggested that it lacks the negative social and academic experiences encountered in a traditional classroom. This is an important finding considering at-risk students need genuine motivation through validation and meaningful social interaction (Archambault et al., 2010; Christle et al., 2007). Staff participants described also how students experience anxiety, pressure, and withdrawal as a result of repeated failure in school and that students are more likely to advocate for themselves and seek assistance in the lab after school. They are encouraged to acknowledge need and request help from the teachers (monitors) who are assigned to the lab.

Most students enrolled in supplemental online courses attend a brick-and-mortar school, and generally the online program requires a mentor be provided to the student. It is expected that this mentor be available for both technical and academic support (Watson, 2007). Student participants presented contrasting views of the available support in the online learning lab. Some acknowledged that the monitors provided academic as well as technical assistance, while others noted the limited content knowledge of the monitors as it related to their own online coursework. Overall, the students felt that the monitors' primary responsibility was for accountability, not necessarily instructional support.

Recommendations

First and foremost, school leaders who make decisions regarding how to best support at-risk students and improve graduation outcomes should review the results of this study. At-risk students have complex issues and challenges that require different options, considerations,

supports, and opportunities. Opening a lab at the end of the school day for an hour, a few days a week and staffing it with a couple teachers does not adequately provide for the learning and emotional needs of students who require additional supports. Considerations must be given as to how to provide follow-up, accountability, and ongoing encouragement and communication with at-risk students enrolled in online credit recovery. It is incumbent upon school leaders to ensure that all staff members have the opportunity and training to better understand their roles in reaching and supporting at-risk students, especially those who are enrolled in additional online coursework in order to recover credits and graduate on time. There is a potential for tremendous student growth and re-engagement in their education in online learning. Supporting needy students in a high school is the responsibility of all staff, not just the graduation coach and a few others. On-site mentors and tutors may significantly impact the success or failure of at-risk students in online coursework. When hiring new teachers, principals should consider individuals with knowledge of content, technical skills, and the ability to relate to students of all abilities and backgrounds. A well-organized, well-planned program with staff to support each of the main content areas, and who are available to communicate with students on off hours will further enhance student performance. Students enroll in online courses with differing levels of academic ability, autonomy, and self-efficacy. A system of supports that is scaffolded to meet the needs of individual learners will likely yield the greatest results and promote student independence with lifelong benefits. Further, a system of accountability that provides data regarding the effectiveness of various online platforms is vital when considering which option is most appropriate for the targeted population. Additionally, online learning is a viable option for many learners, not just those recovering credit. School leaders set the tone and the climate in their schools, and when the success of all students by all means becomes a priority for the principal that impact is felt in every classroom.

Concluding Thoughts

The school leader's responsibility is to promote a positive learning environment that allows all students to access effective and engaging instruction. As school budgets shrink and students lean toward technology, online learning must become a part of every high school students' educational career. There is a substantial gap between what is and what works - with teachers and policy makers holding on to ineffective programs and delivery models. Strong leadership with a clear plan is needed to bridge the gap and bring America's education system into the 21st century. By developing an increased awareness of stakeholders' perceptions of supplemental online learning for credit recovery, local leaders will be better prepared to optimize the benefits and reduce the barriers in the K-12 online context.

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