

Systematic and Systemic Approaches to Reducing Attrition Rates in Online Higher Education

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Abstract

Prior to 1997, the Department of Instructional & Performance Technology (IPT) online program at Boise State University faced a high student dropout rate. The IPT turned to Keller's ARCS model, Kaufman's Organizational Elements Model, and Kirkpatrick's evaluation model throughout the processes of improving the motivational appeal of the online course for the first-time adult learners and solving the attrition problem. In this article, the author describes a long-term evaluation case study and explains how she systematically designed and implemented various instructional interventions to reduce attrition. She also presents the results of systemic evaluations.

Why Do Students Drop Out of Distance Education Programs?

The number of distance education course offerings and the enrollments in higher education have increased dramatically during the past several years, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES 1999). However, a high turnover in enrollment has been a continuous problem in distance education. Although distance education institutions are usually reluctant to publicly announce their dropout rates, attrition of distance education learners is known to be higher than that of on-campus learners (Kember 1995; Verduin and Clark 1991). Kember (1995) reports that, within a course, attrition is much higher at the beginning than towards the end of the course. The steep attrition slope is also found for an online degree program where students are more likely to drop out after the first couple of online courses than after they have taken a larger number of online courses (Fenner 1998).

Research shows that adult learners tend to drop out of distance education courses or degree programs for a variety of reasons: