Motivating & Retaining Adult Learners Online

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6. Retaining Adult Learners in a High-Stress Distance Education Learning Environment: The Purdue University Executive MBA in Agribusiness

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Abstract

The Purdue University Executive MBA in Agribusiness (Ag-EMBA) Program is an innovative joint master's degree program between Purdue's Krannert Graduate School of Management and its School of Agriculture. Spanning 2 years in four 5-month modules, Ag-EMBA is distinctive in that on-campus instruction is concentrated into 9 weeks of residency (30% of the total program content) spread over a 2-year period (a one-week orientation session, plus 2 weeks of residency every 6 months). Distance-delivered instruction accounts for 70% of the total program content. Students in the program average 37 years of age, hold significant positions in their firms, and travel extensively in their jobs. The program requires a commitment of 20 hours per week during the 20 weeks of distance instruction for each module. Given the pressure of their jobs, the need for a personal life, and the 20-hour commitment to their studies, student retention is a major issue in this program. To address the retention issue, three broad strategies have been developed and implemented: preparing a qualified group of learners to be successful in the program, implementing a delivery philosophy that is highly learner focused, and addressing the engagement of the learners at a much more personal level. This paper focuses on the first and third strategies but also reviews some of the key elements of the second strategy. The specific elements of each strategy are presented, and some insights for developing student retention strategies in distance education (DE) programs are offered.

Introduction

Retention of students is an issue in any institution of higher education today. However, programs involving distance education (DE) learning are likely to face even more challenging issues in retaining students from the time of initial enrollment through successful completion of a course of study. The types of challenges a DE program will face depend on the specific structure of the program. Some of these challenges are likely to include a requirement of more self-discipline on the part of the DE learner relative to a traditional learner; less personal contact between faculty and student, and between students; more immediate pressure from work or home, which may interrupt studies; frustrations with technology and teaching methods; a feeling of isolation and a lack of belongingness; and the sheer ease of dropping out relative to a more traditional course. Effective program design can help to manage most, if not all, of these issues. Therefore, it is imperative that the design of a DE program incorporate an explicit strategy to maximize student retention and avoid design flaws that lead to unacceptable dropout rates.

In this paper, we outline the learner retention strategy that has evolved for the Ag-EMBA Program. This Master's of Business Administration Program is aimed at professionals working in the food and agribusiness industries. About 70% of the total program content is delivered using DE learning methods. The students in the program find themselves under considerable stress as they attempt to balance intense work schedules, the need for a personal life, and 20 hours of study per week that the program requires. It is in this context that the retention strategy outlined here has evolved.

We are quite sure that many of the elements of this strategy are in place in other DE programs. At the same time, we hope that there are some unique elements that program administrators, faculty, and instructional designers will find useful in developing their own approaches to student retention. We first describe the program so that the context for the strategy is clear. Then we define the overriding principles we employ in the strategy and provide an overview of the three broad retention strategies. The remainder of the paper outlines the key elements of each strategy. We conclude with a few of the ideas we have for improving our own efforts in this area.

The Agribusiness EMBA Program

Ag-EMBA is an innovative joint master's degree between Purdue's Krannert Graduate School of Management and its School of Agriculture. This program is a cohort program: All participants in each class enter the program together, take a common set of courses together, and graduate together. Spanning 2 years in four 5-month modules, Ag-EMBA is distinctive in that on-campus instruction is concentrated into 9 weeks of residency (30% of the total program content) spread over the 2-year period (a 1-week orientation session, plus 2 weeks of on-campus residency every 6 months).

The use of DE instruction (70% of the total program content) allows the participants to pursue this degree at times they find the most convenient, while maintaining ongoing responsibilities to their respective organizations. An asynchronous, Internet-based model is employed, and an “anytime-anyplace” learning philosophy followed in the design of the DE portion of the program. Within a 2-week block of DE-delivered material, students have complete control as to when they work on assignments.

However, the program is not self-paced in that work must be completed within these 2-week blocks in order to move to the next topic with the cohort. A wide variety of tools are used by the 15 instructors in the program: voice-over PowerPoint lectures, discussion forums, video presentations delivered on CD, case study assignments, self-graded quizzes, animated spreadsheets, guest audio lectures, reading assignments, timed and untimed examinations, and a variety of written homework exercises, among other tools and approaches. Some of the work is individual; some of the work is done in teams.

Students in the program average 37 years of age, hold significant positions in their firms, and travel extensively in their jobs. The program requires a commitment of 20 hours per week during the 20 weeks of DE instruction for each module. Given the pressure of their jobs, the need for a personal life, and the 20-hour commitment to their studies, student retention is a major issue in this program.

Some Design Principles

Over the 4 years since this program was conceived, and building on the almost 20 years that the Krannert Graduate School of Management has been involved in DE, a series of basic principles have been identified as affecting student retention. We recognize that these principles could be a set of testable hypotheses for researchers in the education arena, so we offer them for what they are, namely, observations made after 4 years of intense effort to launch a new DE learning initiative in a high-stress learning environment:

1. Maintaining student retention starts with the right program for the target audience and the right target audience for the program.

2. Preparing qualified learners for success in the program is essential for retention.

3. Engaging coursework that students find valuable to their professional growth improves retention.

4. Utilizing an efficient, convenient, learner-focused course delivery system improves retention.

5. Receiving immediate, responsive support from staff and faculty reduces learner frustration and improves retention.

6. Discovering student problems early facilitates the development of solutions that may permit learners to remain in the program.

7. Being flexible in accommodating the work schedules and personal situations of students aids retention.

8. Developing close relationships between students and their peers, and students and staff, aids retention.

Although other principles could likely be added to the list, these eight items related to student retention have provided the foundation for the retention strategy we employ. With these basic principles in mind, we turn our attention to how they are implemented in practice.

Retention Strategy Overview

To address the retention issue, three broad strategies have been developed and implemented. The first strategy focuses on student selection and preparation. Without qualified students who are prepared to be successful, it is doubtful that other retention strategies will make much difference. The second strategy embraces a delivery philosophy that is highly learner focused. This learner focus keeps convenience and efficiency of the learning environment high and learner frustration low. The third broad strategy involves engaging the learners at a much more personal level. The notion here is that a close personal affiliation to their classmates, the program, and the university creates an emotional bond that improves retention. We review the elements of each strategy in turn.

The First Broad Strategy: Qualified, Prepared Learners

The first broad strategy addresses the first and second design principles. Student selection is absolutely essential in any DE retention strategy. Students with unrealistic expectations about the program or the workload, students not qualified for the program, or students qualified but not prepared are students at risk. Note that there is an element of symmetry here: Students must be right for the program, but the program must also be right for the students. Ultimately, adjustments must be made in the target audience or the program so that program and target audiences are aligned.

Some key elements of the strategy we use to help the right students get off to a strong start include the following:

- Clearly presenting the nature of the program and the time commitment required. Some students have unrealistic expectations, or perhaps no idea, what DE is or how it works. Advertisements that show people lounging in a field with their laptops while doing coursework do not help much. Finding 20 hours per week to devote to studies for a 35-year-old middle manager who has two children and is working 55+ hours per week is exceedingly difficult. We try to help students understand what life will be like in the program. One of the most effective ways we have found to do this is to put them in touch with current students.

- Utilizing admissions criteria developed around backgrounds that are likely to be successful in the program. Admissions standards must be consistent with the nature of the program. For this program, job responsibilities are an important dimension of the admissions criteria. There is a 5-year work experience requirement. Individuals with this much experience bring a valuable perspective to the program and make the cohort more valuable. In addition, they are more likely to find the course material relevant and engaging. However, work experience is not enough for an academically rigorous program; consequently, undergraduate grade point average, any graduate work, and the GMAT test score are used to assess academic preparation. Our aim is to admit individuals who can be successful in this program, not to admit anyone and let "survival of the fittest" take care of those with inadequate preparation.

- Introducing students to their classmates early, before the program starts. The period of time after admission and before the start of the program is a time when students can be lost for a number of reasons: enrolling in a competing program, second-guessing their decision, delaying entry for another year, and so on. As soon as students are admitted, they are given an URL address and a password to access their cohort group's Web site. Here they will find additional information about the program, and they will find photos and background information about their future classmates. Once we have admitted students, we want them to feel from that moment on they are part of Ag-EMBA.

- Assessing areas where students have inadequate preparation and where additional preparation is required. As in many MBA programs, the quantitative areas such as statistics, finance, accounting, and economics are typically where students need the most remedial work. For the managers in this program, spreadsheet skills were one of the weakest areas. Trying to learn advanced spreadsheet skills and quantitative methods simultaneously is a very frustrating experience. A set of self-paced tutorials have been identified to help students build background in weak areas.

- Addressing technical readiness prior to program start. Students perform a "tech check" on their computers prior to the orientation session to surface any problem areas such as corporate firewalls and software incompatibilities. This tech check developed by our staff lets students try to access all of the tools used in the DE portion of the program. Any problems are cataloged, and solutions are developed. As many of these technical issues as possible are taken care of before students come to campus for orientation.

- Holding a face-to-face orientation session where students meet each other and their faculty. This program starts with a 1-week, face-to-face orientation session. Some specific elements of the week are described later in this paper. From a preparation standpoint, this may be the most important element of the retention strategy. Expectations are reviewed, relationships are initiated, and technical issues are addressed. The goal for the week is for the students to leave excited about what they are embarking on and prepared to pursue the program successfully.

- Team building to encourage the group to get to know each other quickly. Study teams are an important element of the instructional and retention strategies. Students are assigned to teams that they work with across all courses in a module. These teams are rotated every module. Backgrounds are carefully considered when students are assigned to teams. These teams are part of group learning activities, but they also become support groups, providing encouragement when attitudes are low and peer assistance when students are struggling with course material. The team-building activity held during the orientation helps the cohort get started much more quickly than if the relationships were simply left to evolve on their own.

- Providing additional technical assistance during the residency. Additional technical assistance is provided during the orientation to insure that laptop computers are set up properly, the program's Web site can be accessed, and all DE-delivery tools are working. The goal is to insure that all the students are technically ready to work on the DE activities after they leave the orientation session.

- Demonstrating the DE process during the orientation. Every student knows what it is like to be in a traditional classroom, but almost none knows what it is like to be in a virtual classroom. Instructors do cover some material in a traditional manner during the orientation as they start their courses, but they also spend time demonstrating to the students how they will use DE tools, helping the students to understand how they will "take" the course once they leave campus.

- Answering student questions about the program. This is an ongoing activity of the residency session. One of the best ways we have found to do it is through a presentation made by a previous student who provides comments and answers questions about keys to success in the program. This presentation has helped address student questions from the perspective of someone who has been through what they are getting ready to do. Also, it is very motivating for the students to hear and meet someone who has been successful in the program.

The Second Broad Strategy: Learner-Focused Course Delivery

The second broad strategy focuses on the development of a learner-centered course delivery system. This strategy addresses design principles 3 through 7. Addressing effective course design is beyond the scope of this paper, but students who find the courses valuable are certainly more likely to remain in the program than those who find little value.

Instructors who deliver relevant content, instructors who know how to motivate material, and instructors who create engaging learning experiences are the foundation of this process. Although course content and effective instructors are fundamental to program success, there are other elements of course design that are important to student retention. We highlight some of the key elements of this strategy:

- <u>Engaging, on-line course resources</u>. These resources include PowerPoint presentations, streaming audio clips, lectures in audio and text format, and self-tests available for download anytime. Our students have consistently reinforced the use of audio in DE delivery. At 11 p.m., when one is working through a challenging statistics problem, hearing the voice of the instructor talk through a difficult concept is very well received.

- <u>Using on-line "virtual discussions forums</u>." This is a commonly used method in DE. When done well, discussion forums can create a very strong sense of community among students in the class, and they can help to build bonds between instructors and students.

- <u>Coordinating assignments across courses</u>. Students in this program take three courses at any one point in time. It is imperative that the total workload be managed across all three courses to respect the 20 hours per week we have asked students to devote to the program. This requires staff to work with faculty in coordinating workloads to avoid weeks where all three courses have major assignments due.

- <u>Committing to continuous improvement and utilizing a carefully structured approach for collecting learner suggestions for such improvement</u>. For this broad strategy of learner-centered course delivery, this element may be the most important. We evaluate the program at four distinct points in every module – the halfway point of the first off-campus block, at the residency, the halfway point of the second off-campus block, and at the end of the module. A "Town Meeting" is conducted during the residency, and students are free to discuss any element of the program. Given the evolving nature of DE-delivery methods and the technology that supports it, a number of changes have been made in the program—some minor, some substantive—but all based on student and faculty feedback. Over time, the fact that we have been responsive is not lost on the students. Even though we cannot do everything that students suggest, we have responded to good ideas. As a result, students are very forthcoming with their suggestions. It is important to note that our focus here is delivery, not content. We cannot master the material for the students, and we are not talking about reducing course rigor. However, we can, and should, develop, maintain, and constantly improve the course delivery system in a manner that helps students to maximize the value of their scarce time resource, allowing them to focus on understanding the material, not wasting time on technology.

- Providing responsive support to student problems and issues. This element encompasses a number of initiatives: On-line help, extended hours for technical assistance, customer-oriented staff, and faculty who respond to e-mail messages within 24 hours are all part of reducing learner frustration. When students have a limited amount of time to devote to coursework, taking 3 days to get back to them on an issue is unacceptable.

- Constantly monitoring student engagement. In part, this is a faculty responsibility, but we also see this as a staff responsibility. If students start getting behind, corrective action must be taken quickly – a 3-week hiatus from this program means that a student is at least 60 hours behind. For students with full-time jobs, this lost time may well be impossible to make up. Ultimately, the responsibility here rests with the student, but detecting problems early, identifying issues, and exploring solutions can help to avoid a situation where a student is forced to drop out.

- Maintaining some degree of flexibility to accommodate the schedules of students. This is a challenging area for program administrators and faculty. Applying an iron rule to assignments and due dates works well with undergraduates; for the marketing manager who is required to take a 2-week trip to Malawi and Mozambique, and who will likely have limited, if any, Internet access, such intransigence may cause considerable frustration. Although it is critical that students communicate and use good judgment, it is also important to accommodate students' incredibly intense work schedules when necessary. Anytime this can be accomplished without comprising the quality standards of the program pays big dividends with respect to retention.

The Third Broad Strategy: Emotional Engagement

Individuals familiar with brand management in marketing or the principles of customer relationship management often talk about the emotional attachment an individual has for a brand or company. Here, we can talk about emotional engagement toward the program and the institution. Qualified, prepared learners; great courses; and a learner-centered delivery system will likely have a major impact on retention. However, taking all of these elements further with an additional set of activities to build an emotional attachment to the program is the final retention strategy we employ. Some of the key elements in the third broad strategy include:

- Daily updates to the course Web site, which include motivational and humorous messages to encourage students to visit the site each day.

- Small personal touches, such as birthday cards mailed to students.

- Special events during residencies to allow students a more personal level of interaction with faculty and staff.

- Special reminders of their status as Purdue students. An example would be the Purdue football team's trip to the Rose Bowl in January 2001. Each student was mailed a Rose Bowl party kit complete with Purdue banners, streamers, football team information, microwave popcorn, and so on. The cost of this kit was minimal, but the response from the students and their families was extremely positive

- On-line links to Purdue University news, athletics, and campus life so that students can stay connected with what is going on at Purdue.

- A "Fun Facts" section on the Web site that presents information about faculty that has nothing to do with their academic training to help the students know their instructors on a more personal level.

Some may dismiss these ideas as frivolous and not part of a serious academic program. We disagree. Even though these students are at a distance, we want them to know that they are still Purdue University students working on a graduate degree in agribusiness management. These small touches help to build an emotional link and commitment to the university. When job or family pressures exert themselves, which will happen, we believe that students are less likely to drop a program they feel an emotional commitment to rather than one they do not. The other point that makes this area so appealing is that virtually all of these activities are very low cost. Being creative and staying alert for opportunities to build these emotional connections can go a long way to making this broad strategy an important component of an overall student retention strategy.

Some Future Ideas

To date, we have admitted 41 students to this new program. Currently, 34 are in the program. Of the 7 who have left, 3 were forced to drop out due to health or job reasons, but they are enrolling in the next class. Hence, we have lost a total of 4 students to date, and 2 of them were lost when their firms sold their divisions and they lost their jobs. We do feel that the student retention strategy we are using is paying off with few dropouts and, just as importantly, very positive attitudes about the program from the students.

As we look to the future, we anticipate improvement in all three areas discussed previously. Continuous improvement is just that: continuous. Probably the greatest upside is in the course delivery area as technologies evolve and bandwidth improves. We will continue to explore DE delivery alternatives that allow us to serve highly motivated learners in a high-stress learning environment.