

Evaluating and Supporting Student Engagement in Online Learning

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Abstract : Research on student engagement is founded on a desire to improve the quality of online instruction in both course design and delivery. A high level of student engagement is associated with a wide range of educational practices including purposeful student-faculty contact, peer to peer contact, active and collaborative learning, and positive factors such as student satisfaction, persistence, achievement, and learning. By encouraging student engagement, institutions of higher education can have a positive impact on student success that leads to retention and degree completion. The current research presents the results of an online student engagement survey which support faculty teaching practices to maximize the learning experience for online students. The 'Indicators of Engaged Learning Online' provide a framework that measures level of student engagement. Social constructivism and collaborative learning form the theoretical basis of the framework. Social constructivist pedagogy acknowledges the social nature of knowledge and its creation in the minds of individual learners. Some important themes that flow from social constructivism involve the importance of collaboration among instructors and students, active learning vs passive consumption of information, a learning environment that is learner and learning centered, which promotes multiple perspectives, and the use of social tools in the online environment to construct knowledge. The results of the survey indicated themes that emphasized the importance of: Interaction among peers and faculty (collaboration); Timely feedback on assignment/assessments; Faculty participation and visibility; Relevance and real-world application (in terms of assignments, activities, and assessments); and Motivation/interest (the need for faculty to motivate students especially those that may not have an interest in the coursework per se). The qualitative aspect of this student engagement study revealed what instructors did well that made students feel engaged in the course, but also what instructors did not do well, which could inform recommendations to faculty when expectations for teaching a course are reviewed. Furthermore, this research provides evidence for the connection between higher student engagement and persistence and retention in online programs, which supports our rationale for encouraging student engagement, especially in the online environment because attrition rates are higher than in the face-to-face environment.

Keywords : instructional design, learning effectiveness, online learning, student engagement

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