How to Increase Retention Rates for Online-Only Students

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Introduction:

In Fall of 2015, 14.4% of all degree-seeking post-secondary students (2.8 million total) were enrolled in online-only programs (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2017). However, studies have shown that online student retention rates are as low as 50-60% (Gravel, 2012). Current research shows that efforts to increase retention are minimal at best. It is important for university retention efforts to consider the needs of this large number of degree-seeking students.

Background:

The main factors that contribute to online-only student retention are:
1. A strong sense of community among students
Forums, single in-person interactions, peer group relatability (Dunworth, 2012; Sutton, 2014; Mannay & Wilcock, 2015)

2. Engaging interactions with faculty and staff
Quality of interactions, time given to hear and respond to needs, questions, and concerns (Gravel, 2012; Sutton, 2014; de Freitas, 2015)

3. Strong writing skills
In one study, the high-performing writing group had a higher retention rate than lower-performing writing groups (Sutton, 2014)

Guiding Questions:

What are the problems affecting online-only student retention?
How can we begin to address these issues?

Discussion:

The foremost challenges to online-only student retention are:
1. **Finding ways to foster community from afar**, alleviating the burden of doing so from the local community, especially for students from low socioeconomic communities
- University resources should be allocated toward this goal, instead of leaving the financial and operational burden on the community alone (Travers, 2016; Sutton, 2014)

2. **Addressing student underpreparedness** for the rigor of a degree program, especially for students who come from populations underserved by primary and secondary education
- Remedial coursework, online accessible tutoring, library resources, trainings on writing and research (Gravel, 2012; Travers, 2016; Mannay & Wilcock, 2015)

3. **Aiding students who are behind on computer literacy**, to combat the "digital divide" experienced by many individuals from low socioeconomic communities
- Computer literacy training, IT support and computer / technology access (Maffett, 2007; Travers, 2016)

Conclusion:

Increased retention for online-only students will lead to higher success rates in accessible higher education opportunities for diverse and widespread students. By specifically targeting the needs of online-only students, higher education administrators can have a positive influence on online-only student retention rates.