

Supporting Online Credit Recovery Students to Find Success

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Students with a history of course failure usually have attitudes, behavior patterns or barriers that were a factor in course failure. Since these students often find completing coursework challenging, how can a high school support students who are now asked to work independently to complete challenging coursework online as part of a credit recovery program? The purpose of this needs assessment is to identify supports at-risk high school students need to finish online credit recovery courses. Teachers of the failed courses, and the adult tutors who assist student were surveyed for opinions regarding student skills, attitudes and supports for academic success as well as factors and barriers that appear to lead to student failure. All responses were compiled and focus group members examined the data, discussed responses and created recommendations. Additional structure was strongly suggested to meet the needs of students involved in the program. Recommendations were also generated toward a longer term plan to differentiate the options for students to earn additional credits in a meaningful way.

Introduction

Students in the United States education system have always failed classes. At one time, a certain failure rate was expected and considered part of doing business in education. The education system and society as a whole expected to see tiers of success regarding students participating in our compulsory system. Expectations were that the top students would graduate and go on to college and professional careers, the middle tier would graduate and move on to technical schools or work and the bottom tier would drop out and take labor positions in manufacturing or other non-skilled jobs. Today's economy requires intellectual skills rather than skilled hands to earn more than minimum wage (Garmston & Wellman, 1999; Pletka, 2007 and Wagner, et al. 2006).

The nature of industry and employment has changed in the US and in the world. Our manufacturing companies and jobs have moved to other countries where labor and related expenses are more affordable. Technology has changed how we work, communicate, make purchases and do business. There is no longer a need in our country for a large unskilled workforce (Pletka, 2007). With no niche in the world of employment for workers without a minimum level of literacy, numeracy, problem solving and technological skills, there has been a shift in expectations for the US education system. Workplaces today are requiring the same skills as colleges, even though all jobs do not require college degrees, employees are

expecting comparable skills to those needed for college (Wagner, et al, 2006). The demands of a new economy, the skills required by employers and post-secondary education create a compelling case for developing supports to keep students who struggle in school.

In order to keep struggling students in school, more opportunities to earn credit were developed through school schedules, correspondence courses and eventually, online curriculum. Students have participated in correspondence courses for decades, using the US mail system. Supports are provided by counselors, parents or other personnel to facilitate completion by the student's graduation date. Many students failed to complete courses or had more courses to complete than could be completed within the time limit. Many schools also have limits on the number of courses that could be taken. School schedules and the availability of summer school also influence the availability of credit opportunities for students.

Technology and the World Wide Web created the opportunity to provide courses online. These courses offer flexibility in terms of pace and place for completion of curriculum. Students are drawn to these courses as a way to complete needed credits for graduation, yet the factors that may have previously interfered with completing courses, often interfere with timely progression through online coursework. Students needing to make up credit toward graduation, often called "credit recovery" have one or more of the characteristics of students considered to be at-risk for failing to eventually graduate from high school. Opportunities for student who struggle to catch up on credit can make a difference between graduation and dropping out of school (Shore & Shore, 2009).

The purpose of this needs assessment is to identify what supports at-risk high school students need to finish online credit recovery courses by interviewing the teachers of the failed courses and the adult tutors who assist students in the lab then establishing a focus group to develop and initial support plan. The site of this needs assessment is a high school on the island of Kauai, Hawaii. This school offers a limited schedule of six credits per year over four years to earn 24 to 25 credits for a State of Hawaii diploma that leaves no room for error.

A limited number of courses can be taken in summer school or through the state's online system of courses. The state system known as E-School offers courses to students across the entire state. These courses fill up quickly and the registrar at this high school reports that many of the students from the school who enroll drop out and some of the remaining students fail to pass. The state has also developed several courses specifically for credit recovery that the school has access to, but the selection is limited and doesn't necessarily reflect the courses needed to graduate. The school purchases additional courseware and implements a supplementary program that requires students to work independently on curriculum. Tutors are available after school to provide specific help and to supervise computer labs and provide Internet access for students. Correspondence courses implemented through the US mail system are no longer used for credit.

When students fail courses that they do not successfully make up, they will not graduate in a timely manner. If students fall too far behind and become discouraged, they are at-risk for

dropping out of school. The Childtrends DataBank reports that young adults with low education and low skill levels are more likely to live in poverty, receive government assistance, and become involved in crime. In addition to these personal and social costs, poor physical and mental health is also linked to dropout status. Males are more likely to drop out with 9% nationally compared to 7% for females. Foreign-born students drop out at a rate of 21% with 13% for the children of foreign born parents. The characteristics and behavior of students who are taking online credit recovery courses because they have failed courses in the past were considered for the purpose of this study (Shore & Shore, 2009).

Body of Paper

Review of existing literature examined the characteristics of at-risk students and programs reporting success with students meeting this profile, drop-out data, online teaching and learning practices, high school online program support and existing credit recovery programs. The research consists of a variety of sources and data to gain a well rounded perspective on skills and attitudes needed to be successful with online curriculum. Factors and barriers that interfere with achievement for students with a history of course failure and supports and structures that have been found effective to support students in retrieving credit were part of the body of research.

The Kids Count Indicator Brief: Reducing the High School Drop Out Rate outlines five strategies for reducing the dropout rate which includes; developing a long term approach with a focus on school readiness, focusing intensely on ninth grade challenges, understanding the needs of at-risk students and building understanding and skills of adults who are influential in a student's lives (Shore & Shore, 2009). Archambault, et al (2010) found that students reported multiple factors creating barriers to academic success. To address barriers, strategies include the use of supportive faculty and staff, individualizing of instruction and specific instructional strategies such as mastery learning to ensure success. The human element is highlighted in the relationships between students and supportive faculty and staff. Many of the programs mention teams that provide support to the individual and subsequent learning comprised of families, mentors, coaches and teaching staff (Hammond, Linton, Smink & Drew, 2007 and Kemple, Herlihy & Smith, 2005).

Mac Iver & Mac Iver (2009) report that engagement is the key element in student decisions whether to stay in school or not. Students as individuals and the school, family and community as an institutional system factor into student engagement. Disengagement manifests in individuals as high absenteeism, behavior problems and course failure. Failure to provide a learning environment characterized by supportive relationships, high academic expectations and coherent and relevant instruction is a recipe for lack of engagement and potentially dropouts. Students who fail to pass all courses need options to earn credit toward graduation.

Credit Recovery is defined as receiving credit for a course passed after a previous attempt that was unsuccessful with a larger focus on assisting students to remain in school and graduate on time. In terms of format, online programs provide flexibility and are less stigmatizing. This format also addressing mobility issues and other barriers and allows for

customization of curriculum to meet student needs. Surveys of existing programs indicate that a supportive environment with structure and ongoing access to assistance also appeared to be critical even if delivery methods are varied. (Gemin & Gemin, 2008).

Indicators of potential low performance in an online learning environment include lack of self-regulation (Robler & Davis, 2008). In an online educational setting students need to direct their own learning, often students who have previously failed courses lack the ability to self-regulate. McMahon & Oliver (2001) advocate for scaffolding activities for self-regulation into course structure then fade over time as students learn to utilize tools, problem-solve and self-assess.

Florida Virtual School imbedded support and skills that included structuring learning so that students gain skills in time management, using module or unit organizers as reported by the North American Council for Online Learning (2006). Enterprise High School in Redding California offered a “school within a school” format designed for part-time credit recovery. The goal is to provide social structure and educational interventions through small group and individualized instruction and interventions through small group and individual instruction. The students operated on a slightly different schedule with four block schedule created out of a three block schedule to allow for an additional class to forge ahead on credit.

Research suggests combining comprehensive school reform and targeted programs for students to address students staying, progressing and completing school (Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009). This study was conducted at a school that is looking at refining or redesigning its credit recovery program and additional options to earn credit in the future. The school is also in the midst of comprehensive change as it redesigns itself into smaller learning communities with teams at the 9th and 10th grade level and an academy structure that addresses relevancy and interest for students. Credit options are part of the bigger discussion as well as an intervention for students in immediate need.

Methods

In order to conduct this needs analysis, interview questions were created and subjects contacted for consent, surveys were conducted with open-ended questions. The survey for teachers, created in Survey Monkey an online survey tool, contained questions regarding the skills and attitudes necessary for students to succeed in an academic classes. What support systems do students who struggle with academic content need to be successful? Teachers were also asked to comment on factors and barriers that may have led to student failure in their own courses as well potential support systems these students may need to succeed with online courses.

The survey for tutors contained questions tailored to their particular role as supports for students working on credit recovery courses. This survey asked tutors to reflect on skills, attitudes and support systems necessary for students to be successful with online courses. In addition, tutors were asked to comment on factors and barriers they believe have led to student failure with online courses.

The surveys were created to seek parallel information about student characteristics from the unique perspective of each surveyed group. The dual surveys were created to gain a multiple perspectives for the focus group to examine. The survey data was prepared for the focus group to review, look for patterns and trends and make suggestions.

After surveys were completed, the participants assembled as a focus group to discuss the observations, perceptions and ideas gathered during the survey process. The group was asked to review all of the comments, look for patterns, and use the data and their collective knowledge to make suggestions for improvement of the credit recovery program currently in place at the school.

The participating teachers have a year's experience with most students. The tutors have provided support for credit recovery students for a number of years. The participating tutors have been employed by the school between one and five years. This group of participants is well acquainted with the credit recovery students. This group is also aware of school systems and resources.

Results

Both of the target groups were given similar surveys using SurveyMonkey online tool. The surveys addressed student skills, attitudes, possible barriers to academic success and support systems necessary for success with online coursework. The focus group, who had all participated in the survey, reviewed all the comments. The following is a summary of the qualitative data gathered through the surveys.

Skills reported by tutors and teachers for students to succeed with academic content in a face-to-face or online context fell into two categories; academic skills and work habits. Academic skills included good reading comprehension of English, ability to compose and write, and comfort with the internet, computers and other tools such as calculators and online dictionaries. Work habits were also cited in response to questioning about student skills. Tutors and teachers indicated that the ability to think and work independently, pace themselves in completing work, to sustain focus, follow directions, attend to details and exhibit self-discipline were important to success. Attitudes to complement the reported skills and work habits included motivation and persistence, the ability to be positive and patient as well as exhibit a sense of urgency.

In order to get a more complete picture of challenges students with course failure who become credit recovery students face, the subjects were asked about factors they had knowledge of that may have been an influence. Student behaviors and work habits were also cited in this area as factors potentially leading to failure such as attendance in face-to-face courses, attending to online work and requirements or simply failing to turn in work. In addition, insufficient prior learning and lack necessary skill level for the academic work. The courses assigned may also not feel relevant to students who are usually simply attempting to earn credit to fulfill graduation requirements.

Lack of adequate orientation and support as well as asking students who failed courses in previous years to retake the material in a primarily independent study format were suggested as systematic factors that should be addressed in this study. There is also a particular challenge for English Language Learners (ELL) who often lack a comfortable grasp of the English. Language fluency is often necessary to operate effectively within an online environment rooted in language based instruction. Depending on where ELL students are from, they may also have very little computer and internet exposure, creating another challenge.

Students who fail courses, whether in a traditional face-to-face format or who fail to complete the requirements of online courses often have barriers. Lack of computer access outside of school or fluent technological skills can present access issues for students completing online coursework. Many students have a number of obligations that can interfere with time to work on course requirements such as jobs, sports practice and games and extra-curricular activities.

In addition to tangible barriers, the adults surveyed felt that many of these students felt defeated and saw themselves as failures in an education setting. The format of online curriculum with relatively large amounts of text based information can present a challenging situation to students who lack adequate literacy skills or lack an adequate vocabulary for the courses assigned. This may affect English Language Learners, students with disabilities and students with low skills or a history of absenteeism.

Both tutors and teachers were asked to reflect on support systems students need to be successful with academic content. Access to a trusted, knowledgeable adult, structured orientation, and a managed or structured environment was suggested by both tutors and teachers. Parental support was also cited as an important component. Additional ideas for student support included systems for monitoring and checking for progress and for students to monitor themselves. Access and knowledge of online resources also proved to be valuable for students as support that can be utilized independently or prompted by supportive adult.

Discussion

Focus group suggestions for next school year include more structure, scheduled course times, using the online coursework as content and involving the students in articulating with other students working on the same coursework in a collaborative manner. Other recommendations included systems for decoding the requirements of the course so that the structure and progression of coursework can be comprehended in a way that is somewhat concrete. The focus group felt that the program should strive for more authentic learning through portfolios of learning as a culminating product for the courses. Students are finding ways to power through the courses, often without meaningful learning. The discussion included differentiating support, related activities and products based on the learner based on screening the student for learning style and preferences and success in prior learning environments.

The focus group addressed a developmental approach to revising and redeveloping the credit recovery program. Providing a structured time, differentiation and support was addressed for the next school year. Developing a number of options for the recovery of credit that has a variety of options was viewed as optimal as the school moves forward. Using learner characteristics to develop and drive credit options rather than a one size fits all option was advocated for by members of the focus team. Options included; online independent study, hybrid online courses with structured course attendance, supports and differentiation in products to showcase learning, credit for work that is accompanied by learning products and reflection, and face-to-face elective credits before and after the regular school day.

Conclusion

The survey data was analyzed by the focus group. Discussion indicated that the school has a credit recovery program that has grown significantly over the last couple of years with support systems and program implementation practices that are leaving many students without sufficient support. The learner characteristics were cited as overlooked criteria in the current program design. The recent practice of offering online, independent study courses to at-risk students with a history of difficulty with attendance, coursework completion, and insufficient prior learning was discussed extensively. A mismatch between literacy levels of students and literacy demands of the courses as well as inconsistent study and work skills also emerged as a concern.

The focus group created a two-tiered set of recommendations for consideration in program refinement or redevelopment. The first tier consisted of recommendations to provide more sufficient support for students during the 2011-2012 school year participating in the program. A scheduled class that students attend either before or after school that requires mandatory attendance was the primary recommendation for the next school year. Staffing the lab with a knowledgeable adult to provide assistance, differentiating products and assessments of learning for more meaningful learning was also considered to be critical to maintaining rigor and providing for personalization. Orientation to the technical aspects of the online courseware and a tangible way see the expectations for completion and track progress were also strongly suggested to support students.

A longer term plan that provides for differentiation of options to earn credit outside of the regular school schedule was felt to be a way to better provide for the needs of a diverse population of students who need credit who may not necessarily find a fit with an online independent study based course. In addition to online independent study, hybrid online courses could be developed with structured course attendance, using software to deliver content with differentiation in products to showcase learning. Additional suggestions include credit for employment that is accompanied by learning products and reflection, and face-to-face elective credits before and after the regular school day. These options will need to be explored by examining data and will involve discussion and development if they are to be included in the school's program. Funding or creative scheduling of instructors needs to be planned for if the school is to implement a matrix of options for credit. A brief synopsis of results has been presented to the school's principal. Further discussion is needed to structure

the credit recovery program to support credit recovery students during the next school year plan for future implementation.

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