

PEIRCE COLLEGE AND STUDENT SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT

This case study describes the philosophy underlying the delivery of online programs and courses at Peirce College through Peirce Online[®]. The strategies used to implement the Peirce College model and the measures used to validate its success are outlined. These factors are reviewed in the context of the Sloan-C Five Pillars for quality learning environments.

KEYWORDS

Retention, Student Success, Course Completion, Strategies, Sloan-C Five Pillars

I. INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND

Peirce College is a private four-year specialized institution offering accredited business administration, information technology, and paralegal studies degree programs to address economic and workforce development needs. Founded as the Union Business College in 1865 to provide educational opportunities to Civil War veterans transitioning to the civilian workforce, Peirce College was at the forefront in providing career-oriented education for women in the 19th century and remains a leading provider of part-time business education for women in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. In keeping with the College's legacy of utilizing innovative technology to support its mission of providing practical, leading edge curricula to primarily working adult learners, Peirce created Peirce Online in year 2000. With its online business administration, information technology, and paralegal studies degrees, Peirce is one of the oldest accredited colleges offering a complete degree program online in the United States.

One of the College's most notable strategic accomplishments with respect to online learning has been its expansion from a strong regional brand to a national scope and international reach, serving degree seeking students from 38 of the 50 states and 24 foreign countries. More than half of Peirce's credits attempted are derived from its online program. Face-to-face instruction and online delivery use the same curricula, course descriptions, and professors; both delivery formats promote the same learning outcomes. These interchangeable formats are included under institutional accreditation through the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) as well as program specific endorsements by the American Bar Association (ABA) and the Association of Collegiate Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP).

II. SUCCESSFUL COURSE COMPLETION IN INTRODUCTORY LEVEL CLASSES

The College defines successful course completion as being enrolled in a course after the drop/add deadline and subsequently passing the course (i.e., not failing or withdrawing). In seven week classes students may drop the class without penalty before the end of the first week of class and may withdraw before the end of the fourth week of class. Using this definition, the success rate in 100- and 200-level online courses during the 2007–2008 academic year was 83.2%, slightly lower than the 85.2% rate for on

campus courses. For this case study, please note that all discussion of success is at the individual course level. In the 2007–2008 academic year, there were 3456 grades earned in campus classes and 6817 grades earned in online classes. The average class size was 11.43 and 18.63 in on campus and online classes, respectively. Most classes are seven weeks in length. Introductory paralegal studies courses are fourteen weeks in length and only offered in a face to face format as required by the American Bar Association. There are 14 week options for English 101 and some mathematics classes.

III. STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING SUCCESSFUL COURSE COMPLETION

A. Access

The College's approach to ensuring student success in online courses is straightforward and substantial. As an institution that works with primarily working adult learners (83% at least 25 years old and an average of 34 years old), Peirce has many support systems in place for all of our students whether they take online or face-to-face courses. Additionally, Peirce leverages technology wherever possible to identify students who are at risk of not successfully completing courses. The learning management system that the College uses provides a user activity report that details the amount of time students spend in their online classes during a specific time period. The College runs this report weekly to determine the amount of time students spent online for the previous seven days. This information is provided to program advisors who contact their students who have shown little activity in their courses. The College is, therefore, able to intervene quickly and provide needed support. Since all of our degree programs are available completely online, and that more than half of our credits attempted are taken in an online format, all members of the College community recognize that online education is a critical component of our students' success and ability to complete their degree programs.

1. First Year Initiative

There are several services that the College provides to all students to support course completion. Most of these services fall under the umbrella of our First Year Initiative which is designed to make all new and readmitted students, including online students, part of the College community. These include, but are not limited to, skills assessments, an orientation course delivered entirely online, a wide variety of workshops, and online tutoring offered through SMARTHINKING. All of the student associations meet in person but also have a strong online presence using a "course" in eCollege, our learning management system.

2. Skills Assessment

Students who apply to Peirce College without transfer credit in English 101 and/or college level mathematics are required to take skills assessments in those subjects. Students who answer at least 70% of the questions correctly may elect to enroll in a seven-week English 101 or college level mathematics course. Students who do not, and those who choose not to take the assessments, must enroll in a 14-week English 101 or college level mathematics course.

3. Orientation

Students become acclimated to Peirce College and learn about available support services, policies, and procedures in Peirce College 101, a required seven-week, one-credit, online orientation course that must be taken within the first 14 weeks of enrollment at Peirce. All online courses at Peirce College are in a seven week format. In this course, students learn to use the online platform on which all of their online

courses will be held. (All face-to-face courses have websites using this same platform.) The College's online course websites all have a similar design allowing students to focus on achieving learning objectives rather than learning the look and feel of the course website. This design has been developed over the eight years of our online program with the input of faculty, feedback from students, and instructional design support. In addition, during the orientation course, students complete the Noel-Levitz College Student Inventory. The results allow students to identify areas in which they need additional focus to be successful. The results of this inventory are used to advise students when they are enrolling in degree programs and courses and to create programming that supports students' needs.

4. Institution-wide Ongoing Support

The Walker Center for Academic Excellence (WCAE) provides student support services for all Peirce College students. The WCAE staff facilitates numerous workshops on a regular basis throughout the year. Topics include time management, stress management, test taking and study skills, success strategies for adult learners, computer skills, career development, and mathematics and writing skills. These workshops are available for all students, including students taking online classes. The workshops are available both on campus and online.

5. Free Tutoring

SMARTHINKING is a subscription-based online tutoring service that the College offers at no charge to Peirce College students. This online tutoring service provides assistance in the same manner as on campus tutoring support services. Students can connect in real-time with a tutor or submit a paper for review and receive feedback from a tutor within 24 hours.

6. Just-in-Time Advising

There are several administrative processes in place, specific to online courses, which leverage technology to assist with student completion. These include both faculty and advisors contacting students who have been minimally active in the course website in any week throughout the course. The drop/add period for our online courses is the first week of the course. Since user activity in online courses is readily available, near the end of the first week, faculty members contact students who have not yet logged onto the course website. This communication not only encourages the students to begin their coursework but also identifies the last day to drop the course without penalty. After the drop/add period, the College generates a User Activity report on a weekly basis for students in online courses. This information is sent to the students' advisors who contact the students to identify any issues that might be hindering their progress and/or to encourage them to resume their coursework. Faculty members have access to this user activity information throughout the course and are encouraged to contact those students who are falling behind. We have found that providing this information to the students' advisors allows the advisors to develop the relationship with their students that goes beyond just providing assistance with choosing a class schedule but allow them to understand more about the external influences on students' academic progress.

7. Faculty Responsiveness

The College has found that faculty participation is a critical component of student satisfaction and success in online courses. To that end, the College has a twenty-four hour response time policy for faculty to respond to students' questions. This twenty-four hour response applies to all faculty teaching face to face or online courses. Faculty are also trained on how to use the class websites during their orientation and are provided consistent support by the Instructional Design Specialist. Both faculty and students also have access to 24-hour-a-day phone, email or live chat technical support.

8. Access to Technology and Support

Technical access to, and communication within, online courses is also a critical component of success. To support students' access to online course websites, the College has a single sign-on to the course websites through the campus portal. The College provides 24-hour-a-day technical support to both students and faculty. The College has intentionally kept the technical requirements to access and participate in online courses low: there are very few additional applications that are required for successful completion of online courses. Lastly, the College provides a copy of Microsoft Office 2007 at no charge to students and faculty to allow for seamless communication.

B. Learning Effectiveness

Face-to-face instruction and online delivery use the same curricula, course descriptions, and professors and promote the same learning outcomes. The great majority of courses and all program concentrations are available in both an online and on campus format. Additionally, all full-time faculty teach both online and on campus. Many adjunct faculty teach in both formats. With all of these similarities, and the virtually identical overall grade point average in 100- and 200-level online and on campus courses — 2.82 for on campus classes and 2.79 for online classes, students are learning as effectively online as they do in an on campus environment.

C. Student Satisfaction

Student satisfaction with courses is an important consideration in evaluating student success in any course. Overall student satisfaction as measured on end-of-course surveys is slightly lower in online courses (88.1%) than it is for on campus courses (88.7%). The College attributes this similarity to the institutional focus on utilizing the same curricula, course descriptions, and professors and achieving the same learning outcomes.

D. Faculty Satisfaction

The College believes that faculty satisfaction is an important component to student success. The Office of Academic Operations and Faculty Support offers a variety of support services for faculty, including those who teach online courses. Upon hire, the Instructional Design Specialist provides a thorough orientation to the online platform for all new instructors in a one-on-one setting. This orientation may be conducted either in-person or online. Throughout their employment, faculty members have access to the Instructional Design Specialist for both instructional design and technical support. Faculty members have access to 24-hour a day technical support provided by the learning management system provider, eCollege. All course masters are developed by full-time faculty members who also act as academic mentors to adjunct faculty members. Faculty are made aware of the 24 hour response time expectation to students during the initial orientation upon hire. Faculty are also made aware that the Office of Academic Operations holds to that same standard in responding to faculty.

E. Scale

Online education is an integral part of the Peirce College community. Since its inception in 2000, Peirce Online has grown to the point where more than half of the credits attempted at the College are through online courses. Every service that Peirce provides to students from the time of application is available to all students, whether they take courses on campus, online, or both. The College provides the tools for students to identify obstacles and robust student support services to allow them to overcome those obstacles. The College is able to leverage technology to help identify students who are at risk of not successfully completing their online courses. The College provides strong support for faculty allowing

them to focus on the teaching and learning in their courses without having the technology be a barrier to communication. The success of our students is supported from admission, through their introductory courses, and beyond.

IV. AUTHOR BIO

As Associate Dean, **Jonathan Lenrow** serves as Peirce College's leader and manager for academic operations. He is responsible for developing, implementing, maintaining, and monitoring quality control systems for the academic program and operational procedures. Jon is the chair of the Academic Quality Assurance committee. He is also a member of the eCollege Product Advisory Board and serves as the primary liaison to Peirce College's academic technology providers. In 2007, eCollege honored Jon by presenting him with the Excellence in Academic Operations Award. He holds a bachelor's degree from State University of New York at Albany and a master's degree in education from Wake Forest University.