
Creating a First Class Experience That's First Class

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Abstract

The American Public University System (APUS) is currently attracting more than eight hundred new undergraduate students every month, the majority of whom are required to take “Foundations of Online Learning” as their first course. That first course plays a critical role in the academic career of new students and may have a direct bearing on whether they finish their degree. It must introduce students to the institution’s policies, procedures, and processes, develop competency with the online learning management system; develop critical study skills; and initiate the complex and necessary process of building a sense of belonging within a virtual community of learners. This paper examines the critical first class experience from the perspective of an online, open enrollment institution serving primarily adult learners in the military and public service sectors.

Introduction

As an open enrollment institution, APUS attracts many students who might not meet entrance standards at other schools, who may have had difficulty in high school or another institution of higher education, but have decided it’s time to try to earn a college degree. They are often hesitant and scared of failure, and as working adults they must balance the competing demands of job, family, and school – frequently while meeting deployment or training requirements imposed by the military. In addition, most have never taken a class in the online environment, and are not sure what to expect. It is imperative that they get off to a good start, feel confident in their abilities and comfortable in the online environment so they will persist and graduate. APUS began to pay particular attention to these issues in 2004 and quickly determined that the first class experience was one of the keys to student retention and success. In early 2005 efforts began to overhaul the undergraduate course required of all new APUS students, with the intent of creating a positive experience for new students while helping them rediscover themselves as learners and developing the confidence and skills necessary to attain their educational goals.

Phase I – Establishing Objectives

A design team, comprised of several APUS staff and faculty and a subject matter expert from John Wiley and Sons, Inc., was established and started its work by setting objectives for the new course. Whereas the previous course had tried to accomplish too much and focused too heavily on writing, resulting in student frustration and an unacceptably high withdrawal rate, the team sought to create a new course that more appropriately met the special needs of new students. Accordingly, many of the writing assignments in the previous course were eliminated and new assignments were devised that would provide students a chance to write as a component of other course learning objectives. Revised course objectives are listed below:

At the end of the course a student should be able to:

- Demonstrate familiarity with the features of the electronic classroom by effectively interacting with the instructor and fellow students, and completing assignments and examinations.

- Identify his/her motivational style.
- Identify personal strengths and weaknesses in the area of written communication, so that additional instruction and writing assistance can be pursued as appropriate.
- Demonstrate sound study habits by completing assignments on time, in accordance with the schedule outlined by the instructor.
- Identify personal learning style/attributes and career orientation traits, and how that knowledge can be used to contribute to academic and career success.
- Discuss the concept and relevance of Information Literacy, and demonstrate the ability to conduct basic research, using the online research center and other electronic and/or library resources.
- Demonstrate knowledge of APUS policies and procedures.

Phase II – Course Materials

The next step was selecting a textbook that would serve as the foundation for the course and complement other material associated with the institutional learning environment. The assistance of the Wiley publishing company was solicited for this phase, and the company offered a subject matter expert in learning theory. Various books were reviewed by the team, and *Learn More Now*, by Marcia Conner, was selected for its appropriate subject matter and relative simplicity of presentation. To complement the basic text, tutorials located in the APUS online Library and an outside web site were included to support the course objectives.

Phase III – The Assignments

Student mastery of the course objectives was not the sole intent of the revised course. The bigger picture revolved around persistence and, ultimately, graduation. The effect of community building and interaction has been well documented in terms of its impact on student success and persistence (Kaiser, 1991, Tinto, 1975). The team examined factors that could contribute to drop out rates. In her initial report, Miller (2005) supported the notion that novice online learners are particularly concerned about their readiness to pursue a degree in a virtual environment. Specific concerns included their ability to function within the classroom itself and the ability to conduct online research. Her recommendations for creating a successful orientation course included providing a thorough introduction to the online campus; including how to conduct student business, such as registration and tuition payments, the classroom and use of its features, and the library. The emphasis was on making sure students were empowered to learn in their new environment. Therefore, the design team was committed to developing assignments and activities to insure that students completing the course were thoroughly acclimated to the learning management system, policy and procedure, and the online library. The challenge was designing activities that would provide the necessary foundation for learning and thoroughly engage students with APUS. The activities that grew out of the course redesign are as follows:

- a. To provide a starting point for students and instructors, students write a two-three page essay describing their decision to return to college: what motivated them to do so, why they thought they would succeed, and what challenges they must overcome in the process. This assignment serves three purposes: provides an opportunity for students to examine their personal motivation, provides a writing sample, and supplies background information which instructors could use later in the course to stimulate students who started to lag behind.
- b. Several assignments immediately begin building the sense of community. A “Virtual Introduction” Discussion Board activity is required during the first week to foster peer-to-peer interaction. By the second week of class, students must identify and interact with their Student Advisor and complete a “Scavenger Hunt”, during which they locate information inside the electronic campus and on the APUS website.
- c. The Policies and Procedures exam in week three requires students to study the Student Handbook. The questions on the open-book exam were developed in conjunction with the Student Services Department which provided input regarding the major sources of student confusion.
- d. In week four students experience using an external site, while building upon themes of learning and

motivational psychology. For this activity the Gilbert Education Management System (GEMS) was selected. Students login and complete a survey tool called the "Work Preference Indicator", which asks a series of comprehensive questions concerning their personality and preferences. They are provided with video and written feedback, then write a short paper analyzing the accuracy of the tool as they perceived it and explaining those results with which they specifically agreed or disagreed. This task provides another opportunity for students to practice their writing skills and gives them some experience with an outside resource integrated into an online course to complement the text.

e. Once students have become comfortable with navigating the classroom and procedural issues, they must develop critical skills required for using the extensive resources available in the online library. With support from the Dean of Libraries, assignments were designed with information literacy and research as companion themes. Over a two week period, students use tutorials within the online library to guide their exploration.

f. The culminating activity, a reflective essay, gives students an opportunity to analyze and synthesize the events of the past eight weeks. For this assignment students reflect on the experience: what they learned, how it will be applied, and what any suggestions they could offer for course improvement. Once again they are provided the opportunity to hone their writing skills with feedback and recommendations from the instructor.

g. Throughout the course students take a weekly quiz and participate in a weekly Discussion Board, related to the textbook readings for the week. The Wiley representative and the textbook author contributed to the development of the discussion questions and quizzes. Collaborating with these individuals was a very positive experience, which contributed to the success of the process.

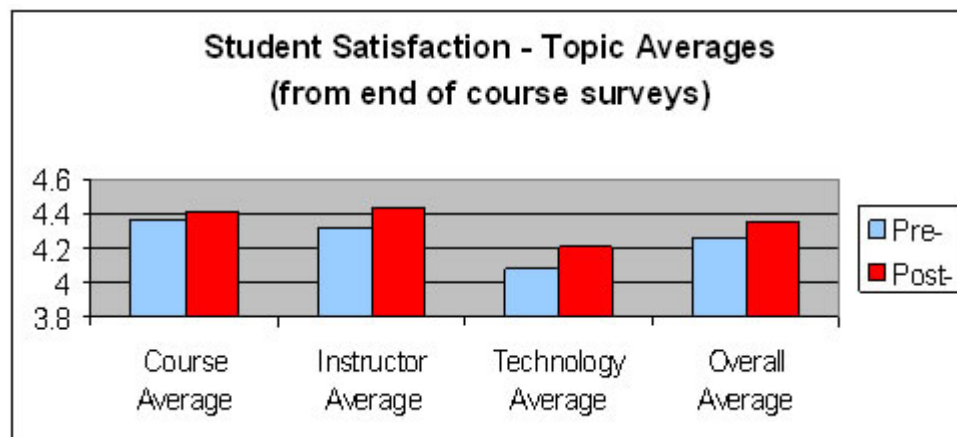
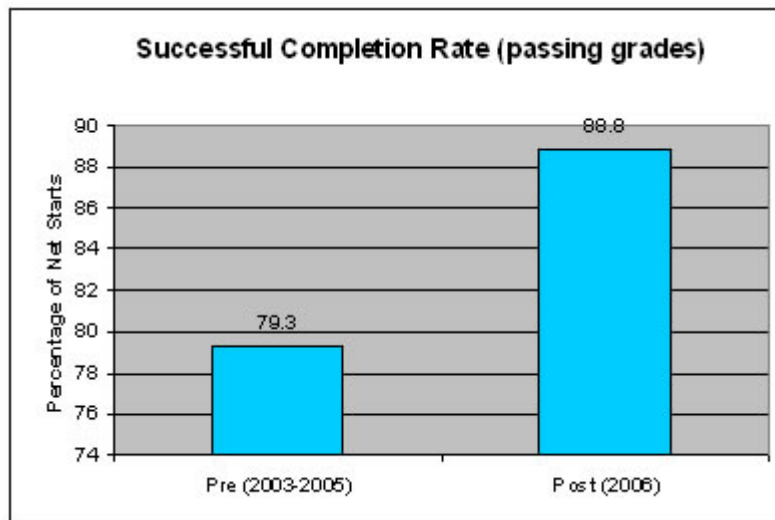
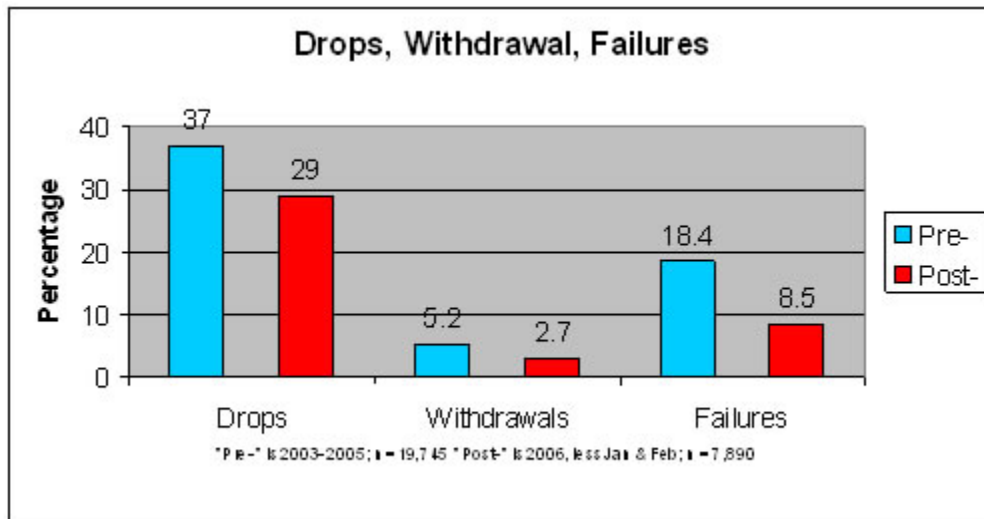
Phase IV - Faculty Management

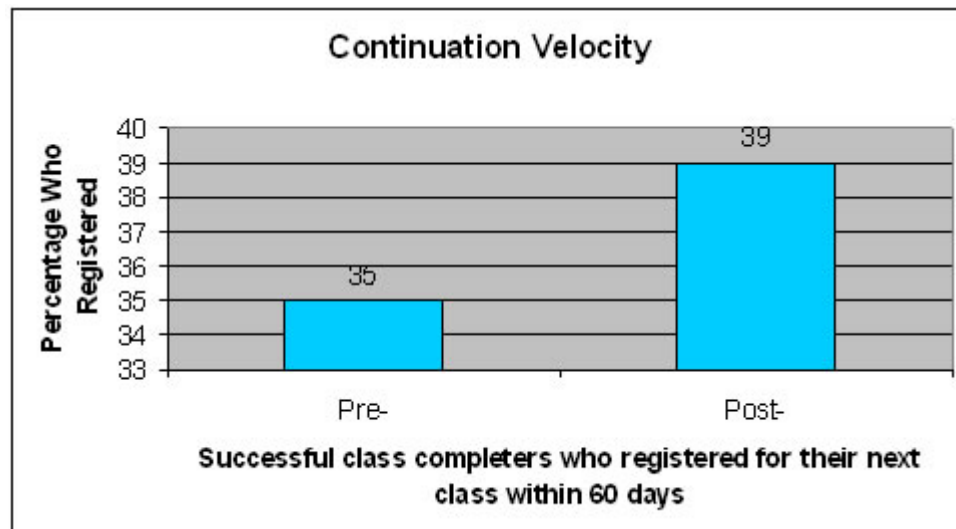
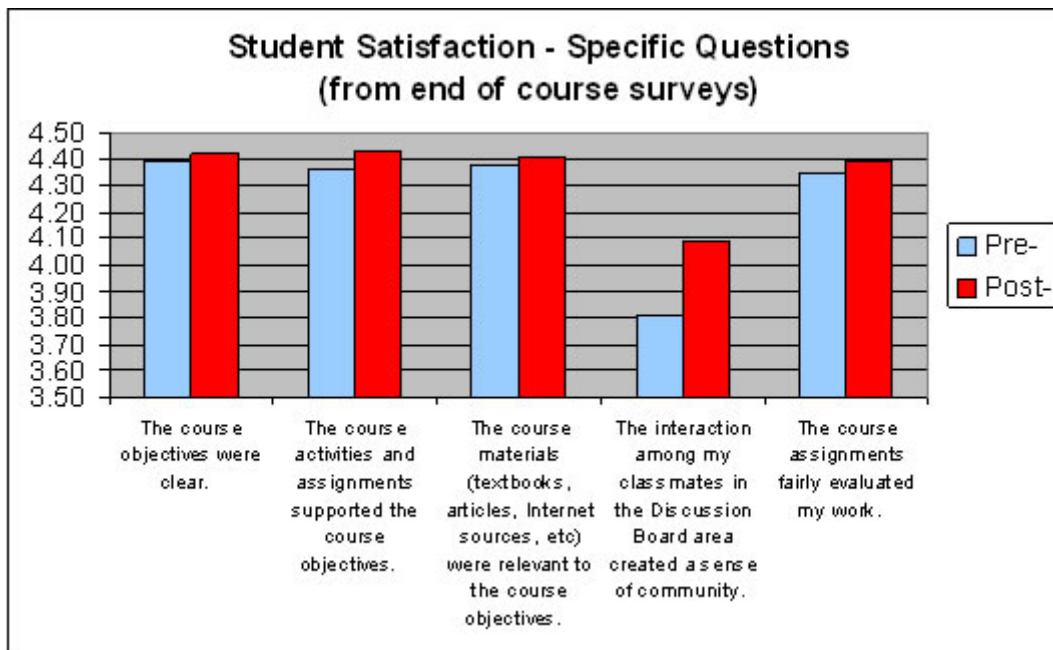
Tyler-Smith (2006) noted that faculty is crucial to adult student persistence in online programs. Faculty who teach new students must possess different skills than those who instruct experienced students. First time students require more coaching, nurturing, and encouraging. Additionally, not all instructors are skilled in online teaching. A first class experience with an inappropriate instructor could be especially deleterious to student success. It was, therefore, critical that faculty selected to teach this course be screened and managed carefully so that the efforts to redesign the course were not in vain.

Because of the importance of the course and the great number of students enrolled, a course manager was identified to provide focused oversight. Both instructor performance and curriculum is reviewed constantly. Data and classroom monitoring provides critical information regarding instructor performance. Instructors who are not well suited to the course or the environment are counseled or reassigned.

Results/Lessons Learned

Results - Once redesign was completed, the course was offered in a pilot version in several sections taught by experienced instructors. When the pilot ended, instructors gathered to discuss the new design and adjustments were made based on recommendations. The revised version was again offered in pilot form and the evaluation process repeated a second time. Finally, the new course replaced the old version in all sections beginning in March 2006, and statistics were collected and compared to the old version from that point forward. Charts reflecting this data are shown below:





Lessons Learned:

- A collaborative team approach to instructional design works well.
- Numerous activities and interaction kept students engaged at all times.
- The amount of writing was “about right”.
- Exposing students to areas of the institution outside the classroom, like the library, the electronic campus, their Advisor, and the Student Handbook helped them feel comfortable being students.
- The basic subject matter was viewed as positive. Students often reported that they had never taken a course that helped them learn about themselves, and appreciated being exposed to individual learning concepts.
- Positive course results extended to other areas, such as increased library usage.
- The institution’s staff can become quickly overwhelmed when new students are required to interact with them.
- Exam questions that related to institutional policies must be kept current as policies change.
- Having several weekly graded activities is a good teaching methodology, especially for new students, but it requires a lot of work by instructors. Instructors get “burned out” easily keeping up with all required interaction and responding to questions.

- Vetting the course in pilot form was a good idea.

Conclusion

Focusing attention on the institution's key introductory undergraduate course was worth the effort and results were positive in almost all measurable areas. The redesign process used for this project worked well and has already served as a model for similar activities in other courses. Student cohorts will be tracked to determine the long term impact on student persistence and graduation rates, though many factors beyond the first course certainly contribute to student success.

References

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