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# Utilizing Distance Learning as a Strategy for Academic Success for Undergraduate Students on Academic Probation: Atypical Candidates for Online Learning

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## Abstract

This study explores the implementation, student satisfaction, and the effectiveness of an online academic support course required for students on academic probation at a mid-sized private institution in the Northeast. Although it is often considered that students on academic probation may not exhibit the typical characteristics associated with success in distance education, the results of this study found that the majority of the students were satisfied with the course content, and found the online teaching pedagogy to be effective. On average, the students enrolled in the course increased their GPA by .16 bringing the GPA of more than half of the students above a 2.0 and off of academic probation.

## Introduction

Undergraduate students enter college with high expectations of academic success. Yet, statistics regarding success are quite staggering including the fact that 26% of first year students who attend a four year college will not complete their degree (ACT, 2005) and 25% of undergraduates will find themselves on academic probation at some point during their college career (Cohen & Brawer, 2002). These facts may lead some to question whether or not students entering college were adequately prepared for the academic rigor they were about to encounter. A recent report by the American College Testing organization (2009) found that “[o]nly 23% of all 2009 graduates met all four ACT College Readiness Benchmarks, meaning that 77% were not adequately prepared academically for first-year college courses in English Composition, College Algebra, social sciences, and Biology” (p.19). Further, they found that retention of these students was based upon academic as well as various non-academic factors. Colleges and Universities have been working on various academic and non-academic initiatives to support students in reaching their academic success/potential. Examples of such initiatives include first year seminars, supplemental instruction, as well as bridge and academic support programs (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

## Academic Success Courses

Academic success courses have been offered on college campuses for many years to assist in student transition to campus, to provide necessary academic and interpersonal skill development, to teach and/or enhance non-academic support skills, to develop community, and ultimately, to positively impact student retention. The courses offered have many different names, teaching pedagogy, content, and course requirements, yet one of their primary goals is to promote student success. At a mid-sized private University in the northeast, the need to provide an academic success course was identified by the undergraduate academic affairs committee of the University senate. The committee felt it was important

to provide support to students who were accepted to the University but were subsequently struggling to succeed. Once agreement was reached regarding the offering of such a course, the discussion regarding implementation began. This included how to provide the number of sections needed with limited resources available (such as faculty and classrooms). After much discussion, the decision was made to design and present the course online.

### **Providing Support Online**

Implementing this type of course online did not seem optimal to all constituencies at the University as comfort level with distance learning as a teaching pedagogy was not universally accepted. Yet distance learning was not a new concept. In fact, it began with correspondence courses which have been in existence since the development of the postal service in the nineteenth century. Media, such as radio and television, became instrumental in distance education, and now computers and two-way interactive video are critical components. (Merisotis & Phipps, 1999). Research has been done about the effectiveness, satisfaction, and various uses of technologically assisted learning and the characteristics of successful online learners. Typically, it is believed that online learners should have certain characteristics in order to succeed in this type of learning. A three year study by Kerr, Rynearson, & Kerr (2006) found that students should have good reading and writing skills, be independent learners, have higher levels of motivation, and be proficient with computer use. Howland & Moore (2002) also reported that self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation were more important in online rather than in face-to-face courses. Many distance education programs offer some type of assessment that students can take prior to enrolling in an online course or program to confirm that they have the necessary characteristics found to promote successes in online learning. One outstanding issue remained: Could students who were struggling academically and who may not be exhibiting the requisite self management, self-monitoring, and motivation characteristics be good candidates for online instruction?

When reviewing course delivery for the proposed academic success course, two important issues emerged. The first was that technology to support online instruction and learning had advanced over the past few years. The second was that our students have been brought up in a high tech world, feeling connected to, and interacting with others through cell phones, internet, text messages, and other technological tools (Prensky, 2001). Distance Learning has been developing and increasing as a method of instruction on colleges and Universities across the United States (Allan & Seaman, 2010). According to the seventh annual Sloan Survey of Online Learning (Allan, & Seaman, 2010) “over 4.6 million students were taking at least one online course during the fall 2008 term; a 17 percent increase over the number reported the previous year (p. 1).” This would suggest that students are willing and interested in taking courses online but would the atypical students in our study be satisfied with the course and believe the course was effective being taught through this modality?

### **Implementation of the Course**

In the Fall of 2007, the University launched an online academic success course for all students on academic probation. Students on academic probation were required to successfully complete and pass the course prior to registering for the next semester. The course was developed to run in Blackboard, the university-wide learning management system (LMS), and all coursework took place online. The course consisted of ten modules focusing on academic and non-academic support skills related to academic success including: learning styles, time management, study skills, healthy lifestyles, communication, money management, career development, and identified resources available at the University to assist students to reach their academic goals. Each module consisted of a number of activities that needed to be completed in order to proceed to the next module. Activities included PowerPoint's with video and audio, videos, interactive activities, readings, short papers and surveys. In order to proceed from one module to the next, the student needed to complete all the activities in that module in addition to a module post test in which they needed to pass with a score of 80% or above. They were given three attempts to achieve the necessary score. Progression through the course was regulated by an adaptive release process where, when one module was successfully completed; the student would gain access to the next module. The course was completely asynchronous, meaning students could log on to the course at any time and complete the work at their own pace. This gave students more flexibility and ownership. Studies have shown that when a student is given a more active role in their learning and more autonomy,

this can lead to higher levels of satisfaction. (Hannay & Newvine, 2005). The only time students were required to meet face-to-face with the instructor was a one-time orientation class where the technology and the course were explained.

### **Prior Studies on Student Satisfaction**

In the studies that focused on student satisfaction with online instruction, the results varied. Wyatt (2005) found that students enjoyed the online courses over their traditional, face-to-face courses. In a random sample of 120 students who had taken both online and traditional courses, 54% reported they were very satisfied with the online course(s) that they completed and 33% were somewhat satisfied. There were 9% total of those that were very dissatisfied or somewhat dissatisfied and 3% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. These results were statistically significant.

Another study by Summers, Waigandt, & Whittaker (2005) showed a more negative view of the online version of a requisite course. Seventeen nursing students chose to take a required statistics course online while 21 chose to take it in a traditional face-to-face method. Based on a survey of 16 questions that was designed to assess student satisfaction, statistically significant results revealed that the students who took the course online reported being less satisfied with the course as compared to those taking the same course with the same teacher face-to-face.

Student satisfaction can also be dependent on whether or not the student has had prior experience in online learning. In a study by Dobbs, Waid, & del Carmen (2009), 280 students in both online and distance learning programs taking criminology and criminal justice courses took a survey to evaluate student perceptions of online learning. Of those with prior online experience, 50.3% reported they would rather take an online course as compared to 35.2% who would rather take a traditional course and 14.5% who had no preference. 81.8% of the students also said they would take more online courses in the future. Three-fourths of those who did not have prior online experience reported that they preferred traditional classes.

More often than not, studies have shown no significant difference. In a study of 153 undergraduates who took a wellness course either completely online, blended (a combination of online and face-to-face), or completely face-to-face, completed a Likert scale survey measuring their satisfaction with the course (Lim, Kim, Chen & Ryder, 2008). While all ratings in student satisfaction were positive, there were no significant differences between the students taking the course online, face-to-face, or in the blended learning environment. In another study, students self-selected a face-to-face, blended, or online course option for an e-business course with 46 and 45 students in each of the options respectively (McFarland & Hamilton, 2005-2006). In this study, the survey results found no significant difference in overall course satisfaction between the online and face-to-face sections. However, there was a statistically significant difference between the online learning group and the blended group as compared to the face-to-face students in the ratings of their learning experiences. The online and blended groups rated their learning experiences higher than the face-to-face group.

In addition to satisfaction, effectiveness has been another area studied in regard to online courses. Students in the Summers, et al (2005) study felt that the teachers were as effective teaching online as they were teaching face-to-face. Lim, et al (2008) believed that if well designed, online courses could be as effective as traditional course settings. Effectiveness was also dependent upon whether or not students felt they learned throughout the course.

Research has also been done in the area of learning experiences. Do students feel they learn more in an online course as compared to a face-to-face course? Dobbs, et al (2009) reported that 29.6% of students surveyed believed they learned more in online courses while 44% thought they learned the same. Hannay & Newvine (2005) had more positive results. 57% reported they learned more in a distance learning course and 2% thought learning was about the same. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that “students who study via distance education approaches appear to learn as much course content as do their counterparts in conventional on campus classroom settings” (p. 100). The students in this study could not compare knowledge accumulation between an online and face-to-face method as the course was only offered online, but they did report on whether or not their knowledge of the various subject matter

covered increased as a result of this course (Table 1).

Table 1  
*Descriptive Statistics for Student Reported Increase in Knowledge of Modules Covered*

	Mean	SD
Learning Styles	4.03	1.02
Time Management	4.01	0.99
Writing Skills	3.56	1.13
Taking Tests	3.60	1.11
Reading Texts	3.66	1.11
Note Taking	3.84	1.06
Stress Management	3.67	1.15
Communication	3.70	1.14
Health/Wellness	3.43	1.22
Career Development	3.67	1.08
Money Management	3.51	1.20
Healthy Relationships	3.60	1.13
Resources Available	4.03	1.09

Although transforming the content of a face-to-face course to an online format may be considered common place for many academic courses, it is not universally utilized (outside of institutions primarily offering distance education) for academic support courses. For the majority of students participating in this study, this was their first experience taking a course online. It was important to the researchers, as well as the University, to assess the course effectiveness as it related to the University stated outcome goal of supporting students who were struggling academically. By providing and/or enhancing academic support skills and resources in the online course, it was hoped that the student would be able to raise their GPA and move off of academic probation. Further, the student response both in the way of content/knowledge gain as well as course methodology (being taught online only) was critical in the decision as to whether the course would be offered in the future. It was with those issues in mind that the following research questions were developed.

#### **Research Questions:**

1. Do students enrolled in the academic success course report an increase in knowledge in the topics presented in each module?
2. What is the level of student satisfaction with the course being presented in an online format?
3. Do students perceive the course to be effective?

Does the course impact the students GPA?

#### **Methodology:**

Participants in this study were undergraduates students on academic probation who were enrolled in, and successfully completed, an online academic success course in the Fall 2007(N= 34), Spring 2008 (N= 47), Fall 2008 (N= 85), Spring 2009 (N=125), Fall 2009 (N=44), and Spring 2010 (N=86). Each of the 421 student who successfully completed the academic success course since its inception in Fall 2007 evaluated the course through an online post course survey. For the purposes of this study, the data from the evaluations over the past six semesters were combined. The post course survey was developed with the assistance of the office of Institutional Research. Content validity was established for the instrument as the questions were developed based upon related research on the satisfaction with, and effectiveness of, online learning, and the fact that the instrument was reviewed by subject matter experts (SME). Students were asked to rate various aspects of the course using a 5 point Likert scale to indicate their beliefs on various statements. Questions associated with student perceptions regarding the effectiveness and satisfaction of their distance learning experience include:

- How enjoyable was working at your own pace? (5= very enjoyable, 1= not at all enjoyable)
- How effective was the class at helping you learn, given that it was taught online? (5=very effective, 1=not at all effective)
- The class would have been most effective if it was taught: (5=traditional classroom style, 3=mixed online and face-to-face, 1=online only)

Students were also asked to rate any increase in knowledge gained on the particular topic taught in each module on a five point Likert scale (5=very much, 1=not at all). Finally, the researchers reviewed the overall GPA (in aggregate) of the students the semester prior taking the course as compared to the semester after being enrolled in the course.

**Discussion:**

Evaluation and analysis of the academic success course were essential to insure that the course was meeting the goals and expectations of the University and the students enrolled. To do this, the researchers reviewed the questions on the posttest evaluation regarding content/knowledge, course effectiveness and student satisfaction. The first research question was related to content/knowledge. Do students enrolled in the academic success course report an increase in knowledge in the topics presented in each module?

Students reported an increase in knowledge in each of the content areas presented with the largest gains in the areas on learning styles (4.03), knowledge of resources available at the University (4.03), and time management (4.01). All of which are important skills that will assist student in their future academic success (Table 1).

Questions two and three focused on student satisfaction with the online format of the course. This was particularly important as many of the students enrolled may not have had the traditional characteristics of the successful online learner including self-management, self-monitoring and motivation (Howland & Moore, 2002). Lacking these characteristics may also have had an impact on their initial probationary status. Yet, overwhelmingly, students reported that the course was most effective being taught online (Figure 1).

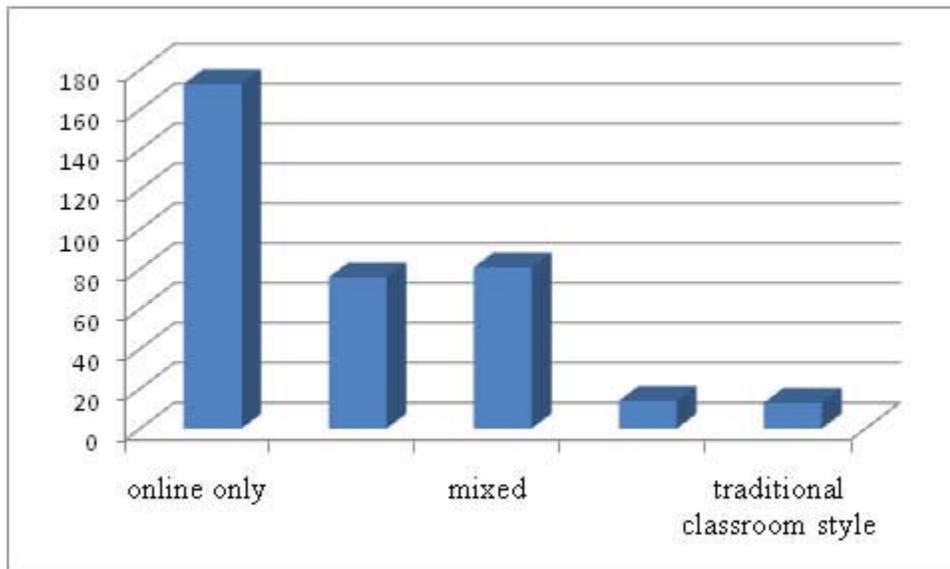


Figure 1. The class would have been most effective if it was taught

In this sense, this research differentiated itself from the rest because it studied an atypical population that would not be traditionally considered strong candidates for distance education and yet the students in the course reported being satisfied with the online teaching pedagogy. Unfortunately, the students did not have an alternative means of study that would have allowed the researchers to conduct a comparison of

student satisfaction with the course based on teaching methodology.

Students also reported enjoying working at their own pace with an overall mean score of 4.08 (Figure 2).

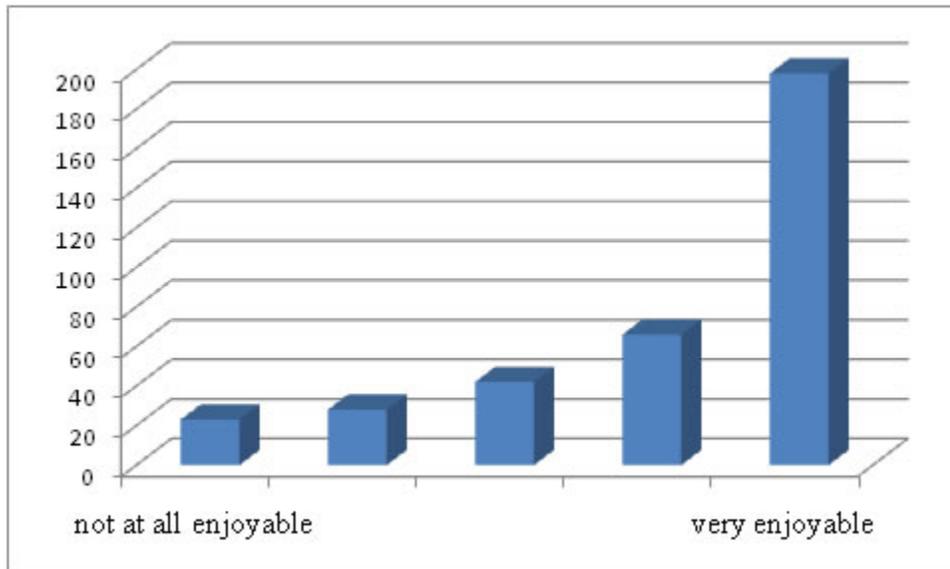


Figure 2. How enjoyable was working at your own pace?

Student comments on the post test survey supported this finding, and it is notable that comments were voluntary and overwhelmingly positive. In addition, this finding supported the prior research which found that students reported being satisfied with their online courses typically due to flexibility and convenience (Lim, et al, 2008; Walker & Kelly, 2007). Along those lines, working from home, not having to worry about scheduling conflicts, and not having to travel to the class were more specific reasons found (Hannay & Newvine, 2005; Wyatt, 2005).

Interestingly when asked about the effectiveness of the course, the majority of the students felt the course was effective, but there were still some who felt it was not effective at all (Figure 3). This could be due to the fact that the students had no choice in their enrollment in the course or in the format in which the course was taught. Therefore, if they were not comfortable being enrolled in the required the academic success course, or the fact that it was only offered online, they may not have found the course to be effective. This, along with the lack of a true control group may be considered a limitation to this study and something the researchers will need to address in future research.

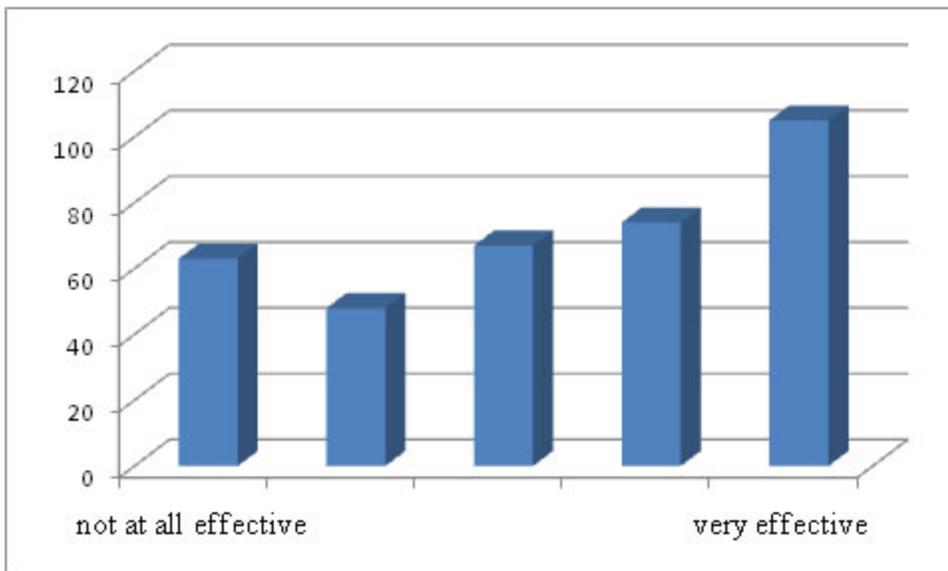


Figure 3. How effective was the class at helping you learn, given that it was taught online?

Question four focused on the effectiveness of the course relating to its impact on the students GPA. The goal of the course was to enhance academic support skills, and provide information on available academic support resources which ultimately would assist the student increase their GPA, no longer be on academic probation, or at least show a positive directional trend. The impact of taking the academic success course on GPA was an important outcome assessment of the effectiveness of the course. Although students who are struggling academically may not be considered strong candidates for online instruction, the researchers found on average that students enrolled in the class raised their GPA by .16 bringing more than half of the students who passed the course above a 2.0 and off academic probation.

There were some limitations to the study including the fact that the course was required for all students their first semester on academic probation. This lack of self selection into the class and the fact that there was no control group to which to compare results, could impact the analysis. Also, as the data regarding content knowledge as well as satisfaction were self reported, there was potential for respondent bias. Yet the implications for practice and future research regarding utilizing online instruction to support the academic success of students on academic probation even though they do not exhibit the traditional characteristics of success in distance learning was noteworthy.

Overall, the course implementation was smooth and effective. Students reported an overall increase in knowledge in the topics presented and were satisfied with the online presentation of the course. From the University perspective, the course met the desired outcome goal of assisting to increase the students' GPAs and to provide the necessary support services and skills to move them off academic probation. This study supported the initiative of utilizing distance learning to provide academic support skills to students who may not exhibit the typical characteristics associated with success in online learning. College and Universities may want to continue to consider offering online academic success courses or developing individual seminars based on topics to support the academic and non-academic skills necessary to support students who are struggling reach their academic goals.

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