ONLINE STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES AND INSTITUTIONAL VALUES

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Abstract

The research investigated the relationship between students’ reasons for late submissions, henceforth referred to as reasons, in online classes and to investigate the relationship between reasons and institutional values or standards of excellence as identified by in two private institutions of higher education. Data was collected, for two semesters, by the reason submitted to the instructor either in the online course or by email. Results revealed students did not seem to recognize the relationship between their actions and institutional values. Nor did it appear that they interpreted the values in the same way or to the same extent as did the institution.

Keywords: Values, online late submissions.

1 INTRODUCTION

Students have altered how they interact with instructors, and this change is, in part, a result of the changing technologies and the increased availability of online classes. Students enter online classrooms with a diversity of learning styles and communication skills. As a result of this shifting paradigm, full time, part-time and adjunct faculty play a significant role in creating learning online environments that encourage students to successfully achieve their academic goals.

The purpose of the research was to investigate the relationship between reasons students submit their assignments late, (defined as not according to course deadlines), henceforth referred to as reasons, in online classes and to investigate the relationship between such reasons and institutional values or standards of excellence of two private institutions of higher education. The institutions included a private nonprofit faith-based graduate school and a private for profit graduate school in the United States; all classes were graduate level classes in the College of Education. Both institutions created their online curriculum grounded in institutional values or standards of excellence, henceforth referred to as values. In the aggregate, these values include: excellence, community, respect, personal development, responsible stewardship, integrity, quality and student centeredness, Christian, teaching and learning, and service. Each value was not unique to an institution; three some values (excellence, integrity, and respect) were shared between the two institutions.

Online and face-to-face faculty meetings and anecdotal evidence of informal faculty conversations revealed a frustration among adjunct, full-time and part-time faculty with regard to timely student assignment and discussion forum posts submissions. It is from these conversations researchers sought to investigate if there was a relationship between students not submitting their work in a timely fashion and not adhering to institutional values. The intent of the investigation was to provide the participating schools with a snapshot of why students do not submit their work according to institutional course policies and deadlines and if these reasons violate the institution’s values. The results are intended to provide each institution with information from which to develop persistence and retention strategies. Additionally, the results are intended to add to the body of literature with regard to student success, persistence and retention.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Education has become a life-long process. The creation of knowledge and continuous learning has become crucial for both the individual and the organization [11]. On the graduate level, students range in age from their 20’s to their 60’s. Institutions of higher education have student bodies composed of young Gen Y learners to those that are senior citizens. Education is no longer just an activity for young people [7]. All of these learners involved in higher education, young and older, desire feedback,
direction, and mentoring from their instructors [16]. They need clear statements of expected learning outcomes, focused interactive learning, and access to teachers and instructional materials.

However, the above factors might not be enough for all the learners to be successful. Values, institutional and individual, play an important role in learner achievement. Defined simply, values are the belief system that helps people differentiate “right from wrong”. In an individual or institutional value system, values are placed in order of importance [3]. The importance of values in higher education has diminished since originally infused in the curriculum during the early years of the founding of American colleges and universities. Values infused curricula have been replaced with curriculum focusing on intellectual development, public service and volunteerism [15]. However, the issue of values infused in the curriculum has taken on a new role with [2] identifying the values of social justice, competency, liberty, and loyalty and by Premfors [14] who extended the work of Clark [2] by identifying the values of equality, excellence, autonomy, accountability, and efficiency. In 2007 the Association of American Colleges and Universities [1] identified personal and social responsibility as essential learning outcomes.

Adult learners face many challenges in their busy lives as they attempt to balance school, work, and family life. Much of this education is occurring in the online setting, allowing working adults easier access to educational content. Two broad values adults must balance are achievement vs well-being values. As these adult learners attempt to achieve a balance between achievement values and well-being values, conflicts arise [10].

Fries [10] found that students who had high achievement value experience better performance in school related tasks, while those with high well-being values were not as successful in school related activities. Fries found that achievement values led to greater school related efforts and to better school performance as evidenced in grades, participation, and assignment completion. Well-being values were primarily addressed through leisure activities, and tended to interfere with performance in school related work. Studies have shown that out of class activities impact in class success [5]. Homework completion affects immediate achievement and learning because it provides practice, review, and application of class material and concepts [8]. This practice through homework leads to a higher level of skill acquisition and as skill acquisition increases, performance increases as well [9].

Educational institutions are built on values as well. These are displayed in many different ways. Key values differ from institution to institution; however literature has highlighted the importance of innovation, ethical behavior, responsibility, teamwork, adaptability, a positive attitude to life-long learning and self-development [12]. Institutions of higher education are addressing these values through the implementation of a value-based culture. These are evident through their mission statements or the core values they embrace.

However values are not the only factors that impact students’ completion of their assignments. Current stressful economic, social, and medical issues also present major challenges for adult learners as they attempt to balance the demands on their time. During a typical semester adult students may lose a home, job, or loved one, battle personal or family health issues, or struggle with the demands of being a single parent [4].

This research compares the excuses provided by student for uncompleted assignments between religious, private, and not-for-profit universities. This research study examines whether the same types of concerns and behaviors are evident, no matter which type of university is examined.

3 METHODOLOGY

The research sought to answer the following questions:

1 What are the overall primary reasons students in online classes give for not submitting assignments and discussion posts on time according to university and course policies and procedures?

2 Is there an association between the reasons students give for not submitting assignments on time according to policies and procedures and violation of institutional values?

Data were collected by instructors in the class or by email in relation to the reason each student provided the instructor for submitting an assignment late. Student and instructor names were not recorded to maintain student confidentiality. Data were collected from seven online classes for two-semesters; only the two researchers recorded and collected the data. The researchers taught multiple sections of 8-week classes during the two 16-week semesters. The data were collected and
disaggregated by institution. After all the data were collected, the data were aggregated. Using qualitative open and axial coding methodologies, the data were analyzed for themes, hence referred to as reasons, and second, the themes or reasons were paired or associated with the values of each institution. In other words, the researchers sought to find if there were associations among the themes/reasons for why students submitted their work late (not according to institutional deadlines) and if these reasons were in conflict with any or all of each institution’s values.

Integrity of the data was critical to ensure the reliability and validity of the results. Data integrity and protection was taken seriously with reasonable actions taken to ensure the integrity, confidentiality and security of the information. Data were collected free from bias or manipulation and underwent periodical accuracy checks. The researchers independently coded the data. Once the data were coded, the researchers used a constant data comparison approach to verify the accuracy of their coding. Throughout the process, consistency of data coding was attained thus negating researcher bias and ensuring reliability in coding process.

Following completion of data coding and constant data comparison checks, the data were aggregated or organized by themes. The data were then transcribed, described, classified (open and axial coding methods) and interpreted forming the data analysis process. Using open coding methodology, the researchers read through the qualitative, narrative data several times to create “chunks” of data seeking meaning that emerged from the data. The researchers also used an inductive reasoning process to generate themes and ideas and employed axial coding methodology to identify relationships from among themes hence referred to as reasons. Each researcher coded the data and reviewed it for inter-rater reliability. During this process, the researchers debriefed to identify any variations in coding and coexistent themes. Following the inter-rater reliability check, the researchers finalized the data results into overarching themes, reasons, so as to discern patterns and meanings or in other words to “make sense” of the data. Using an analytic inductive reasoning process, data coding and concomitant interpretation, the researchers were able to:

1. Ascertain the common themes (reasons) or recurring regularities that emerged from the data [13]. This entailed internal homogeneity or the extent to which data belonged to a certain category or theme or dovetailed with a category or theme. This also entailed external heterogeneity or the extent to which the data did not belong in a category and to identify that the differences between categories was clear [13].
2. Test the data for convergence, or identify how the data did not make connections with themes or categories or align with the research questions.
3. Identify deviations from the common themes and, when possible, to provide explanations of the deviations. Deviant cases or data that diverged from the categories or themes were given careful consideration and examination as to why each did not “fit” into the categories or themes.
4. Bring forth the stories or a narrative enquiry from which to draw conclusions aligned with reasons and the research questions.
5. Bring forth patterns or themes that may suggest additional data that needs to be collected.

Data analysis and interpretation provided the structure for the ensuing results, analyses and recommendations. While not a phenomenological study per se, the researchers did seek to understand students’ rationales with regard why they did not submit assignments in a timely fashion. Therefore, the overall structure of the study conforms to and follows that of standard phenomenological study structure to include a review of the literature, methodology, presentation of the data, and summary and implications [recommendations] [6].

Finally, only the researchers had access to the raw, transcribed and coded data. All data were stored on the researchers’ secured computers that required password access. All hard copy and computer original notes and disaggregated data files were destroyed at the completion of the project.

4 RESULTS

Raw data analysis included, 70 reasons from 68 students for seven classes over two semesters, revealed six common themes. Of note is two students, in two classes, each submitted different reasons for submitting late assignments in their respective class. Six common themes or reasons emerged and included: (a) the student was sick; (b) a member of the student’s family was sick; (c) the student experienced the death of a family member or friend; (d) the student experienced computer issues, issues with connectivity or lack of course materials; (e) the student experienced family issues
or emergencies; or (f) issues categorized as other issues. Each reason will be discussed individually and in order of frequency.

First, 15 students experienced a diversity of illnesses ranging from vertigo, headaches, and fatigue to minor and major surgery. In all cases the students contacted the instructor after the assignment deadline. Second, students reported not submitting assignments on time as a result of a sick family member. Family members included children, parents, spouses, and aunts. In some cases the family member was hospitalized in other cases the family member was sick and at home. As with student illnesses, in all cases, the student contacted the instructor after the assignment due date. Nine students reported the death of a relative or friend. Students seemed unabashed in reporting the circumstances of the reason to the instructor. For example, one student wrote, “I had to go out of state with my mom to claim my last surviving aunt out of the morgue.” Another student wrote, “About a month and half ago my grandfather passed and my father took it really hard…. It is too hard for my mom to handle… and I have been helping her.” Lack of connectivity, technology and course materials surfaced as an impediment to students not submitting assignments in a timely fashion.

Ten students noted issues with technology. One student wrote her 6-month son “dropped [her] computer down the stairs” while another student emailed her instructor she was “…leaving on a cruise and will not have access to the Internet.” Other students reported crashed computers and lack of Internet connectivity. Three students stated they did not have the course text and of these, two informed the instructor they did not know they were required to purchase a text for the course.

Ten students reported issues with family members and family emergencies as reasons. For example, one student wrote, “I am coming to you with more family tragedies.” Another wrote, “I had a family emergency that took me out of town until yesterday.” In no case did the student identify the family emergency. Three students reported they were pregnant and the pregnancy served as the reason for not submitting the assignment according to the course deadline.

Other issues for late submissions included a child’s birthday party, incarcerated husband and work related pressures and issues.

After coding reasons, the researchers sought to align the reasons with values. As with coding for reasons, both axial and open-coding methodologies were employed to seek associations of reasons with institutional values. The researchers employed a constant data comparison approach to verify the accuracy of their coding.

One institution identified the values of quality, student centeredness, teaching and learning, service, based on a Christian perspective. The other institution identified the values of excellence, community, respect, professional development, responsible stewardship, and integrity. The definitions of the values for each institution were compared. Based upon overlap in the definitions provided by the institutions, it was determined that the values were combined into six distinct values: excellence, community, respect, professional development, responsible stewardship, and integrity. By definition excellence aligned with quality, community with student centered, professional development with teaching and learning, responsible stewardship with Christian service, and integrity with quality. Of the six aggregate values four of the six aggregated values, responsible stewardship, integrity, respect, and personal development, were associated with students’ reasons. For each association, the researchers provided a cogent argument to support the association. To ensure reliability, the researchers employed a constant data comparison approach to verify the accuracy and reliability of their associations.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

After analyzing the data, the lack of alignment between students’ reasons for late work and the institutional values of respect, professional development, responsible stewardship, and integrity was evident. Students did not seem to recognize the relationship between their actions and institutional values. Nor did it appear that they interpreted the values in the same way or to the same extent that the institution did.

From the results three recommendations emerged. First, perhaps the explanation of the values needs to be conveyed more specifically so that students see the connection between their actions and the institution’s values. In order to accomplish this, institutions will need to infuse their institutional values when developing policies and procedures for on time and late submissions. Creating a tighter link between student submission of work and the values of the institution would make this more evident.
Linking timely submission of assignments to the core values could help students to better understand this relationship.

Furthermore, with regard to examining the link with the core values, there are two additional areas the institutions might want to address through developing policies and procedures. Because individual or family members’ sickness and family emergencies were the major reason for difficulty submitting assignments in a timely manner, institutions might find it helpful to develop a plan or policy to address this area to minimize its impact on student success. This process might provide students with a format to assist with the timely completion of online assignments.

Concerns related to technology and access to course materials were also recurring themes. Institutions might want to examine the availability of technical support, especially for online learners. The technical support may need to extend beyond the confines of the online platform to assist students with options or provide outside resources. When they are faced with technical issues, it impacts their ability to be successful in the online environment.

Providing these additional structures and supports might help online learners to balance the two broad values of achievement and well-being and minimize the conflict between the two [10].

Finally, the researchers recommend future research focusing on examining the relationship between the students’ reason for late submissions, institutional values and end of course grades to further understand the relationship between timely submission of online assignments, institutional values and student success.

REFERENCES


