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Preventing Online Dropouts: Does Anything Work?

By [Marc Parry](#)

Nothing works.

That's the disheartening suggestion of a new Kennesaw State University study about retention strategies in online education, soon to be published in the *International Journal of Management in Education*.

Students drop out of online classes at rates 15 percent to 20 percent higher than traditional ones, according to earlier research cited in the study. Kennesaw State saw that problem reflected in its own classes, so a group of the university's professors set up a study to find the best strategies that might improve retention.

Using undergraduates in a business course as their test subjects, the professors experimented with lots of techniques that previous research had suggested could help. For example, they called students at home. They quizzed them on the syllabus. They made more of an effort to steer them through the virtual classroom. They pushed them to develop personal connections with classmates. They broke them up into small groups for discussions and team projects.

Half the students got the extra effort and half didn't. To the professors' surprise, it didn't matter. The engagement strategies had no impact on dropout rates. The same held true when they did the experiment again.

"If someone was going to drop out of the class, they were going to drop out of the class," says Stacy M. Campbell, assistant professor of management at Kennesaw State and co-author of the retention study, which is not available for free online.

It may not be that bleak. Ms. Campbell suggests that the next step is to look not at the structure of the class, but at the students themselves. One of her co-authors, Elke Leeds, associate professor of information systems, says figuring out the retention puzzle might boil down to pinpointing particular traits that are tied to success in online classes, such as time-management skills and motivation.

At least one online-learning expert rejects the idea that nothing works.

You can improve retention, and the University of Illinois at Springfield has done so by assigning staff members to serve as informal advisers and advocates for online students, says Ray Schroeder, director of the Center for Online Learning, Research, and Service.

Called program coordinators—different colleges have varying names for the position—these advisers basically become the on-campus "best friend" of online students. They help them navigate the university bureaucracy and facilitate communication with professors. They might work with the financial aid office to find a program that can help, for example, or negotiate an "incomplete," an extension to finish the class.

"In many cases, just having a sympathetic 'sounding board' for a student who feels isolated at a distance can help the student to know that they are not alone," Mr. Schroeder says in an e-mail to *Wired Campus*. "Without that connection, an isolated, distant student may simply drop out."

Online student peer mentors are effective, too, Mr. Schroeder says.

The practices tried by Kennesaw State promote engagement and deeper learning, Mr. Schroeder says, but they could be more directly focused on preventing dropouts.

If your college has come up with good ways to help students stick with their online courses, *Wired Campus* would like to hear them. Drop us a note in the comment section below.

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