Success Coaches: Supporting online students

Key Words

online retention isolation engagement peer support affective behavioural personalised communication

Abstract

Increasingly students are choosing to undertake university degrees wholly online. With retention rates considerably lower than on campus courses (Hanover Research 2015), engaging off campus students with the university and key online supports is essential. Kahu (2013) has suggested that student engagement is a complex phenomenon that involves multiple elements with affective, cognitive and behavioural dimensions that are variously impacted by psychosocial and structural factors that can either support or frustrate students during their studies (Kahu 2012, p. 59). Finding ways in which to support student engagement across these dimensions and ensuring that university systems and process are supportive rather than obstructive can be seen to be a key objective in furthering online student engagement. In 2016 Deakin implemented a peer support program specifically designed to support online students to navigate the University's learning environment and to foster student engagement, through personalised communication. Designed specifically to help commencing undergraduate cloud campus (online) students to connect with Deakin and navigate their way through the university's support services in their first trimester, the Success coach program matches experienced later years students to groups of commencing students from similar disciplines and through them reaches out to online students every week of their first trimester. The program aims to support new students in areas that influence persistence in online students such as study habits, personal motivation and engagement with the university (Hanover Research 2015). It is anticipated that this online interaction and guidance will help to counter some of the key issues online students can experience, such as isolation, a feeling of disconnection and lack of support (Angelino, Williams & Natvig 2007). A key premise of the program is that the student and coach can relate as peers, share common experiences, and the more experienced student can help break down barriers to seeking help, connecting the new student with university supports and with peers. Whilst initial feedback from the Success Coach program is varied there is evidence that it has had a positive impact on students' emotional and behavioural connections to studying at university, with students reporting that having a friendly, experienced student in constant contact is reassuring and the advice helpful for developing their own approaches to study. Despite this encouraging feedback we have not yet seen a significant improvement in retention for these students and continue to explore ways to support and engage this growing cohort of students.

References

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