Supporting distance high school students in E-learning

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Abstract: Many schools in Japan have begun to offer e-learning in their distance education programs as a means to increase the rate of students continuously learning until they graduate high school. By facilitating and deepening communications between teachers and students as well as among students, and also by developing an individualized learning support system, many high schools have successfully incorporated e-learning into their distance education programs. In this report, we used X High School as an example of a school with very successful results in continuous learning. After analyzing data gathered from interviewing predominantly faculty members and alumni, we were able to deveop three methods of supporting students with continued learning.

Keywords: e-learning, distance education, mentorship

Introduction

High school distance learning programs play an essential role in accepting students who cannot commute to school. However, one of the issues has been the low rate of students actually continuing to learn. Many schools with distance learning programs have adopted e-learning and improvised new teaching methods such as mentoring and individually tailored one-on-one tutoring in order to resolve the problem of low continued learning rate. Mentorship has been reported as a main factor in completion of academic courses or continued learning (Matsuda et. al, 2003). However, applying the same principles of e-learning and distance education which are fundamentally geared towards students who are seeking life time learning or adult continuing education to high school level distance learning has many issues. Simply taking the current e-learning model geared towards more mature and experienced students, we must take a different approach to develop methods of academic support which takes into account specific characteristics of the students enrolled in high school distance learning programs.

Goals and Methods of the Study

The goal of this study was to suggest effective methods of support for high school distance learning students enrolled in e-learning to enable them to study independently and continue learning until completion of the program. The majority of students enrolled in X High School whose system is more individually based complete their program within the expected time frame. We took X High School as an example of a successful high school distance learning program offering e-learning as we analyzed mentorship methods used for continued learning from both faculty and students' perspectives.

Method of Analysis

In order to develop and suggest an effective support method for students to continue learning, we must first identify the types of relationships developed between faculty and students. We decided that the best means to gain an understanding of their relationships was by interviewing faculty members of X High School and its graduates.   In July 2011, we conducted semi-structured interviews of two available faculty members (Faculty A and B) and two graduates (Graduate A and B). We selected interview questions for the faculty related to frequency and types of support they typically provide to students seeking continued learning. The interview for the graduates consisted of the following basic questions: a) what specific academic problems did they encounter in high school? b) What types of support did they receive from the faculty and c) How did they overcome these academic problems?

The data was collected by recording the interviews on an IC recorder, which was converted to text for further analysis. We conducted analysis by following the procedure developed by Sato (2008) in his study. First, we broke down the data into codes, then into categories. Then, we compared and contrasted these categories to determine their relationships/associations. At the same time, we determined the criteria for each category and conducted interpretation of the data. In order to clearly identify the characteristics of the faculty and student relationships, we made associations of all comments based on certain criteria for continued learning from both teachers and students' perspectives.

Results and Discussion

As a result of our analysis, we were able to develop three methods for supporting students achieve successful continued learning:

(1) Develop an informal setting as part of e-learning outside of the academic curriculum, i.e., clubs, where faculty and students can interact.

Due to the nature of high school distance learning programs, there is a tendency for students to have very little interaction with their teachers, often leading them to feel lonely and isolated. Students also commented that they found themselves confused and lost when they first transferred to the program. Although the main reason students chose distance learning was to be able to study at their own pace without having to attend classes or keep up with assignments, the fundamental basic foundation of distance learning, independent learning, is not demonstrated. This is where interactions with faculty and other students and friends become crucial.   In other words, teachers used non-academic extracurricular activities of the e-learning system to have more frequent contacts with their students. The key to continuing the academic program was accessing the e-learning system and making connections with teachers and other students through these activities.

(2) Incorporate instructions through email and phone conversations since a large number of students have problems with social interactions.

Some students commented that they just stopped going to school, which eventually forced them to drop out of middle or high school. Merely providing social settings outside of academics to give students opportunities for social interactions is insufficient since many students who dropped out of high school for failing to interact with others would still have problems establishing and maintaining new personal relationships in the distance learning program. After dropping out, one student commented on how he became isolated from his family and society altogether: To cater to students under similar circumstances, high school distance learning program faculty members frequently used email and phone to contact their students to monitor their academic and home life statuses to support their efforts in continued learning.

(3) Involve the parents or guardians of students who have limited access to e-learning by contacting them frequently by email and phone, as well as their parents or guardians.

There were cases where teachers suddenly could no longer contact their students. To avoid these situations, they involved the students' parents or guardians on a regular basis to monitor their living conditions and circumstances as well as their academic progress. In one case, a student stopped accessing the e-learning system altogether. When contacted, his parents told the teacher that they were having domestic problems and the student locked himself in his room. The teacher asked the parents how to approach the student, and they ultimately resolved the issue together. Therefore, parent or guardian involvement and information exchange with them is one of the crucial support methods for success in continued learning.

Summary and Issues

In this study, our goal was to suggest effective methods of support for high school distance learning students enrolled in e-learning so that they can study independently and continue learning until completion of the program. As a result, we discovered three support methods, all of which require identifying the students' particular characteristics and backgrounds. The majority of enrolled students either had experience not being able to keep up with the pace of their schools' academic curriculum or skipping school. Those students need to be contacted constantly by email or phone to focus their attention on school. The next step is to find ways for them to develop relationships with their teachers and friendships with their peers. The stress of not being able to attend a regular school falls on the students and parents alike, which leads to further problems with their own relationships. By continuing to provide students with school information and finding social opportunities on the Internet, students can develop new friendships and relationships with their teachers. Only when they are released from social isolation and pressure, can they find interest in school work and develop a sense of belonging. We suggest that by providing mentorship and academic support in which parents or guardians are full participants, students with low self-esteem will grow to learn independently and successfully complete their studies until they receive their diplomas.

The graduates of high school distance learning experienced and overcame many obstacles while finishing their studies through e-learning. It is necessary to further our study based on more specific examples to determine and refine the types of support methods that the students need to successfully cope with issues associated with e-learning.

Literature Reference

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