

To Drop or Not to Drop?

Understanding Attrition In Online Education

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Who Cares About Who Drops?

- Institutional concerns
 - Want satisfied students
 - » Students will take more online courses
 - » Maybe even come to campus

Students equal



Our Plan for Today

- Review our research method
- Present our findings
- Discuss some ideas for change
- Hear some of your strategies

WTOonline Background

- 1997 – 1 class, 24 students
- Spring 2003 – 97 courses, 4,215 students
- Several complete programs
 - MBA, M.Ed.
 - B.A.A.S degree in Emergency Management Administration
- A number of core classes

Definition of Attrition

- Students who drop the course between 12th class day and mid-term
- Concern is with individual courses
 - WTONline has fewer complete programs
 - Literature talks about attrition in programs

Research Method

- Surveyed students who dropped WTONline courses
 - Fall 2001, Spring 2002
 - 18 percent response rate
- Surveyed students who completed WTONline courses
 - Same semesters
 - 24 percent response rate

Research Method

- Students who dropped were asked an open-ended question
 - Why did you drop the course?
- Other questions
 - Demographic
 - Survey instrument from Wallace and Clariana (2000)

Why Students Dropped

- Reasons for dropping the course
 - Lengthy explanations
 - Withdrawal reasons (Cookson 1989)

Withdrawal Reasons

- Job-related factors
- Family or domestic pressures
- Lack of time
- Change in career plans
- Course too hard or long
- Loneliness and lack of support
- Dissatisfaction with teaching methods
- Dissatisfaction with the subject matter or course materials
- Slow turn-around time on assignments

Persistence Barriers- Morgan and Tam (1999)

- Situational – change in life
 - “I obtained additional work load in my profession”
- Institutional – difficulties with institution
 - “I was able to take the course at Clarendon College (Pampa Center) for cheaper and have it transferred”

Persistence Barriers (cont.)

- Dispositional – student attitude
 - “Because it was going too fast and it was no way to caught up (sic). Too much reading for a person who does not like to read.”
- Epistemological – course material/content
 - “I didn’t have the time to devote to this class. I can’t imagine being able to take other classes along with this [subject] course. It is taught like a graduate class instead of freshman [subject].”

Comparison of the Groups

- Questions from Wallace and Clariana (2000)
 - Principal components factor analysis
 - Five factors
 - Most interesting and useful is “Active Engagement”
 - Constructed a scale using questions 1, 4, (reversed), 7, 10 (reversed), 16, 17, 20

Active Engagement Scale

- Reliable scale
 - Cronbach's alpha = .9024
- Range 5-35
- Compare “dropping students” to completers
- Drop – Mean of 22.34 (N=71)
- Complete – Mean of 26.37 (N=542)
- Completers appear more actively engaged than those who dropped
- Concerned about small N in dropped category

Additional Research

- More semesters of data
 - Increase N among the dropped
- Look at attrition data across courses
 - Do more students drop required courses, or courses with instructors new to online, or courses with lots of students?

Additional Research

- Administer survey to f-2-f courses
 - Reasons for dropping may be exactly the same
 - Even harder to reach students who have dropped
- After implementation of change
 - Does attrition decrease after additional faculty training?

Ideas for Change

- Student training
 - Done informally right now
 - » What is involved in an online course?
 - » Am I ready for an online course?
 - Hold WTOonline “open houses” to show off courses and provide “screening” tests
- Better students are happier and submit higher instructor ratings

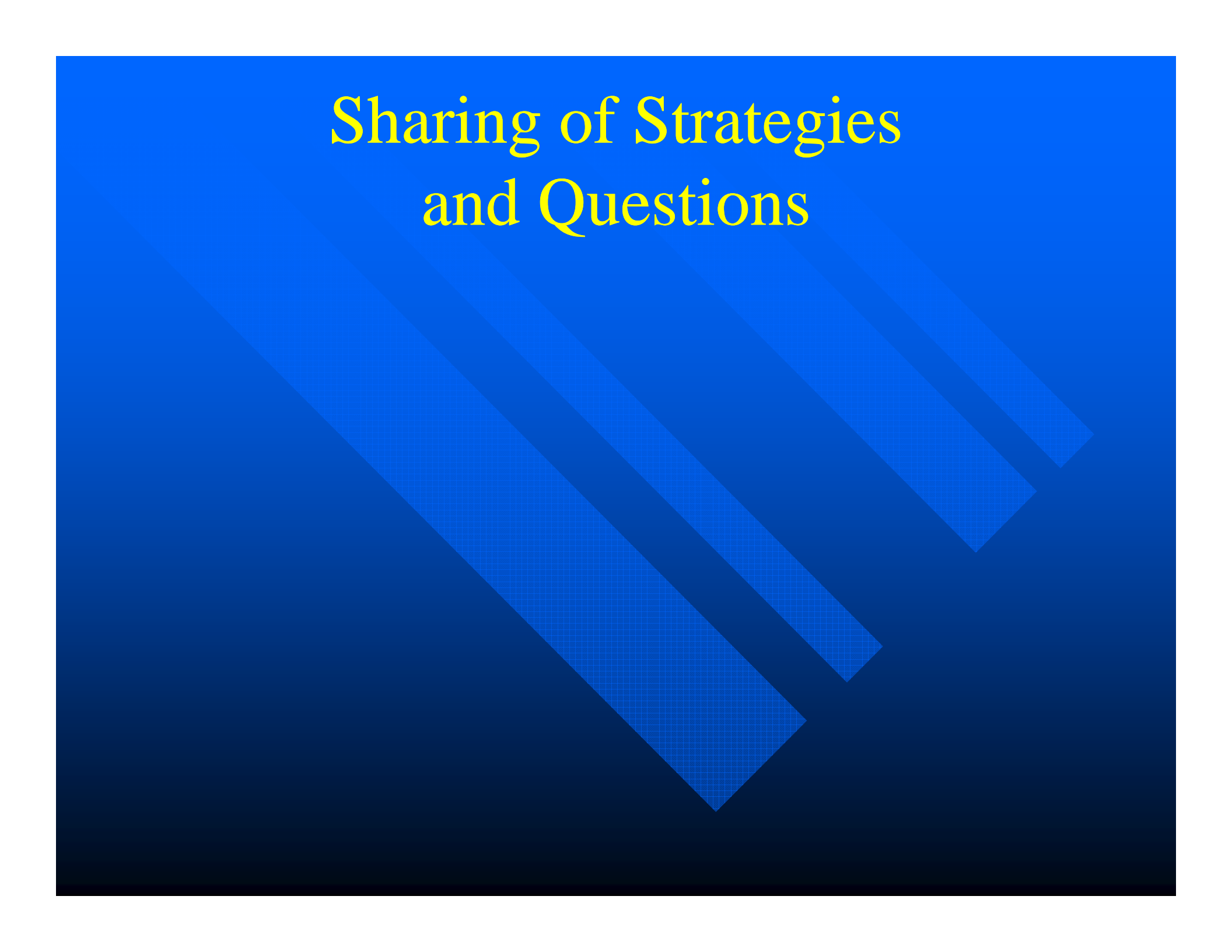
Ideas for Change

- Faculty training
 - Some teaching theories
 - How to engage students
 - “Learning activities must be organized to provide maximum advantage for minimum inconvenience.”
- Better instructor equals happier students and higher course evaluation ratings

Ideas for Change

- Administrator training
 - Learn what is involved in designing and implementing an online course
 - Know the difference between a well-designed course and one developed “on-the-fly”
 - Challenged by lack of faculty resources
 - Understand the role of a skilled instructional designer

Sharing of Strategies and Questions

The background of the slide is a blue gradient, transitioning from a lighter blue at the top to a darker blue at the bottom. Overlaid on this background are several overlapping, semi-transparent blue triangles of varying shades, arranged in a pattern that suggests movement or a sequence of steps. The triangles are oriented with their vertices pointing downwards and to the right.

References

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