

Feelings of alienation and community among higher education students in a virtual classroom

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Abstract

Although the professional literature identifies feelings of alienation and low sense of community as factors that help explain relatively low student persistence rates in distance education programs, no studies have attempted to investigate the relationship between these two constructs. Accordingly, the present study uses canonical correlation analysis to determine if and how a set of three alienation variables is related to a set of two classroom community variables in a sample ($N=117$) of online graduate students. The results suggest that the two sets of variables are related along two reliable multivariate dimensions. Implications for college teaching are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The growth of online learning in higher education during the past decade is well documented. According to a report of U.S. higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2004), 1.9 million students were enrolled in online courses in the fall of 2003, 19% more than a year earlier, and double-digit growth is expected to continue over the near term. However, a number of studies (e.g., Carr, 2000; Carr & Ledwith, 2000; Dutton, Dutton, & Perry, 1999) provide evidence that a higher percentage of distance

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education students become dropouts before completing their courses when compared to students in on-campus classrooms, with persistence rates reported below 60% in some online programs.

The professional literature (e.g., Sweet, 1986) also identifies multiple factors that can contribute to lower online persistence rates, such as varying degrees of mismatch between the difficulty of online courses and students' academic preparation, family and peer influences, the high degree of self-directedness required for most online programs, the need for students to adapt to computer mediated communication, student economic factors, lack of employer support, and the varied experience levels and skills of faculty in teaching online. Frequently this last factor manifests itself in deficient facilitation of discussion forums and group work and in faculty feedback to students that students perceive as neither timely nor constructive. Factors such as these, acting singly or in combination, create pressures for online students that can result in student attrition.

Researchers (e.g., Morgan & Tam, 1999) suggest that students in distance learning programs may be more likely to experience isolation and alienation from the institution because of their physical separation from the school and its services and from other students. Also, poor academic and social integration of students into the institutional life can also contribute to feelings of alienation (Tinto, 1975, 1995, 1997). Typically, postsecondary education persistence studies (e.g., Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) find that integration has an important impact on persistence. Consequently persistence is often viewed as a measure of how well students integrate into a particular school. Finally, limited skills of some online faculty in presenting courses at a distance can erode affiliation and increase alienation among students.

1.1. Alienation

The construct of alienation has evolved over the centuries through Christian doctrine, philosophical thought, contemporary sociology, and social psychology (Trusty & Dooley-Dickey, 1993). It refers to a sense of social estrangement, an absence of social support or meaningful social connection (Mau, 1992). To be alienated is to lack a sense of belonging, to feel cut off from family, friends, or school (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Within the school context, alienation is often related to negative student behaviors such as self-isolation, failure, absenteeism, and dropping out (Mau, 1992). This view is consistent with that of Adler (1939), who wrote that failure in school often stems from feeling unconnected to the teacher, other students, or the school community at large.

Seeman (1959) defines alienation as the discrepancy between personal expectation and reward in the context of modern society. His conceptualization of alienation consists of six dimensions: social isolation, cultural alienation, self-isolation, powerlessness, meaninglessness, and normlessness. However, social science researchers have been unable to validate the existence of six separate dimensions. Consequently Dean (1961), drawing from Seeman's work, redefined alienation as consisting of only three dimensions: social isolation, powerlessness, and normlessness.

Social isolation, according to Dean (1961), is the feeling of loneliness, even when in the company of others, due to a perceived lack of meaningful, intimate relationships with peers, family, and the wider community. Students who feel isolated tend to be separated from mainstream groups, feel a lack of connection to others, and feel no one cares or pays attention to them (Dean, 1961). Powerlessness, the second dimension, is a feeling of the inability to influence one's choices and a belief that one has little control over what occurs; a construct very much related to external locus of control. Students who feel powerless often give up when encountering resistance or failure (Dean, 1961). Finally, normlessness

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