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Tiffiany Howard

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, tiffiany.howard@unlv.edu

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Instructional Methods That Improve Outcomes for UNLV Students in the Virtual Classroom

Tiffany Howard, Department of Political Science

Background
The demand for online education programs has resulted in the expansion of course and degree offerings, and a steady increase in online student enrollment nationwide (U.S. News, 2016). While the goal of online education is to improve access to higher education, historically underrepresented groups experience lower course completion rates and poorer grade performance in online classes, when compared to underrepresented students enrolled in hybrid and in person courses. (Gladieux and Swail, 1999; Hoskins and Hooff, 2005; Newell, 2007; Figlio, Rush, and Yin, 2010; Xu and Jaggars, 2012, 2013, 2014)

The Practice
I implemented transparent instruction methods and problem-centered assignments in PSC 302-Research Methods and Statistics, and used a quasi-experimental design with a focus on underserved students at UNLV to demonstrate that transparent instructional methods do improve outcomes for UNLV students in online courses.

UNLV is currently ranked first among US universities in the US News and World Report’s Best University for Ethnic Diversity (U.S. News, 2017). Given the University’s commitment to educating low-income, under-represented minority, and underserved college students, UNLV functioned as an ideal site for data collection.

Study Design
The data for this study come from a convenience sample of students from the political science course, PSC 302-Research Methods and Statistics taught at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas across four consecutive semesters, 2015-2017.

- When online course instruction utilizes transparent teaching as a holistic course model, there is significant improvement in students’ performance in the online course.

Further, the learning outcomes for students in the transparent virtual classroom are comparable to the learning outcomes for students in the face-to-face classroom

The adoption of transparent, problem-centered assignments improves the learning outcomes for underserved students at the introductory level, and decreases the rate of attrition among the student population with the highest risk of dropping out (Winkelmes et al., Peer Review, 2016).

Resources and where to find them
- Transparency in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: https://www.unlv.edu/provost/teachingandlearning
- Sample assignments, materials and resources: https://www.unlv.edu/provost/transparency/tilt-higher-eds-examples-and-resources
- Online Education: https://online.unlv.edu

Online curricula in higher education can benefit greatly from the adoption of transparent teaching methods in order to improve student performance, especially for students from underrepresented and underserved groups.

UNLV teachers can share the Transparency Framework with students to help frame conversations about the required academic work in a course.

UNLV teachers can also use the Transparent approach to design their courses and syllabi around the purposes, tasks, and criteria for students’ work, demonstrating how coursework benefits students’ long-term knowledge acquisition and skill development in ways that are useful to students long after the course is completed.

REFERENCES:
- Newell, C. C. (2007). Learner characteristics as predictors of online course completion among nontraditional technical college students (Doctoral dissertation). University of Georgia, Athens, GA.