



Improving student persistence rates through increased engagement

Excelsior College is a private, non-profit online college with degree programs, courses, and exams in Business, Technology, Nursing, Liberal Arts, Health Sciences and Public Service. The college provides educational opportunity to adult learners with an emphasis on those historically underrepresented in higher education, offering quality instruction and assessment of prior learning.

The challenge

Excelsior College offers a flexible, exam-based associate degree in nursing program that allows students to study on their own schedule and earn college credit through theory and performance examinations. The theory examination model is mostly self-paced, with some conference activities that are facilitated by faculty.

While this model is very convenient and quite effective for certain students, the lack of structure, faculty support, and engagement proved to be a great challenge for many aspiring nurses. As a result, Excelsior was experiencing very high withdrawal and non-completion rates. In addition, students pursuing their degree through the credit by examination model are not eligible for Title IV federal funding.

The solution

Excelsior College approached Tata Interactive Systems to help them design and develop eight innovative and appealing courses that make up the Nursing Theory portion of the Associate Degree in Nursing. The resulting program uses rich media and solid pedagogy to give students an

CASE STUDY



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immersive and engaging experience as well as solid structure and ample support and guidance from faculty. Each course contains a mixture of scenario-based and story-based tutorials, games and simulations with a high level of interaction, and a large number of animations and practice activities. Courses also contain more traditional online components, such as discussion boards, written assignments, and quizzes.

As an added benefit, students enrolled in this fully online, instructor-led program may be eligible for federal financial aid.

The result

The highly interactive tutorials and practice activities, as well as a sense of community among students created by the addition of moderated student discussions, peer reviews, and faculty support, increased student engagement and retention beyond expectations.

The first course of the initial pilot opened to students in September 2012 and the first cohort completed the two-year program in June 2014. While it is too early to accurately compare the overall performance of these students with those studying independently, preliminary data show that individual course completion rate of online students is at 90% and persistence rates are above 80%. Compared to the overall institutional persistence rate of 68% (and closer to 50% in the exam-based ADN program), these results are very encouraging.

The program was recognized with a Gold award under the Best Custom Content category at the Brandon Hall Excellence Awards 2013 and also won a Silver award from The United States Distance Learning Association 2014 International Awards for Best Practices in Distance Learning Programming.

