Adv Educ Res Eval, 2025, 5(1): 293-302
DOI: 10.25082/AERE.2024.01.005

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Instructor Practices and Progression: Examining the Impact of Instructional Techniques on Student Progression in First-Year Courses

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Received: April 17, 2025;
Accepted: July 4, 2025;
Published: July 11, 2025.

Citation: Shehadeh H, Pritts N. Instructor Practices and Progression: Examining the Impact of Instructional Techniques on Student Progression in First-Year Courses. *Adv Educ Res Eval*, 2025, **5**(1): 293-302. https://doi.org/10.25082/AERE.2024.01.005

Abstract: In first-year writing courses, where students often begin to define their academic identity, the instructor's role becomes a critical point of contact. Advancing successfully through first-year college courses is essential for supporting student progression and ensuring timely degree completion. However, what remains less clear is how specific instructional choices may influence a student's decision to persist, impacting their progression rate from one course to the next. This study explored the relationship between specific instructional practices and student progression in ENG121 and ENG122, two first-year writing courses taught online at a four-year online university. Drawing from two academic years, 2022-2023 and 2023-2024, of institutional data and survey responses from instructors in the top and bottom 20% of progression rates, the results of this study indicated that student and section counts did not account for differences in progression outcomes. Instead, the most meaningful distinctions came down to how individual instructors showed up in their courses. Faculty in the top 20% demonstrated higher levels of engagement, timeliness, and student support, contributing to better student progression. Faculty in the bottom 20% have the potential to improve student progression particularly by focusing on timely, actionable feedback and fostering stronger student engagement in online discussion forums.

Keywords: student progression, first-year writing, online instruction, instructor engagement, teaching presence, instructional effectiveness, course-to-course persistence

1 Introduction

First-year writing courses are more than academic checkpoints; they are foundational places where students begin to develop a sense of belonging in higher education. For many, these early experiences lay the groundwork for confidence, engagement, and the decision to continue. However, in online learning, where students and instructors do not share a physical space, it becomes harder to know exactly what supports that sense of connection and what pushes it out of reach. Despite institutional focus on retention and progression, the mechanisms that move students from one course to the next, especially online, remain frustratingly opaque. Much of the discourse still centers on external factors, such as financial constraints, academic preparedness, and family obligations. While these factors matter, that emphasis can obscure the role instructional practice plays in shaping students' daily experiences and long-term outcomes. In an era where more students are learning remotely, understanding how the nuances of teaching, such as presence, feedback, and engagement, contribute to progression is vital.

This study examined progression not as a bureaucratic metric, but as a signal, an indicator of connection, engagement, and belief in the value of continuing. By focusing on two general education writing courses, ENG121 and ENG122, and comparing the instructional practices of faculty with the highest and lowest progression rates, this research identified behaviors that made a measurable difference. ENG121 (English Composition I) introduces students to academic and professional writing standards, emphasizing writing as a process, from idea generation to final draft. ENG122 (English Composition II) builds on this foundation, focusing on research and argumentation to help students produce well-informed, ethical, and persuasive texts. ENG121 and ENG122 are fully online, asynchronous foundational writing courses offered in a five-week format on Canvas. The accelerated nature of these courses requires instructors to demonstrate presence and implement effective instructional strategies within a limited timeframe, which underscores the importance of examining how such practices influence student progression. In

doing so, it invites educators to rethink how they define effective teaching, not just by outcomes, but by presence, responsiveness, and the small, cumulative acts of care that help students stay. The goal was to understand how specific instructional strategies align with student progression. The findings suggested that while course content and structure are standardized, what instructors did within that framework, including how they engaged, how quickly they responded, and how they made students feel seen, had a meaningful impact on student progression.

2 Literature Review

First-year courses serve as the foundation for academic success for so many students. However, despite retention initiatives across higher education institutions, student progression remains a challenge. While various factors influence student persistence, understanding the impact of specific instructional practices on progression rates can offer valuable insights for enhancing student success. Several factors influence student progression rates in higher education, many of which the instructor cannot control. While external factors such as financial aid and prior academic performance impact student progression [1], instructional techniques can also influence student persistence, particularly in first-year courses. Robinson and Bornholt's (2007) Pathways Theory of Progression suggests that instructors may have a direct effect on the development of engagement and motivation in students, thereby shaping student persistence [2]. Despite this, less research has examined precisely how instructors directly contribute to differences in progression rates in first-year courses like ENG121 and ENG122. Identifying these differences is critical since it would suggest that instructor-level factors, such as feedback strategies, engagement efforts, or communication styles, play a measurable role in student persistence. While other perspectives, such as those that focus on autonomy or relatedness, shed light on student motivation, the literature surveyed here resonates more directly with Pathways Theory. Its emphasis on the routes students take through institutional structures, and the role instructors play in shaping those routes, reflects the broader patterns under review. Rather than centering only internal motivation, this framing highlights how teaching practices intersect with progression in tangible, measurable ways.

While existing literature offers valuable insights into factors influencing student progression in higher education, several gaps remain, particularly regarding instructional techniques and their direct impact on student progression. Student progression refers to the process of guiding students through the necessary coursework to fulfill graduation requirements [3]. However, in this study, the progression rate is defined as a student's active attendance in the subsequent course (ENG122 or another required course) within two weeks of the previous course's end date. This definition allows for a precise measurement of course-to-course persistence, distinguishing it from broader retention metrics. More importantly, progression in first-year college courses plays a crucial role in student retention and degree completion. Much of the research to date has emphasized external influences, such as family background, prior academic performance, and financial aid, as significant predictors of student success [1]. However, less attention has been given to the role of specific instructional methods and strategies that instructors employ to enhance student progression, particularly within first-year general education courses.

Studies demonstrate that student satisfaction positively affects students' academic effort, which in turn influences their academic performance, including next course progression [2–4]. However, most of these studies rely on self-reported satisfaction and effort measures, often gathered through survey data rather than observed behaviors or longitudinal tracking, which may limit their ability to establish causal relationships between instructional behaviors and progression. Pathways Theory reinforces this by demonstrating that teaching strategies employed by instructors, including active learning, clear explanations, and engaging activities, are central to creating these positive learning experiences, which in turn enhance student motivation and commitment to continuing their academic pathways [2]. While this body of work suggests important connections, the present study is grounded in an implied conceptual model in which instructor behaviors—such as timeliness, responsiveness, and engagement—directly influence students' satisfaction and engagement, which then contribute to student progression. This model, shaped by Pathways Theory and Tinto's framework, underpins both the selection of survey variables and the interpretation of outcome differences between instructors. Though not visualized as a formal diagram, this conceptual pathway structures the analytical lens applied throughout the study.

While prior research has established a general connection between instructor quality and student outcomes, recent studies have begun quantifying these relationships. For instance, the use of emojis in instructor communication has been linked to increased perceptions of instructor

credibility, which in turn enhances students' learning motivation and self-reported performance [5]. These findings, while intriguing, are based on small-sample experimental studies and primarily measure perception rather than demonstrated academic outcomes. Similarly, studies on instructor-generated videos often rely on student satisfaction surveys rather than experimental or longitudinal data, which may inflate the perceived impact of such strategies without tracking actual retention or progression metrics [6]. These findings suggest that specific, measurable instructional behaviors, such as communication style and content delivery methods, have quantifiable effects on student engagement and learning. Because feedback and communication are both independently significant and deeply interrelated, they appear across several parts of this review. This repetition reflects their layered role in shaping both student experience and progression, and helps establish them as recurring anchors in the subsequent analysis.

Additionally, factors contributing to student withdrawals include poor learning experiences. Student satisfaction is a key indicator of instructional quality in higher education, especially in online learning. In this context, student satisfaction is a measure of the quality of education provided. Effective instructors are key to a positive online learning experience and student satisfaction. Recognizing and understanding what contributes to student satisfaction can help institutions identify areas for improvement and enhancement [4]. Getting feedback from instructors and comparing their perspectives can provide valuable insights into the strengths and weaknesses of their programs. This approach may lead to better-designed courses and support services, but, most importantly, it can help understand what instructional strategies work best for student retention. While these insights are valuable, many of the cited studies are cross-sectional or rely on instructors' self-perception of their teaching behaviors, which introduces potential biases and limits generalizability. However, there is limited empirical evidence that links particular instructional techniques, such as feedback mechanisms, communication styles, or engagement strategies, to measurable outcomes like progression rates across different instructors. Most studies assess instructor impact in general terms, but few examine variation across instructors teaching the same course within a standardized curriculum. This absence of comparative analysis restricts our understanding of how individual teaching behaviors may account for differences in student outcomes, even when course content remains constant.

The quality of instructors, particularly their ability to communicate effectively and create an engaging learning environment, significantly impacts student success in online classes [4]. Empirical research has demonstrated that students rate instructors who integrate structured communication strategies, such as video feedback and responsiveness, more positively in terms of helpfulness and instructional clarity [6]. Moreover, the perceived quality of instructor communication, feedback, and accessibility has been shown to directly influence student satisfaction and academic effort, with student satisfaction acting as a full mediator of the effect [4]. These findings underscore the need to examine whether differences in instructional behaviors across faculty members correspond to statistically significant differences in student progression rates. Pandza Bajs and Guszak (2024) demonstrated that students highly value timely and constructive feedback from their instructors, as it provides them with a sense of direction and progress [4]. When instructors are responsive to student inquiries, provide clear explanations, and offer personalized support, it creates a positive learning environment where students feel heard, valued, and motivated. It seems clear that instructors can positively influence student experience and success in online classes by focusing on effective communication, timely feedback, demonstrating enthusiasm, showing genuine concern for student learning, creating a respectful learning environment, being accessible to students, and providing personalized interactions when necessary.

Effective communication is more than just providing information. It encompasses a variety of traits and actions. For example, instructors should structure online courses in a clear and concise manner, ensuring that expectations, deadlines, and grading criteria are transparent, and pair that with regular check-ins and announcements as even just a brief message acknowledging student progress or addressing common questions, can help maintain a sense of connection and presence [6]. Ingram et al. (2024) also demonstrated that students value instructors who are accessible and responsive to their questions and concerns [6]. Setting clear office hours, responding to emails promptly, and providing personalized feedback demonstrate a commitment to student success.

Timely feedback is essential, but its effectiveness is amplified when it is personalized and specific; going beyond generic comments and providing detailed feedback that addresses individual student work demonstrates that the instructor is invested in how students can enhance their understanding and skills. Also, instructors can utilize various feedback mechanisms, such as audio or video recordings, written comments, or virtual meetings to cater to different learning

styles and preferences [5]. Instructors who are passionate about what they teach naturally create a more engaging and stimulating learning experience [4]. Recognizing that students may face personal challenges or anxieties, especially in times of disruption, can help create a more supportive and understanding learning environment [5]. Celebrating student successes, however small, can boost morale and motivation. Identifying the specific instructor behaviors and actions that convey enthusiasm, a caring tone, or a passion for the subject is something the present study may uncover.

Instructors can also use dedicated online spaces specifically for non-academic discussions, fostering a sense of community among students [7]. Beyond informal interactions, the strategic use of synchronous communication tools, like video conferencing or live chat sessions, can facilitate real-time interaction and discussions [5]. For example, instructors can hold live question-and-answer sessions or facilitate small group discussions during synchronous sessions. By incorporating these strategies, instructors can create a more engaging and interactive learning environment for online students.

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of feedback and instructor-student interaction, but they have not examined whether specific instructional strategies correlate with higher student progression rates. For example, while timely and personalized feedback is known to impact student satisfaction [6], its impact on student progression is underexplored, and it is unclear how instructors' approaches to engagement impact progression compared to other factors like content delivery or assessment techniques. Prior research has demonstrated that specific instructional behaviors, such as structured communication strategies, real-time feedback, and multimodal instructional delivery, impact student engagement, and learning motivation [5, 6]. However, little research has investigated whether such behaviors correlate with measurable differences in progression rates across faculty members teaching the same courses.

3 Materials and Methods

Although there are assumptions about what influences student progression in first-year general education courses, limited research exists on the instructional variables that shape these outcomes across different instructors. While some factors fall outside an instructor's control, it is essential to focus on the pedagogical techniques that may impact student advancement. Understanding which instructional practices contribute to successful progression is crucial for informing course design, teaching strategies, and data-driven decision-making, especially in alignment with accreditation standards. Instructors may find it challenging to enhance their teaching effectiveness without a clear understanding of which instructional approaches and types of presence foster student advancement. This lack of clarity can lead to suboptimal progression rates and hinder student success. To address this issue, a focused analysis of progression data across instructors is necessary to uncover actionable insights that inform and improve teaching practices. Tinto's theory of student departure emphasizes the importance of academic and social integration in student persistence. By identifying instructional practices that enhance students' sense of connection and engagement in the classroom, this study aligns with Tinto's assertion that meaningful interactions with faculty contribute to improved retention outcomes.

In this study, progression is defined as active attendance in the subsequent course (ENG122 or another required course) within two weeks of completing the previous course. By narrowing the scope to short-term persistence rather than broader retention, the research offered targeted insights. The study identified teaching patterns among faculty with the highest progression rates in ENG121 and ENG122, comparing these practices with those of lower-progression instructors to pinpoint effective instructional strategies.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

Exploring student progression rates in ENG121 and ENG122 courses holds significant historical and theoretical importance in higher education pedagogy. Historically, foundational English courses have served as pillars of academic development, providing students with essential language and critical thinking skills crucial for success in diverse fields of study. Theoretically, this study addresses fundamental questions about effective teaching and learning strategies in ENG121 and ENG122 courses in the light of Tinto's Theory of Student Retention. This theory emphasizes the role of the academic community and its impact on student persistence and success [8]. The different progression rates across instructors indicate variations in teaching and engagement methods that shape the students' academic experience. Thus, this study aims to analyze the effective teaching strategies that impact progression rates.

Tinto's theory posits that students who feel connected to their institution and engaged in their academic environment are more likely to persist and succeed. Higher progression rates in courses like ENG121 and ENG122 can be indicative of a supportive learning environment where students actively participate, feel valued, and receive practical guidance from their instructors. Higher progression rates also suggest that the teaching strategies the faculty employs foster academic success and enhance students' sense of belonging and community within the classroom, ultimately contributing to greater retention rates and improved outcomes for students. By examining progression rates alongside Tinto's theory, this study can highlight how effective teaching practices and positive student-faculty interactions play a crucial role in promoting student persistence and academic success. By examining factors influencing student progression, such as instructional techniques and instructor presence, this study contributes to theoretical frameworks of educational psychology and instructional design. Moreover, the investigation of instructional practices that facilitate successful student advancement offers valuable insights into the complex interplay between teaching strategies, student engagement, and academic outcomes.

3.2 Research Methodology

The research questions guiding the study are:

RQ1: How do progression rates vary across different instructors teaching online asynchronous ENG121 and ENG122?

H1: There is a statistically significant difference in progression rates across different instructors teaching online asynchronous ENG121 and ENG122.

RQ 2: What instructional themes and strategies differentiate faculty with the highest student progression rates from those with the lowest progression rates in ENG121 and ENG122 courses?

The focus of this study was to examine the differences in progression rates across ENG121 and ENG122, comparing the instructional techniques and strategies employed by instructors in both the top 20% and bottom 20% of progression rates. The study used a mixed-method approach to address the research questions. To answer the first research question, analyses would determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in progression rates across different instructors teaching ENG121 and ENG122 over the past two academic years, 2022-23 and 2023-24. To answer the second research question, purposive population sampling was used to select ENG121 and ENG122 instructors with varying student progression rates over the past two academic years. Instructors from both the highest 20% and lowest 20% of progression rates were chosen for this study. These selected instructors were surveyed to gain insights into their instructional techniques and strategies, with the goal of identifying key differences and common themes across both high- and low-performing faculty. The survey that was utilized is the science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM) Online Course Auto-Report, developed by Western Michigan University, which is a free and open-access instrument designed to measure online teaching practices. While the survey is intended for STEM online courses, the selected questions focused on areas related to course structure, presentation, materials, learning management systems (LMS), instructor-specific course modifications, and strategies for engagement, feedback, and contributions. Coding responses and analyzing themes and patterns were employed by the researchers to draw conclusions about successful teaching practices. The survey data were collected, and no personal or identifying information was included. The survey responses were analyzed to identify common themes and insights related to effective instructional strategies.

4 Results and Discussion

A total of 94 instructors, four full-timers and 90 part-timers, taught ENG121 and ENG122 courses in 2022-23 and 2023-24. To answer the first research question, an analysis was conducted to examine whether the number of sections an instructor teaches impacts their progression rate.

Table 1 shows the average, median, and variance for three key variables: progression rate, student count, and section count. The average number of students taught by instructors was 179, with a median count of 166 students. The average instructor progression rate was 72.8%, with a standard deviation of 6.85%, suggesting moderate variability. The standard deviation indicated that while there was some fluctuation in progression rates, the variance was not excessively large. Thus, most instructors had rates close to the average. However, the standard deviation was much larger for student count (113) and section count (5). This suggests greater variation in the number of students and sections assigned to instructors, meaning that some instructors

taught significantly more or fewer students and sections than others. On average, instructors taught 179 students, but the median student count was 166, indicating that some instructors had higher-than-average enrollments, which likely skews the distribution. The difference between the mean and median for student count suggests a right-skewed distribution, meaning a few instructors had significantly larger class sizes.

Table 1 The average, median, and variance for progression rate, student count, and section count.

	Summary Statistics		
	Progression Rate	Student Count	Section Count
Average	72.8%	179	7.69
Median	73.2%	166	7
Standard Deviation	6.85%	113	5

Table 2 shows that the top 20% of instructors had an average progression rate of 82.20%, significantly higher than the bottom 20%, which averages 64.3%. The *t*-test p-value for progression rate was 1.36E-13, which is less than 0.05, indicating a statistically significant difference between the two groups regarding progression rates. The top 20% of instructors taught fewer students on average (136.76) compared to the bottom 20%, who taught an average of 151.64 students. The *t*-test p-value for student count was 3.50E-01, which is greater than 0.05, indicating no statistically significant difference between the two groups based on student count. For section count, the top 20% of instructors taught an average of 5.82 sections, while the bottom 20% taught an average of 6.68 sections. The *t*-test p-value for section count was 3.02E-01, also greater than 0.05. Thus, there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups based on section count. This indicated that the progression rate showed a statistically significant difference between the groups, while student count and section count did not.

Table 2 Comparison of the top and bottom 20% of instructors by progression rate, with averages of 82.2% and 64.3%, respectively.

	Progression Rate		Student Count		Section Count	
	Top 20 Percent	Bottom 20 Percent	Top 20 Percent	Bottom 20 Percent	Top 20 Percent	Bottom 20 Percent
Average	82.20%	64.3%	136.76	151.64	5.82	6.68
Standard Deviation	4.33%	5.47%	120.35	108.26	5.10	4.69
t-test p-value	1.36E-13	-	3.50E-01	-	3.02E-01	-

To refine the results, a subset of instructors who taught over the median number of sections (7 sections) was analyzed separately. Some instructors taught only a few sections during AY 2022-23 and 2023-24, which could have skewed the data. To address this, a second analysis focused only on instructors who taught more than the median number of sections. A total of 48 instructors were identified as teaching seven or more sections. *T*-tests were performed to compare student count and section count between the top 20% and bottom 20% of instructors to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in instructor progression rates based on the number of students taught. Table 3 presents a median section analysis, comparing the top 20 percent and bottom 20 percent of instructors based on three variables: progression rate, student count, and section count.

Table 3 A median section analysis comparing the top and bottom 20% of instructors on progression rate, student count, and section count.

	Progression Rate		Student Count		Section Count	
	Top 20 Percent	Bottom 20 Percent	Top 20 Percent	Bottom 20 Percent	Top 20 Percent	Bottom 20 Percent
Average	77.80%	68.2%	280.67	282.82	11.78	12.36
Standard Deviation	1.26%	1.58%	51.17	43.89	2.48	1.72
t-test p-value	1.28E-11	-	4.63E-01	-	2.90E-01	-

Of the top 20% of instructors, only nine had an average progression rate of 77.80%, significantly higher than the bottom 20% of instructors, who had an average of 68.2%. The *t*-test p-value for progression rate was 1.28E-11, which is much less than 0.05, indicating a statistically significant difference in progression rates between the two groups. For student count, the top 20% of instructors taught an average of 280.67 students, while the bottom 20% taught 282.82

students on average. The *t*-test p-value for student count was 4.63E-01, which is greater than 0.05, indicating that there was no statistically significant difference in the number of students taught between the two groups. In terms of section count, the top 20% taught an average of 11.78 sections, while the bottom 20% taught an average of 12.36 sections. The *t*-test p-value for section count was 2.90E-01, which is also greater than 0.05. Thus, there was no statistically significant difference in the number of sections taught between the two groups. This analysis indicated that while the number of students or sections did not appear to have a substantial impact on performance, progression rates are influenced by instructor ranking, suggesting other factors beyond section and student count may play a more substantial role in progression outcomes, such as student demographics, student motivation, instructor course management skills, and teaching methods. Analyzing collected data, it was indicated that instructor performance significantly affected student progression rates, and student count and section count did not significantly differ between top and low-performing instructors, indicating that workload did not necessarily impact progression rates.

Following the quantitative analysis, a qualitative survey was conducted to gain deeper insights into instructional practices and perceptions that may contribute to progression outcomes, focusing on only part-time faculty. Although the initial analysis focused on instructors who taught seven or more sections, the inclusion threshold was lowered for the survey phase to enhance participation while still ensuring respondents had sufficient teaching experience. This adjustment also allowed the study to include perspectives from adjunct faculty who teach sporadically, an important segment of the instructional workforce, whose contributions may otherwise be underrepresented in progression data. Including these voices in the qualitative phase ensured a more comprehensive understanding of the instructional strategies used across varying teaching loads.

The survey targeted instructors from both the top and bottom 20% performance tiers, specifically those who had taught two or more sections during the 2022–2023 and 2023–2024 academic years. The survey aimed to explore potential factors influencing progression rates, such as teaching methods, course management strategies, and student engagement techniques. This qualitative component provided context to the statistical findings and helped identify possible areas for pedagogical improvement. The survey was sent to 11 instructors in the top 20% performance tier, and only five instructors responded. The same survey was also sent to 18 instructors in the bottom 20% performance tier, and only eight instructors responded.

The survey responses were analyzed qualitatively to identify recurring themes and patterns in the feedback provided by instructors regarding student progression in ENG121 and ENG122. To enhance coding reliability, the two researchers reviewed a subset of responses to confirm theme consistency, and discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus. The survey responses from the top 20% group revealed a strong trend of instructor engagement in key areas such as participation, feedback practices, and overall involvement in student progress. Instructors in this group consistently engaged with students, particularly through course discussions and timely feedback. They shared lecture notes and slides related to course materials, which could have contributed to the clarity and effectiveness of their teaching. They were also highly involved in discussions, identifying misconceptions within threads, which helped guide student understanding. In addition, they integrated current events into course topics, either through discussion boards or announcements, enhancing the relevance and timeliness of course material. This active engagement could have fostered a supportive learning environment, which in turn enhanced student success. The emphasis on timely feedback was particularly crucial, as it could have allowed students to understand their progress and areas for improvement. The strong focus on both participation in discussions and feedback was a core element of the high performance seen in this group. Instructors in the top 20% group were also proactive in creating an environment where engagement was a priority, ensuring that students received ongoing support. They used tools like reminders, course schedules, and clear communication through announcements and emails to help students participate effectively in the course. This consistent, proactive approach to participation and feedback could have been central to the success of the course and played a significant role in maintaining a high level of student performance.

In contrast, the survey results from the bottom 20% group highlighted areas where engagement and feedback practices were less consistent. While some instructors did share time frames for learning activities through reminders or a course schedule, the majority did not integrate current events into course topics on the discussion boards or in announcements, missing an opportunity to enhance student engagement and course relevance. Most instructors in the bottom 20% also did not share lecture notes or slides related to course materials, which could have helped clarify key concepts. While discussion boards were identified as the most significant

platform for student interaction, instructors in this group did not prioritize them as consistently as their counterparts in the top 20%. This lack of engagement in discussion boards could have contributed to gaps in student involvement and might have hindered the development of deeper connections between instructors and students. Also, while feedback was recognized as a key component for student progress, delays in providing feedback, often taking more than two business days, could be perceived as barriers to student success. Timely feedback was crucial for maintaining motivation and helping students improve, and the absence of this in the bottom 20% group suggested that delays negatively impacted the learning experience.

Overall, instructors who engaged consistently in discussions and offered timely, actionable feedback tended to create a more positive and supportive learning environment, which could have directly influenced student outcomes. However, the bottom 20% group could have improved by prioritizing more regular engagement in course discussions, sharing resources such as lecture notes and slides, and offering feedback that was not only timely but also constructive and actionable. By doing so, instructors would have better supported their students' academic development and contributed to higher engagement and success rates.

5 Conclusion

The results indicated no statistically significant differences in student count or course count between instructors with high and low progression rates. While this suggests that workload alone may not directly impact progression outcomes, it does not eliminate the possibility that factors such as class size could influence an instructor's ability to demonstrate presence or build meaningful connections with students. Therefore, other factors, such as teaching style, course management skills, and student motivation, may play a more substantial role in progression.

This means that progression is not just about the quantity of teaching but how effectively the instructor manages their teaching load and supports their students. Examining the second research question, the survey results revealed that the top 20% of faculty consistently prioritized student engagement through regular participation in discussion boards and timely feedback, likely contributing to their students' success. In contrast, faculty in the bottom 20% displayed more variation in engagement practices. Inconsistent participation and delayed feedback may have hindered student progress, suggesting areas for improvement. For instructional practices, prioritizing discussion boards, integrating current events, and providing timely, constructive feedback are essential for fostering a supportive learning environment that can positively impact student progression rate. Faculty in the bottom 20% would benefit from focusing on these areas to improve student outcomes and progression rates. By making these adjustments, instructors can create more engaging and effective learning experiences that promote student progression.

5.1 Recommendations

Based on the survey results and analysis of the top and bottom 20% faculty engagement practices, the following recommendations are proposed to improve instructional effectiveness and student outcomes:

(1) Return feedback within 1-2 business days to help students stay on track and make necessary improvements promptly.

(2) Share encouraging and supportive feedback in discussion boards to foster a growth mindset by providing constructive guidance and positive reinforcement.

(3) Engage more deeply in course discussions to identify and correct misconceptions and guide students to deeper understanding.

(4) Integrate current trends, events, and topics into discussions and announcements to make course content more relevant and engaging for students.

(5) Use announcements to reinforce key course concepts, not only to provide logistical updates.

5.2 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

There are several limitations that may impact the results of this study. One key limitation is that student preparedness and demographics, including prior academic achievement, likely influence progression rates, but these factors were not controlled in this study. While these unmeasured confounding variables may partially impact the results, they were not accounted for in this study. Also, institutional policies, such as withdrawal deadlines, incomplete grade policies, and access to academic support services, may affect progression patterns independently of instructional practices. These policies could introduce variability unrelated to the specific

teaching strategies or instructional methods being assessed.

The course design itself represents another limitation. All instructors in this study taught within the same standardized online course shell, which included predetermined assignments and materials. This standardization limits instructors' ability to fully customize their teaching approaches, potentially masking the true impact of individual instructional techniques. Furthermore, the constraints of the online environment may influence how instructors implement specific strategies, as these may differ from those used in face-to-face settings. The qualitative portion of this study relied heavily on self-reported survey data from instructors, which introduced the potential for biases. Instructors might overreport practices they believed to be beneficial or underreport those they perceived as less effective. Since the study did not include direct observation of actual teaching practices or student perspectives on instruction, it was not possible to verify whether reported practices align with actual implementation in the classroom. Finally, this study focused specifically on progression rates in online ENG121 (English Composition I) and ENG122 (English Composition II) courses at a single institution. As such, the findings may not be generalizable to other disciplines, delivery modalities, or institutions, especially those with different student populations and instructional models.

Future studies can address these limitations by examining students' and instructors' perspectives across different general education courses and disciplines to enhance the generalizability of the findings. A longitudinal study that tracks student progression and instructional practices over several years would provide insight into long-term patterns and shifts in teaching effectiveness. Additionally, further research should explore the impact of potential confounding factors, such as student preparedness, course design, and institutional support services, on student progression rates. Future studies might also examine instructor behaviors at a more granular level, such as specific communication techniques, responsiveness patterns, and frequency of personalized outreach. Incorporating instructor and student perspectives, particularly around perceived engagement and satisfaction, could offer a richer, more multidimensional understanding of what drives progression. Analyzing LMS interaction data may also help identify which instructional behaviors most strongly correlate with progression, offering actionable insights for training and faculty development. By building on these insights, future studies can better illuminate the instructional strategies most conducive to student success and help institutions support faculty development with evidence-based practices.

Acknowledgements

This study was supported by the 2024 Online Student Success Initiatives Fund at the University of Arizona Global Campus.

Biographies

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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