

U.S. VIRTUAL SCHOOL TRIAL PERIOD AND COURSE COMPLETION POLICY STUDY

ABIGAIL GONZALES, BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY
MICHAEL K. BARBOUR, WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY

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State of Virtual Schools in U.S.

- Growth in schools
 - 1997: 2 states with K12 online learning opportunities
 - 2008: 44 states (Watson, Gemin, & Ryan, 2008)
 - Majority virtual high school. Trend in K-8 arena.
- Growth in student population
 - 40,000 to 50,000 students enrolled in 2000 (Clark, 2001)
 - 1,030,000 students enrolled in 2007-2008. (Picciano & Seaman, 2009)
 - Primarily supplements brick-and-mortar schooling
 - Increasingly diverse student body

Challenges of virtual schooling

- Attrition is a significant problem (Carr, 2000; Lary, 2002; Rice, 2005)
- Researchers call for standardizing performance measures (Smith et al., 2005; Pape et al., 2006; Watson et al., 2006)
- Two studies examining policies (Pape et al., 2006; Watson & Ryan, 2007)
 - Findings: variety in policies adopted
 - Study weakness: Small sample size → 32 and 3 VS
- Trial periods can sift out weaker students (Ballas & Belyk, 2000; Cavanagh, Gillan, Bosnick, Hess, & Scott, 2005; McLeod, Hughes, Brown, Choi, & Maeda, 2005)
- Variance in policies make comparison of quality indicator meaningless.

Policies Affecting VS Attrition Rates

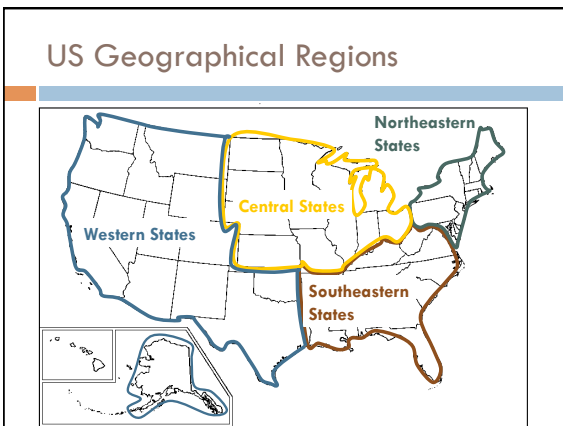
- When do we count students?
 - Trial Period Policy: period of time where student withdraws with no penalty.
 - Begin counting at date of enrollment? After 4 weeks? When submit first assignment?
- How do we count students in retention stats?
 - Course Completion Policy: $\frac{\# \text{ students completing course}}{\# \text{ students started course}}$
 - Who counts as "completing". Passing grade? Failing grade? Remains in course?

Research Questions

1. What is the variation in trial period policies in US?
 - Variability across types schools & geographic regions
2. What is the variation in how US virtual schools define course completions?
 - Variability across types schools & geographic regions

Methods

- Sample
 - 159 US schools
 - Schools listed in
 - iNACOL's Online Learning Clearinghouse List '07
 - State-led schools in *Keeping Pace w/ K12 Online Learning* (Watson, 2007)
- Survey Study
 - 3-question email survey w/ introduction, purpose
 - Presence of trial period
 - Length of trial period in days
 - Definition of successful course completion

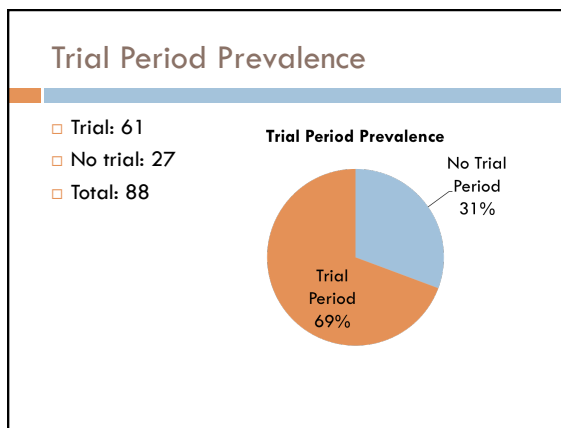


Representativeness by Region

Region	Sample	Sample %	Population	Population %
Central States	23	26.1	41	25.5
Northeastern States	8	9.1	18	11.2
Southeastern States	20	22.7	33	20.5
Western States	37	42	67	41.6
Total	88		159	

Responses by School Type

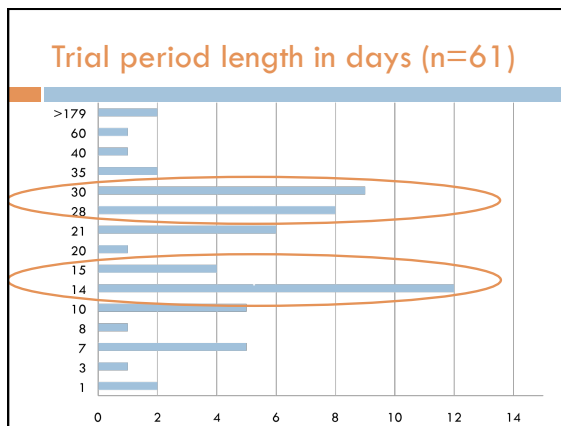
School type	Sample	Sample %	Population	Population %
Cyber Charter	16	18.2	34	21.1
For Profit	1	1.1	9	5.6
Multi-district	7	8.0	11	6.8
Private	13	14.8	21	13
Single-district	26	29.5	49	30.4
State – led	17	19.3	24	14.9
University – led	8	9.1	11	6.8
Totals	88		159	



Trail Period Length in Days

- Range: 1-185
- Mean: 19.59*
- Instances where **event** marked end of trial period

*w/o extreme outliers



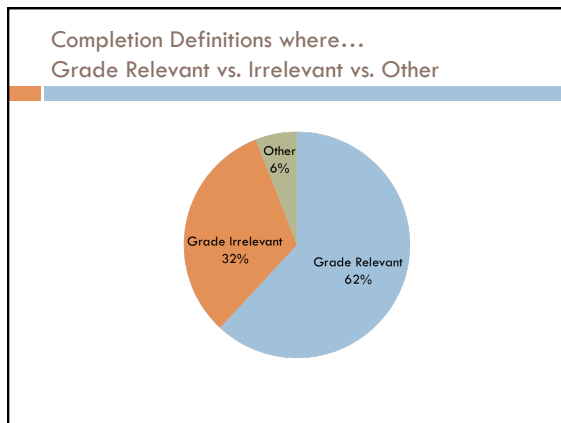
Trial period length variations by...

School type:

- Sig. @ $p=.05$ $df(5)$ $f3.909$
 - ▣ Differences: Private school vs. state-led, cyber charters, and single-district
 - ▣ Private schools had shorter trial periods compared to other schools

Geographical region:

- No significant difference



Course Completion Definitions where... Grade is Relevant

Definitions	US	US %
Pass the course (60%)	38	44.2
Pass course & final	2	2.3
Pass w/ \geq D-/64%	1	1.2
Pass w/ \geq C-/70%	6	7
Pass w/ \geq B-/80%	4	4.7
Pass w/ \geq A-/90%	1	1.2
Totals	52	60.6%

Course Completion Definitions where... Grade is Irrelevant

Definitions	US	US %
Remain in course	16	18.6
Complete all/majority of coursework	11	12.8
Totals	27	31.4%

Course Completion Definitions where... Other

Definitions	US	US %
Mastery not defined by grade	1	1.2
Individual schools define completion	4	4.7
Totals	5	5.9%

Course completion variations by...

School type:

- No significant difference

Geographical region:

- No significant difference

Findings Summary

Trial Period Presence

- Prevalent practice ~70%
- Supports Watson & Ryan 2007 survey of 32 VS with ~66%

Trial Period Length

- Average length ~ 20 days
- Most common lengths: 2 and 4 weeks
 - ▣ Supports Watson & Ryan 2007 findings
- Regional differences: Not sig.
- School type: Sig. - private schools

Findings Summary

Course completion definitions

- Wide variation between and within groups
 - ▣ Remain in course

Future Research

- Student characteristics, experience, and reason for dropping out during trial period duration
- Comparison study with Canadian trial period and course completion policies

Implications

- Need common metrics for calculating attrition
 - ▣ Best if same as bricks-and-mortar schools
- Gather data for internal and external reporting
 - ▣ Internal = Institutional metrics
 - ▣ External = Standardized metrics
- Determining metric easier since geography and school type factor little



Michael K. Barbour

Assistant Professor
 Wayne State University - Detroit, MI
 mkbarbour@gmail.com
<http://www.michaelbarbour.com>