The Relationship Between Reading Skills and the Retention of College Students

ANCORA EDUCATION AND SMARTERSERVICES

As reported in The Huffington Post, "new research across many countries is showing that the best predictor of future education achievement and life success is reading ability." While much of that article pertains to reading at the elementary and secondary levels, Russ Finnie and Richard Muller of the University of Ottawa concluded their research by stating, "the largest determinant of university participation is the score on the reading portion of the PISA."

Ancora Education has been serving students through technical, skills-based training since 2013, and has become an industry leader in education. Traditionally learners who select a technical education may not have participated in "college prep" high school programs and as such may not score as highly on standardized tests. Because of this dynamic dimension of their learners, Ancora Education was interested in knowing the relationship between reading skills and academic persistence among its students.

Ancora Education has been utilizing the SmarterMeasure Learning Readiness Indicator since 2015 as a tool to assist incoming students in recognizing their strengths and opportunities for growth. The assessment measures non-cognitive attributes as well as academic and technical skills. One of the scales measured by the assessment is Reading Rate and Recall. To date, over 167,000 SmarterMeasure assessments have been taken from Ancora Education schools.

Stephanie Nadeja serves as the Manager of Academic Records at Ancora Education. As she was preparing for an accreditation visit by the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges, she mined student performance and persistence data to identify a variable that was indicative of a student's likelihood to persist. For this analysis she selected data from 52 students from the on-ground Augusta, GA campus. The students selected were enrolled in the Medical Clinical Assisting or Associate of Science in Business Administration programs.

As indicated in the table below, she noted a strong relationship between scores on the Reading Rate and Recall scale of the SmarterMeasure Learning Readiness Indicator and the average number of academic credits earned.

SmarterMeasure Scale Scores Below 70%	# of Students in Category	Average # of Credits Earned	Average of Reading Recall	Average of Reading Rate (WPM)	Reading Rate Comment
1	3	24	83%	128	Normal Rate
2	5	37	74%	165	Normal Rate
3	6	35	53%	946	Scanned
4	5	32	52%	205	May Struggle
5	8	21	58%	187	May Struggle
6	6	26	56%	1191	Scanned
7	5	58	48%	237	May Struggle
8	6	9	46%	3216	Scanned
9	3	29	40%	747	Scanned
10	3	4	46%	3566	Scanned
11	2	10	25%	3424	Scanned
TOTAL	52	27	54.62	1092	

The graph below illustrates from this data that the more SmarterMeasure scales that the student scored a 70% or lower on which indicates an undesirable level of readiness (X axis), that their reading recall declines as well as typically their number of credit hours completed.

Credits Earned and Reading Recall by Scales Below 70%
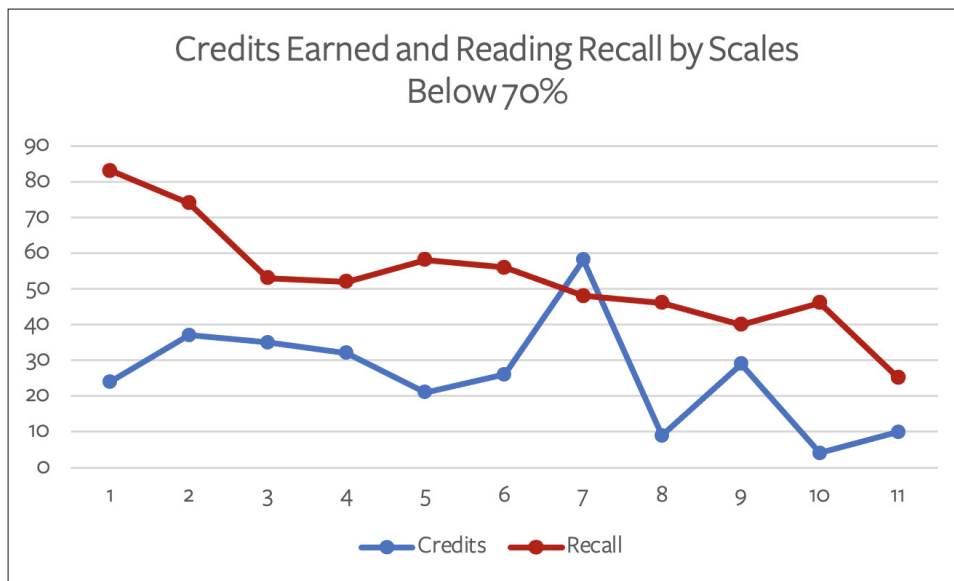
It is relevant to note that the Reading Recall scale of the SmarterMeasure Learning Readiness Indicator is designed not to quantify prior content knowledge, but comprehension of a passage recently read. To achieve this the topics of the reading passages are about obscure topics about which most test takers have little prior knowledge. The assessment then asks questions about the passage such as "What was the main topic?" "What was not mentioned in the passage?" "What is the sequence of events in the passage?" etc. This structure makes it difficult for a person to "game the assessment" by taking the assessment without reading the passage.

Also, of significance in understanding this data is the fact that the average adult reading speed when reading academic content for comprehension is around 250 words per minute. Test takers whose reading rate was substantially higher are not demonstrating excellent reading speed but are indeed just skimming or skipping the reading section. This behavioral factor is telling in and of itself in that it is indicative of a learner who self-selects short cuts to assignment completion.

Dr. Mac Adkins, Founder and Chief Academic Officer for SmarterServices, commented that this information is compelling, especially for students at technical schools whose prior academic backgrounds may not have equipped them with the reading skills needed for persistence and success in a collegiate program. Schools are encouraged to evaluate a learner's reading abilities early in the learner experience and if deficiencies in reading are noted, remediation and support should be immediately offered.

Stephanie Nadeja added that of these students the most common reason (48%) for withdrawal is failure to attend in-class sessions. She observed that poor performance on a reading skills assessment is typically indicative of a student who may quickly become so frustrated by the collegiate learning experience that they soon withdraw. It is imperative that students be assessed at the beginning of their program with support being immediately provided to hopefully avoid this early frustration level thereby fostering student retention.

Miller-Motte College campus of Ancora Education in Augusta, GA opened in 2010, and has the largest population of the Miller-Motte College family of campuses with over 350 active students. For more than a century, Miller-Motte College has committed itself to educating students in healthcare, business, technology, protective services, education, and skilled trades careers. Eleven Miller-Motte College campuses can be found across North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, and Oklahoma, as well as fully online programs offered through our Chattanooga, TN campus, accessible nationwide. Miller-Motte College graduates also have access to career assistance including guidance from our Career Services teams, resume building, workshops, and more. Learn more at