

# Chapter 30

## If You Build It, They Will Come: Create Virtual Student Organizations

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### ABSTRACT

*Students attending traditional or online universities will benefit from membership in a virtual club. This chapter provides specific information about tools used to create, administer, and motivate participation in virtual college clubs. To enhance the club experience, suggestions are offered for creating interactive clubrooms, utilizing specific social media tools, and providing unique club events all as a virtual experience. A case study is included to demonstrate how students of a major online university participate in virtual club events. Results of this case study indicate a correlation between students who can easily access club tools and events and participation. Further, students who participate in events report greater satisfaction with their overall university experience.*

### INTRODUCTION

Recent studies and articles focus on the building of strong online learning communities in the classroom. Most of these works describe strategies for creating active learning experiences. Further, much current research explores the use of social media as a communication tool for classrooms and by extension, student organizations. However, few works suggest best practice strategies for the development and growth of virtual online student organizations. These concepts will be discussed through a review of the research literature, including a case study from one large online virtual student organization.

This chapter will introduce readers to best practices in the use of social media for creating a community that transcends classroom borders. The information can be used as a guide for creating new, or strengthening existent organizations. The specific sub-sections will provide the reader with information related to: components of online student organizations, use of social media as communication and retention tool, practical guide to types of social media tools, online security considerations, best practice strategies, and the future of virtual student organizations.

Creating strong student organizations has been shown to increase retention, build community in a department, and strengthen student and faculty

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morale (Smart & Cappel, 2006). Understanding how to bolster student participation by offering easy to access synchronous and asynchronous activities is important to the creation of a strong organization. The sections of the chapter will provide specific strategies to do this.

## **BACKGROUND**

With the advent of online learning, students and their professors worked together to create learning communities in their classrooms. Most universities grappled with the issue of how to create authentic learning experiences in the abstract of virtual classrooms (Smart & Cappel, 2006). These universities adopted a standard classroom structure that mimicked traditional classrooms. The structure of these classrooms included tools for collaborative learning such as discussion board, live chat areas, and areas for document storage (Zhu, 2012). Most universities that offer distance-learning classes purchase platform services from virtual learning companies who provide the framework for the classroom shells. The arrangement of the components is selected and supported by these companies. Therefore, there is not much opportunity for rearranging course structure. Over time, online students and faculty gained comfort interacting within these conceptual spaces in the classroom despite their lack of control over the creation of it (Zhu, Valcke, & Schellens, 2008).

With the expanded use of virtual classes and the inception of online universities, more students warmed to the idea of creating a virtual, academic life. Many students developed relationships with their classmates based solely on virtual interaction opening new possibilities for collaboration (Smith, Coldwell, Smith, & Murphy, 2005). Like pioneers in a new world, college officials studied and proposed tweaks to the online format and course delivery (Veerman & Veldhuis, 2001). The goal was to create interactive experiences that felt

similar to those of a traditional university. Most officials found that student and faculty satisfaction increased with the implementation of innovations that created a sense of personal control in the virtual environment (Santhanam, Sasidharan, & Webster, 2008). These innovations enhanced the student's ability to access synchronous (e.g. live lecture) and asynchronous features of the class (e.g. discussion board). Popularity with online learning grew rapidly as more adults living outside major metropolitan areas enrolled in virtual classes and major universities embraced the cheaper delivery of virtual classes.

Students attending online universities expressed interest in participating in traditional college experiences similar to the ones offered by traditional universities. University officials in the early days of online learning struggled to meet the challenge. The obstacles were in creating a virtual space that could be monitored by school officials and accessible to members, recruiting and maintaining membership, and offering worthwhile activities (Santhanam et al., 2008). Membership in virtual clubs was mostly restricted to the most tech savvy and enthusiastic students.

As classroom platform technologies advanced, officials were able to create classroom shells for club members to use. Still, membership was low as many students struggled to balance family, work, and school responsibilities. Other problems related to accessibility. Many students used dial-up modems to connect to class. Students did not have much free time to wait for additional classrooms to load. Due to these early restrictive connection technologies, students did not actively participate in clubs mostly due to the necessary additional time that it took to participate.

It was not until 2008, when many students traded phone internet access for cable and broadband internet access, that clubs reported increased memberships. Around this time, social media sites grew in popularity helping to train students to think of virtual reality as a social gathering place. With the emergence of these sites and new

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