

Chapter 10

Out of Isolation: Building Online Higher Education Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Having a supportive community in graduate school is a key element that increases the probability of a student's success in their program. Online learning can often feel very isolating both for students and faculty. In a 1:1 teaching model that offers more personalized feedback to students, students can spend significant time in their studies without communication with other faculty, students or school administrators. Such isolation can inhibit the development of a supportive community. In this chapter, we will explore how a graduate school initiated a transition in their culture from one of isolation to one of community by increasing faculty and students' ability to engage and communicate to each other beyond their courses. We will review the strategies they implemented, the challenges they faced, the successes they saw, how they reviewed their progress and how they plan to use their initial work as a foundation for growing a more engaged graduate culture out of isolation and into community.

INTRODUCTION

Having a supportive community in graduate school is a key element that increases the probability of a student's success in their program (Almeda, 2014; Bain, Fedynich, & Knight, 2010). Today many graduate students seek out online graduate opportunities due to their need to juggle their academic dreams with work, family, community and financial responsibilities. Online learning can often feel very isolating both for students and faculty (Cereijo, Young, & Wilhelm, 2001; McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). Students that feel isolated or disengaged often want to leave school (Allen & Smith, 2008; Harms, Roberts, & Winter, 2006; Lundquist, Spalding, & Landrum, 2002). At a fully online graduate school in the west-

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ern US with a one to one learning model, as the university leadership began to look at ways to support student to student communication they realized that they needed to do more than just provide students with a technology to connect to each other. They needed to create a way for students to have a sense of community and connection that could support their success in their programs. Socio-cultural theories of learning (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978, 1987) view the interactions of individuals in social environments as essential to the construction of knowledge. With that in mind, the university launched a university community, The Commons, in 2014. In this chapter the authors will explore how this institution initiated a transition in their culture from one of isolation to one of community by increasing faculty and students' ability to engage and communicate with each other. The authors will review the strategies implemented, the challenges faced, the successes they have seen, how they reviewed progress and how they plan to use initial work as a foundation for growing a more engaged graduate culture.

When students find their school environment to be supportive and caring, they are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward themselves and prosocial attitudes and behaviors toward others (Schaps, Battistich, & Solomon, 1997). Much of the available research shows that supportive schools foster these positive outcomes by promoting students' sense of "connectedness" (Resnick et al., 1997), "belongingness" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), or "community" (Schaps, Battistich, & Solomon, 1997).

Many students may feel alone or isolated in an online environment (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Daugherty and Funke (1998) indicated that this issue of isolation is an important consideration for student satisfaction with online courses. Research by The Higher Education Academy (Park, 2008 p. 16) found that 22% of distance learning students mentioned 'the risk of feeling isolated' as a challenge, reflecting findings that personal interaction is important for student learning. This issue is also raised by many other researchers as well (Barrett & Lally, 2000; Dickey, 2004; Hartley et al., 2001; Lorenzetti, 2005; Rovai, Ponton, Wighting, & Baker, 2007; Wegner et al., 1999).

BACKGROUND

In 2012 the leadership within a fully online graduate school in the western US explored the possibility of developing a virtual space where students and faculty could come together and support each other academically. Much of the initial focus on this exploration was to find a technology to support their vision. They acquired a platform they felt comfortable moving forward with, which they named The Commons. This platform is an internal community-based platform that enables students and faculty to share resources and support with each other outside of the course room. It is an open space where any student, faculty or team member can initiate a conversation, post a question, or share a resource. As an online university with a 1:1 learning model, students and faculty do not bump into each other in the halls or see each other during lectures. According to Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2006), engagement with peers and faculty is essential to student success. This new community provided the students, faculty, and team members an opportunity to connect and engage virtually outside the course room.

Due to multiple projects occurring at the university, there was a minimal amount of bandwidth to conduct a full implementation of the Commons. The Commons Steering Committee proposed a soft launch of the Commons to start. The rationale was that this soft launch could:

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