

Chapter 93

Developing a Sense of Community Through Engaging Platforms in Support of Online Graduate Students Socialization

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ABSTRACT

Graduate schools often operate in a decentralized community due to the diversity of disciplines and needs within; as such, the success of graduate students and their involvement are then left to the purview of the colleges and programs. However, we know that collaboration with programs and other campus departments are important in developing a sense of community for students in support of student success, retention, and graduation. Yet, the availability of student resources that fosters and supports student academic and professional socialization which are evident in traditional graduate programs are not always reciprocated in online programs. In this chapter, the author will draw from the theories of socialization, community of inquiry (COI) and the equivalency theory to create a sense of community for successfully engaging and preparing students in online graduate programs for their professional roles post-graduation.

INTRODUCTION (MISSION AND CONCERNS)

Online Learning Platforms has become a staple in the delivery of instruction in higher education. However, in 2014, of the 5 million plus students taking classes online (Simonson, Smaldino & Zvacek, 2015) only 966,307 (Allen and Seaman & 2016) of that student population were graduate learners. The disparities in the gap between undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in online programs are partly due to the hands-on approach of research that regulates graduate pedagogy. More institutions are focused on developing online programs and courses due to the ability of online programs to reach a broader range of students (Leader-Janssen, Nordness, Swain, & Hagaman, 2016) and the changing demographics in which adult

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learners includes more than 60% of the student population. In a graduate school context, adult learners often called nontraditional students are individuals that breaks from undergraduate studies and does not enter into graduate programs directly following the completion of their undergraduate studies (UMBC, 2015). This new student population is seeking more online classes and programs because of the flexibility that online learning provides (Leader-Janssen et al., 2016; Bollinger & Martindale, 2004; Rekkedal & Qvist-Eriksen, 2004) as they navigate personal, professional and academic roles and responsibilities.

As institutions aim to create more (graduate) programs and courses within their curriculum, it is equally important to ensure that resources are available to support the online students' academic and professional socialization. Though adult learners bring a wealth of knowledge to the classroom, these programs should still facilitate opportunities for social interactions, and academic rigor that is parallel to the standards of the traditional classroom (Leader-Janssen et al., 2016). Involvement and participation can include academic, social, and political characteristics, but the more involved a student is, even at the graduate level the more likely that student is to succeed. Such concepts mirror the ideals of the equivalency theory as developed by Simonson, Smaldino & Zvacek, (2015).

While the learning outcomes for graduate students are not clearly defined, are the same across disciplines (Gardner & Barnes, 2007), and are not clearly defined by classification (Masters, & Doctoral), the consensus is that graduate students, specifically, doctoral learners should have developed mastery in the following areas "self-awareness, advanced communication skills, flexibility, team-building, and problem-solving" (Cleveland-Innes & Ally, 2007; Gauvreau, Hurst, Cleveland-Innes, & Hawranik, 2016). Among other skills are "professionalism and work ethic, oral and written communication, collaboration and teamwork, and critical thinking and problem-solving, along with innovative and entrepreneurial thinking and the ability to contribute to multidisciplinary teams" (Council of Graduate Schools and Educational Testing Service, 2012; Gauvreau, Hurst, Cleveland-Innes, & Hawranik, 2016). To this end, graduate curriculum (regardless of its delivery) should include opportunities for students to develop their skills both in and outside of the online classroom.

The author proposes that the creation of engaging platforms can be accomplished in both a social and academic context which considers the Community of Inquiry (COI) theory. COI suggest that learning is community-based and ensues three tenants, societal, instruction, and cognitive existences (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). This platform also adapts the constructs of the equivalency theory, the theory of socialization and the hybrid learning model in higher education to create the Socialization Theory of Equivalency & Partnerships (StEP) in support of online graduate student success both academically and professionally.

Chapter Outline

The remaining sections of this chapter will include a thorough analysis of the COI theory, equivalency theory, academic and workplace socialization, and what is meant by developing a sense of community for graduate students in online programs. The author will also review the theory of Andragogy and Heutagogy as it relates to creating engaging platforms for students in online programs. Next, the author will discuss stratagems for creating buy-in for faculty and students in these endeavors. The chapter will conclude with a conceptual framework that will detail what is working in traditional programs and how those items can be used in the online learning environment to ensure that online learners are provided with opportunities for academic and professional socialization that is comparable to that of the traditional learner.

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