

Chapter 101

Cultivating the Online Graduate Student Experience: Considerations for Creating Co-Curricular Opportunities

Allie Goldstein

The Pennsylvania State University, USA

Karen Paulson

The Pennsylvania State University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents recommendations for creating co-curricular engagement opportunities for online graduate students with evidence and examples drawn from both research and practice. Examples of successes and challenges from a leading online master's program are explored that ultimately led to the creation of multiple events including advising intake sessions, social opportunities, professional development experiences, and a virtual commencement. Four key considerations are provided to those interested in advancing new initiatives: know your audience and your goals, know your time and capacity restraints, consider partners and/or collaborators, and do not be afraid to fail.

INTRODUCTION

SETTING THE STAGE: WHAT COMPRISES ONLINE GRADUATE CO-CURRICULAR OPPORTUNITIES

Now more than ever, those engaged in educating graduate students should become increasingly focused on online education and emerging technologies. Enrollments in online education have continued to steadily rise, whereas residential enrollments have plateaued and even decreased. The historically high enrollments of graduate students in online education (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012) and their identities as non-traditional students warrant consideration of the following questions: what does research explain

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about online graduate students? Are there ways in which program coordinators, faculty, and staff can help to facilitate engagement and connection for online graduate students? In practice, what does it look like to create these engagement opportunities?

The introduction to this chapter was written at a time preceding COVID-19, a catastrophic and historic event that further propelled institutions to consider, and consider quickly, the ways in which they could use technology to innovate and reach students. Educational systems at all levels across the globe were required to adapt and offer educational experiences without in-person contact, which brought about additional questions to which answers are still being explored. This context is important because this chapter focuses primarily on ways to create co-curricular experiences for graduate students pre-COVID-19, yet, the authors also acknowledge the urgency of what is shared within this volume and its potential benefit for moments that require fast thinking and quick adaptation. As the stories shared in this chapter will indicate, engaging online students requires thought, but it also requires experimentation and taking that first initial step to overcome the activation energy needed.

This chapter opens with a brief introduction to the authors and a broad review of the history of online education, followed by an overview of the literature pertaining to graduate enrollments and the online student experience; and concludes with examples of online initiatives related to community building and engagement in graduate education. This chapter will be organized to first set the stage and provide background on graduate students in online education, and then to discuss the authors' experience working with graduate students and how their choice to study online and their identities (as family members, adult learners, full-time employees, etc.) impact the extent to which they engage with and utilize in class and out of class offerings.

INTRODUCTION TO THE AUTHORS

Imagine for a moment the perspective of an individual who just received a letter inviting them to attend their top choice institution for graduate school online. At the bottom of the letter, the soon-to-be-student notices a prompt with next steps: set up a "face-to-face" meeting online with their academic adviser, who is one of two faculty members that work solely with the online students in their future program. Several disparate thoughts likely cross this individual's mind, including: "*but I chose to study online... why do I have to have a face-to-face meeting!?*" or "*Why did I choose to study online again? In addition to having been out of school for years, I am rusty at best with technology. What if I can't get my computer properly running for our meeting?*" or maybe, just maybe, the new student thinks, "*I am SO excited for this journey to begin.*" Regardless of which scenario goes through someone's mind, this moment marks a first moment as an online graduate student and the beginning of an experience that can be as affirming and as connected as what one might expect from a residential graduate program.

The authors of this chapter are two full-time faculty members for a leading higher education online master's program at a Research I institution with resources dedicated to supporting online students and growing online education. In particular, this program is one that embraces change and innovation, regularly looking for new ways to enhance the student experience both inside and outside of class. This program is relatively young in comparison to other residential or online higher education programs -- having only been around for about half a decade -- meaning that there does not yet exist a proverbial "wheel" to reinvent and that nearly every decision marks an opportunity to expand offerings and build the program. Due to the structure and organization of the program, the authors wear multiple hats (as

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