

Chapter 13

Beyond the Books: Building Community and Promoting Student Retention in Online Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

Retention of online students is a topic of special interest in higher education. Research shows that the highest percentage of students failing or withdrawing from classes occurs the first term. There is no panacea to retaining and motivating online students. A collaborative effort by instructors, administrators, and students is needed to promote student success the first term and beyond. Building community involves fostering relationships grounded in common interests and is critical to academic success and student retention. Student activities such as clubs and organizations create a bond between student and the institution. This case study will discuss strategies for retaining and motivating online students. Topics include: curriculum initiatives, student mentoring and peer coaching, academic services for poor-performing students, community building through online student activities and websites, promotion of socialization while learning at a distance, and ideas for working with faculty on promoting student success from admissions to graduation.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The virtual university described in this case, which was formed from three existing colleges, was founded in 1937. In November 2000, the name of the College was changed and became a University in 2004. The University offers online master's, bachelor's, and associate's degrees, as well as certificate

programs. Graduates receive comprehensive education through disciplined, professional programs of instruction.

The University was founded to provide professional business training and has achieved this objective for over 70 years by keeping abreast of employment demands, employer needs, teaching methods, and the use of various educational resources and industry-standard technology and equipment.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61520-909-5.ch013

As stated in the University catalog, the University recognizes the worth and dignity of all people and is sensitive to the diversity of cultural and ethnic backgrounds represented in its student population. All students are encouraged to reach their potential within the framework of their individual needs, interests, and capabilities. The University employs instructional methods based on adult learning theory and is committed to the development of each student's intellectual, analytical, and critical thinking abilities. Teaching techniques encourage active student participation and may include group discussions and projects, laboratory work, simulations, demonstrations, field trips, guest speakers, and lectures.

The University catalog states that a strong emphasis is placed on ethics, accountability, professionalism, and the individual's commitment to pursuing lifelong personal and professional development. The University helps students reach their educational goals by providing them with the communication skills necessary to work successfully with clients and other professionals, offering courses that prepare them to successfully participate in society, equipping them with the business knowledge necessary to succeed in the "real world," and encouraging them to become involved in professional organizations that will promote their learning and professional skills.

As stated in the University catalog, the University's online platform is supported by a large farm of Web servers configured redundantly to generally assure uninterrupted, around-the-clock operation. Degree program and certificate courses are taught by qualified professors and administered by a unique high-performance, multi-user database management system. The attractively designed class pages encourage student involvement and interaction, and the system facilitates text-based class discussions based on professor commentaries, readings, Web field trips, and other assignments.

CASE DESCRIPTION

Technology Concerns

The major technology concerns are related to incorporating new media as a means for promoting student retention through community building activities. Use of podcasts, interactive presentations, and other collaborative tools such as Facebook and Twitter would allow additional means of communication for students not involved directly in a specific club or organization.

Emerging technologies that should be considered for this case include online collaborative spaces, mobile devices, and social networking tools. Webware suites such as Zoho Office (www.zoho.com) and Google Docs (www.Google.com) provide a way to offer collaborative content without software installation. Social networks such as Ning (www.ning.com) provide opportunities to share resources, exchange information, and provide an opportunity for socialization beyond the boundaries of the online classroom.

While a number of new media options exist, the challenge lies in training students, faculty, and student advisors on using the technology. Additionally, since the majority of the student population is adult learners, ease and promotion of use needs to occur.

Technology Components

At the present time, the major form of technology use for communicating in the student clubs and organizations is through the online platform. A separate "course" or student community site, has been established for each club and organization. Included in the student community site are: an announcement section for posting information and announcing upcoming events, an asynchronous discussion board area that allows discussion with other members, a live chat feature for hosting student-led meetings, and information on the organization, current topics, and careers in the discipline.

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