
It Takes a Virtual Community: Promoting Collaboration Through Student Activities

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Abstract

Distance education provides many nontraditional students with the opportunity to pursue a college education not possible through traditional brick and mortar education. Although not meeting face-to-face, student activities help promote a stronger connection between the classroom and university community. This paper will discuss strategies for developing a sense of student community at a distance. Topics include: the role of professional and student organizations in building community; academic coaching and courses for at-risk students; community building through student websites; use of Second Life for promoting student leadership and collaborative activities.

Introduction

Community involves building relationships built on 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. Instructors can also promote a collaborative learning experience by being mindful of individual student strengths and weaknesses and channeling these traits to transform an online classroom from a passive receptor of information to an environment that promotes involvement and learning from all members.

Student Organizations

Although students are at a distance, there are numerous student organizations that can be implemented based on interest and application to the degree programs. Belonging to a student organization promotes leadership through officer positions, committee membership, and event planning. Student organizations also create a bond with students having similar interests and strengths. Meetings for student activities can be held via teleconference or in a student community classroom via live chat. The student community classrooms at Kaplan provide a space for students to engage in dialog through discussion threads; provide information through a resources section; post announcements for upcoming events; and allow students to hold meetings via live chat.

Kaplan University offers the following organizations for students:

- **Book Club:** Join your friends for discussions of bestselling books.
- **Mentoring Club:** Apply To Serve as a Student Mentor and help new students
- **OWLS Roost:** Join the Arts and Health Sciences Non-Traditional Students Club
- **ToastMasters:** Join a local chapter and improve your public speaking skills.
- **Kaplan Gazette:** Submit an article to the Kaplan Gazette—the Arts & Sciences student newsletter.
- **Walking Club:**
The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services challenges all to take steps toward improving

physical and mental health.

- **Women in Communications:**

This opportunity is open to select students majoring in Communication with an above average G.P.A. and demonstrated academic success in classes taken at Kaplan University.

- **Educators Club:**

Educational Paraprofessional and Early Childhood Development students meet with other program members to discuss relevant educational issues and share experiences.

- **Recipe Club:** KU Cooks! Share your favorite recipes.

- **Study Buddy:** We may be online, but we are not out of touch! Kaplan University's Study Buddy initiative puts students in near-by areas in touch with one another. Students can actually meet up or call other KU students in their local area. All information is shared using only the KU email addresses and no personal information is shared, unless the student reveals it to the study buddy.

- **Honors Society:** Kaplan University applauds the exceptional achievement of our academic scholars and supports many of the prestigious Honor Societies that recognize high academic achievement, including Alpha Beta Kappa, Golden Key and Sigma Beta Delta.

Academic Coaching and Student Mentoring

The goals of academic coaching is to provide intensive coaching and mentoring in a student's first two terms at Kaplan, with an effort to prepare students to be increasingly academically and personally self-sufficient, more adept at solving and preventing barriers to education, and to be better positioned for greater and consistent academic success as they move through the first two terms and into the remainder of the degree program. The ultimate measure of success will be demonstration of a higher retention rate of students into their third term than is presently the case.

The Coach has scheduled weekly conversations. Discussions center on the following areas:

- Learning about the student: motivations, goals, ambitions, barriers (real, perceived, and potential);
- Helping student navigate academic and other University-imposed expectations and deadlines. Devising time-management plans and other discipline-building tools and practices, as appropriate;
- Pre-empting barriers to progress through program, helping student to identify and implement solutions (ahead of time, as possible);
- Providing ongoing affirmations of student successes, as well as firm guidance in areas of low performance.

Ancillary communication is conducted via email or instant messenger, though it should only in exceptional circumstances (deployed troops, etc.) be a substitute for weekly phone conversations.

Student mentors also assist in building community through connecting peer-to-peer. Student mentors are volunteers responsible for the following:

- Providing first-term students with the opportunity ask questions from a student who "has been through the process."
- Participating in new orientation training courses, foundations courses and live seminars.
- Offering tips for surviving and thriving the first-term, time management skills, study skills, organizational tips.

Curriculum Initiatives

Kaplan University offers support for at-risk students through a series of Foundations courses. The Foundations courses provide students with the opportunity to strengthen skills in writing, reading, and math prior to matriculation into their degree programs. Additionally, tutoring services are available through a math and writing center. At the Writing Center students can have a Live Chat with a tutor or can email questions to tutors and explore the reference library on topics such as the writing process, research, citation and plagiarism as well as writing mechanics. Students also have the option of submitting written papers for feedback before submitting them to professors for grading. A Math Center is also available for students to work with a live tutor. There are

also Mathematics Modules students can explore to read about topics such as fractions, exponents, algebraic expressions, equations with variables and more.

The Kaplan University Honors Program contributes to excellence in education by enriching and enhancing the degree programs of qualified students. The Honors Program emphasizes critical thinking, leadership, and communication skills in both professional and academic arenas. To this end, the Honors Program promotes intellectual and personal development through curricular and co-curricular initiatives. Ultimately, the Kaplan University Honors Program reflects the University's stated missions of commitment to general education, applied scholarship, and student-centered service and support.

Application to the Kaplan University Honors Program is voluntary and qualification is based on evidence of academic achievement and leadership potential. Kaplan University Program members neither stand above or apart from their fellow KU students. Instead, they have committed themselves to personal development and to assist other students by being leaders and models.

The emphasis of the Honors Program is on recognizing qualified students, encouraging them to reach their academic potential and to serve as institutional leaders.

Student Websites

Developing a student website provides students with an area for housing information ranging from career information to activities at the institution. Students can find interesting spotlights, feature articles and more information on clubs, conference calls and events at Kaplan University by going to the "Arts and Sciences" Community Site.

Resource Room

This is a "one-stop-shop" for all students to find valuable resources and program information throughout their time at Kaplan University. The following information is included in the Resource Room:

- Assistance/Directory
- Program Guide
- Academic Resources
- Information on the KU Community
- Career Information
- Graduation Information
- Referrals for Human Services

Second Life

Use of Second Life promotes community building through creating another means of student communication. Use of audio also creates a stronger connection between students. In Second Life, students can attend conferences on topics such as study skills, time management, and other academic and professional topics. Study sessions and tutoring can also occur via this format.

Roles of Online Instructors in Classroom Community Building

When examining ways the instructor may enhance classroom collaboration, a review of the elements of qualities of effective online learning and the role of the online instructor is in order. Quality online instruction is not modeled after the traditional face-to-face approach because delivery methods are so different. Swenson (2006) notes that teaching effectively online requires:

- Responding frequently to posts and emails
- Flexibility
- Background in information literacy, law, and ethics
- Understanding of special needs and disability issues vis-à-vis the web
- Ability to develop and implement student-centered activities
- Willingness and skill to be a facilitator and guide, not a lecturer
- Orientation toward collaboration, problem-based learning
- Encouraging and supportive
- Understanding of Bloom's taxonomy and how to encourage students to move from knowledge into high-level thinking skills

- Recognition that online necessitates more feedback and engagement with students than face-to-face (p.602).

Additional suggestions for building community in the classroom include:

- Build sense of community feel (class pictures/discussions)
- Remind students of graduation—offer to meet them there/socialize
- Encourage students to work together (in groups)
- Create a climate conducive to support and sharing...post pictures, encourage students to be social (after class time), share recipes, etc.
- Give away some of your authority...allow students to support one another or carry on discussions on topics
- Create class collage.

Reference

Swenson, P.W. (2006). Learning, Online. In English, F. Encyclopedia of Educational Leadership (2006). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

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