



Online and Onward: Fostering a Sense of Community Among Remote Learners

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The Problem

More than 2 million students will begin their first year at colleges and universities across the country this year — wide-eyed and eager to continue their education, cultivate meaningful connections, and ultimately, prepare themselves for promising career opportunities after graduation. As they transition into this new chapter, however, data shows that not all of these students will reach the milestones necessary to make their college journeys a success.

In fact, only 59% of undergraduates at four-year universities will earn a bachelor's degree within six years, and the rate is even lower for online programs. According to U.S. News & World Report, just 35% of students who entered an online bachelor's program earned their degree in six years.

There are a number of reasons why online students do not successfully progress to graduation. Many will struggle as they find themselves on a steep learning curve, figuring out how to navigate the same newfound academic responsibilities as their peers but without the structure and accountability a brick-and-mortar classroom often provides. And too often, students will tackle the challenges of financial hardships and other personal barriers alone, and do not have a campus of peers, professors, and counselors to leverage for their success.

Fortunately, there is a solution, one that has emerged as a powerful and proven tool to remedy many of these problems faced by online students: a holistic support and success team comprised of peers, advisors, coaches, and mentors.

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Strategy

In order to broaden opportunities for community and connection among online students, colleges and universities must rethink their existing programs and create more impactful ways to serve their digital communities. Below we'll explore three key strategies which have already demonstrated promise and have been proven to improve success rates for online learners.

Strategy #1: Create a hub-and-spoke model for all students

The hub-and-spoke model, so named for the centralized ability to connect with resources, has been found to be an effective method for harnessing the power and support of not just one advisor, coach or mentor, but an entire network — including alumni mentors, career center advisors, faculty advisors, peer mentors, teaching assistants, and tutors. In other words, the best way to support students is to make them the center (or the hub), so they can drive their own experience.

Having a strong and diverse community to tap into alleviates the time commitment and pressure for individual staff members, and also allows learners to strategically seek help based on their specific needs at different points in their journeys.

Strategy #2: Personalize based on needs, interests, and lifecycle

No two learners are exactly the same, so it stands to reason that online support services and programs need to be designed to accommodate multiple types of students, personalities, and needs. While there is clear and considerable consensus attached to one-on-one support, this traditional model is simply not scalable, feasible, or desirable for programs often already strapped for resources.

As technology continues to reshape how we communicate and build relationships with one another, the concept of flash mentoring (one-time mentoring where an individual can quickly find information for a specific task) has become particularly relevant and gained traction as an informal, low-pressure way for students to learn from others. The minimal commitment required becomes one of its primary draws, as there is little or no obligation to maintain or manage a relationship afterwards. This is not to say that one type of support such as mentoring is better than another. Rather, it's the opposite — student support systems should be personalized and customized to fit individual needs.

Strategy #3: Use data to measure impact and areas for improvement

The most fundamental way for any program to measure its impact or effectiveness is to look at the return on investment. The results might be centered on individual student outcomes such as graduation rates or career outcomes. For instance, if your goal is to increase student persistence, you could track data on two cohorts: one with an active support team and one without, and identify which types of relationships might be a predictor for long-term success.

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Conclusion

With more students demanding a meaningful return on investment in their post-collegiate careers, society facing a skilled worker shortage, and a burgeoning generation eager to learn online, the time has never been better for universities to invest in academic and social programs designed to motivate, support, and encourage both short and long-term success for online students throughout the college lifecycle.

Whether the goal is to enhance interpersonal skills, improve grades, cultivate career connections, or more, mentoring programs have a proven track record of engaging and uplifting students from all backgrounds and equipping them with the knowledge, confidence, and skills necessary to thrive during their online college experience.

