Fostering Community in an Online Program:
Lessons from Faculty, Students, Staff and Alumni
of a Masters Psychology Program

Meredith Wells Lepley, PhD & Steve Westberg, PhD
Elizabeth Yarbrough, Ella Shahjahanian, Julie Erazo, Tanya Thampipop
Masters of Science in Applied Psychology Program
University of Southern California
Objectives

1. Describe how USC’s Masters of Applied Psychology Program assessed community in our online program
2. Share ideas for fostering community in our online programs
3. Develop a “to-do” list for building community in your program
USC M.S. in Applied Psychology Program (MAPP)

- 110 online students
- 16-month program
- designed for working professionals
- combines psychology and business
- organizational & consumer psychology
Mission

To assess & strengthen sense of community in online program

2017 – a faculty task force created

Task force recruited 4 students
Research Questions

1. What are the hallmarks of a strong online learning community?

2. How satisfied are students & faculty with the sense of belonging they experience in Online MAPP?

3. How can Online MAPP increase sense of belonging?
Methods

**ONLINE SURVEY**
- 47 students participated in a 38-question online survey
- **Response rate: 39%**

**INTERVIEWS**
- 2 alumni participated in a 30-minute phone interview

**ONLINE SURVEY**
- 12 faculty members participated in a 37-question online survey
- **Response rate: 100%**

**INTERVIEWS**
- 3 faculty members participated in a 30-minute phone interview
- **Response rate: 75%**
### Interview and Survey Questions

#### Interview Topics

- Sense of Community
- Physical distance as a factor
- Connection
- Importance and Satisfaction of
  - Faculty
  - Staff
  - Student
  - Program
- Strengthening MAPP’s community

#### Online Survey Topics

- Sense of Community
- Sense of Belonging
- Connection
- Importance and Satisfaction of
  - Faculty
  - Staff
  - Student
  - Program
Research Questions

1. What are the hallmarks of a strong online learning community?

2. How satisfied are students & faculty with the sense of belonging they experience in Online MAPP?

3. How can Online MAPP increase sense of belonging?
What are the components of an ideal community? (Open-ended)

"A place to chat and share resources, tips, frustrations, and accomplishments"

"Safe"

"Supportive"

"No judgment"
What are the components of an ideal community?

(Open-ended)

Togetherness

“Support for good news or bad”

“Someone to turn to for advice”

Interaction in different ways

Sharing the same values & goals
What makes you feel most connected to MAPP?

Students (Check all that apply)

- Availability of Faculty and Staff: 77.80%
- Trojan pride/ school spirit: 55.60%
- Alumni Network: 48.90%
- Owning USC apparel and gear: 42.20%
- Interaction on FB, IG, Snap: 37.80%
- Visiting the campus: 33.30%
- Events (tailgates, mixers): 26.70%
- USC football: 20.00%
- Having family and friends who are USC: 17.80%
- Growing up as a USC Fan: 11.10%
- School Newsletters: 8.90%
- Other USC athletics: 2.20%
What makes you feel most connected to MAPP?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty/Staff (Check all that apply)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty &amp; Staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events (tailgate, mixers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trojan pride/ school spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visiting the campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Newsletters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expansive alumni network</td>
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<tr>
<td>Having family and friends who are USC fans</td>
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<tr>
<td>USC football</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Other USC athletics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owning USC apparel and gear</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When do you feel most connected to MAPP? (Open-ended)

- Live sessions
- Group projects
- Talking with students or professors outside of class
- Connecting with students or professors via social media
- Visiting campus
FACULTY/STAFF

When do you feel most connected to MAPP?

(Open-ended)

- Receiving emails from students
- Hearing about students’ success post-graduation
- Real-time communication with faculty
- Faculty retreat
- Hearing about work my faculty peers are doing
- Having multiple classes with the same students
The Insights

What are the hallmarks of a strong online learning community?

- Student - faculty relationship
- Support
- Frequent real-time interaction with classmates & faculty
Research Questions

1. What are the hallmarks of a strong online learning community?

2. How satisfied are students & faculty with the sense of belonging they experience in Online MAPP?

3. How can Online MAPP increase sense of belonging?
STUDENTS

“I feel like I belong in MAPP”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Items</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I feel like I belong in MAPP.</td>
<td>4.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have pride in being a Trojan at USC.</td>
<td>4.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is an environment of inclusion in MAPP.</td>
<td>3.89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**STUDENTS**

4.03

1 = Strongly disagree  to 5 = Strongly agree
FACULTY/STAFF

“I feel like I belong in MAPP”

“I make an important contribution to MAPP”
<table>
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<th>Survey Items</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I make an important contribution to MAPP.</td>
<td>4.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel like I belong in MAPP.</td>
<td>4.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have pride in being a Trojan at USC.</td>
<td>4.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.63

1 = Strongly disagree  to 5 = Strongly agree
Research Questions

1. What are the hallmarks of a strong online learning community?

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RECOMMENDATION #1

Increase inside classroom interaction - faculty

  Individual welcome emails

  Arrive to live classes early or stay late

  “Getting to know you” videos

  Individual, mid-semester live check-ins
RECOMMENDATION #2

Increase outside classroom interaction

Orientation

Social media
  Student only
  Faculty/staff only
  Mixed group

In-person events
  On-campus
  Regional
RECOMMENDATION #3

Increase career guidance for students
  Regular career panel discussions
  Guest speakers in class
RECOMMENDATION #4

Appoint students as “community ambassadors”
- Welcome new students
- Invite students to online social groups
- Coordinate events
- Assist with orientation day
- Continue community assessment
What Do You Think?
What community-building strategies have worked best for you or your online program?

Which are most easily implemented?

Which are most critical?
Action Planning

Jot down a quick action plan to implement some strategies to foster community in your program.
Contact Us

Meredith Wells Lepley, PhD  mlepley@usc.edu

Steve Westberg, PhD  westberg@usc.edu
Session Evaluations & Drawing

- Download and open OLC Conferences mobile app
- Navigate to specific session to evaluate
- Select “Evaluate Session” on session details screen (located under session type and track)
- Complete session evaluation*

*Each session evaluation completed (limited to one per session) = one contest entry

**Five (5) $25 gift cards** will be awarded to five (5) individuals
Must submit evals using the OLC Conferences mobile app or website