STUDENT CONNECTION:

What COVID-19 Taught Us About “Student Sense of Belonging” in Online Learning

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INTRODUCTIONS

Connection is the theme; so let’s connect!

• Please introduce yourself in the chat
• Name, position, university
• Poll – How many times per day have you said the word COVID in the past 8 months?
  • Include in chat room

Well… we’re going to keep saying it. However, hope and growth is the focus!
Student sense of belonging occurs when a student feels accepted, valued, and understood (Vaccaro et al., 2015; Goodenow, 1993; Peacock & Cowan, 2019).
EFFECTS

• Students feel a sense of belonging when:
  • Students feel that they are valued by the institution
  • Students experience pride in their institution
  • Students experience deep connections with other members of the institution

• Greater Academic Achievement:
  • Increased retention rates
  • Increased graduation rates
  • Higher academic performance

Sense of Belonging is important to online learning!

(Hoffman et al., 2002; Larkin et al., 2013; Laux et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2014)
WHAT HAPPENED AT TEXAS STATE?
TXST IS A PRIMARILY IN-PERSON CAMPUS WITH SOME ONLINE PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

Online Semesters Announced

• 3/12: Extended Spring Break, remote courses through April 12
• 3/20: All courses move online through Summer I
• 7/2: All courses move online through Summer II, Fall 2020 will have multiple learning options

Events and Travel Cancelled

• Any Study Abroad or Study in America travel program was cancelled
• All on-campus events were cancelled with little to no virtual replacement
• Focus was on institutional survival, student safety, and faculty preparedness

Students Needed Connection

• Distance and Extended Learning Student Advisory Committee created
• Students reported boredom, fear, loss of community, in-class engagement issues, accessibility issues
• University social media revealed students were in survival mode; they were missing the connection piece
AREAS OF CONCERN FOR CONNECTION

Traditional Connection Opportunities Were Lost

- Student orgs not meeting
- Athletic events cancelled
- Hangouts with friends stopped
- Faculty online engagement was “spotty”
- Commencement traditions cancelled
- Outdoor Rec and Campus Rec closed
HOW DID WE ADDRESS THIS?

CONNECTION ATTEMPTS CREATED

• “Missing You” Videos by Marketing
• Online student orientations
• Recreation Center created virtual classes and intramurals
• Student Involvement virtual hangout opportunities
• Virtual tours
• Virtual career fairs
• Mental health and wellness online workshops
WHAT DID WE LEARN?

Unveiling Where We Are At

• Campus Climate – mixed feelings
  • Some wanted to return, others wanted to stay home and appreciated TXST efforts

• Lack of online student connection practices prior to COVID

• Online students normally aren’t focused on at a university level (and usually not beyond academics)

• University as a whole must care about the holistic online student experience (Buy-In)
  • Collaboration is key!
WHAT YOU CAN TAKE-AWAY

• Students want connection and a sense of belonging
• We must bring the campus experience to our students
  • This will impact admissions, retention, and graduation
• Collaboration with other offices is needed
• Start Now
  • Build on COVID-19 Efforts
ENHANCING ONLINE STUDENT SENSE OF BELONGING

IDEAS TO IMPLEMENT

Utilize Online Events

• Provide virtual career fairs
• Special guest speakers “virtual pass”
• Study abroad fairs offered online – online students may be interested in Study Abroad too!

Create Student Connection Opportunities

• Work with Student Affairs to create opportunities for online students to meet other online students
• Encourage students to have online organizations for their programs
• Provide an online mentor program; seasoned online students mentoring new online students

Show University Commitment to Online Learners

• Provide in-depth orientations (get president, VP’s, and deans to make an appearance)
• Send “Thinking of You” or “Campus Updates” Videos that highlight the online learner is still on the forefront of the university’s actions and services
• Provide Swag items to online learners; let them know that they are still a part of the campus community
ACTIVITIES

Let’s brainstorm!

• Activity: Small Group Discussion – Best Practices/Ideas for Student Connection (10 min)

• Activity: Planning for Future Connection Attempts (10 min)
THANK YOU!

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