



Developing a Learning Community Through an Online
University's Community Engagement Platform: An
Analysis of the Experiences of Students and Faculty

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Volume 3, Issue 1 (2020)

Online learning is one of the most rapidly growing subsections of education and has become entrenched in business and higher education, offering access and opportunities to learners worldwide. As technology has improved and evolved, so have the means of delivering online education, and recent years have seen a massive proliferation of online experiences being offered by numerous prominent educational institutions and corporations. Present-day online education provides educational resources in various forms of media, supporting both real-time and asynchronous communication between learners and instructors and between diverse learners. Currently, a variety of delivery mechanisms, platforms, and learning management systems are in place to meet the demands of the online landscape. Distance learning courses are offered in conjunction with wholly Internet-based degree or certificate programs, as courses supporting otherwise traditional classroom-centered or place-based programs (these are considered blended or hybrid learning programs), and also as stand-alone fully online courses or programs. The size of online classes is also rapidly increasing with the advent of MOOCs (Massively Open Online Courses), which cater to thousands of participants at any one time. Learners can choose to take non-credit hour courses offered free of charge through MOOCs by a university without being enrolled in the university. Recently, some higher institutions in the United States have started offering MOOC courses for credit with stipulations that include enrolling in the university, attending meetings with the instructor, and requiring additional coursework.

As more institutions offer courses or entire programs online, researchers have been tracking the trends and patterns of higher education online education enrollment in the United States. Allen, Seaman, Poulin, and Straut (2016) found that 29% of higher education students take at least one distance course and that this number was growing. In 2016, approximately 31.6% of students took at least one online education course, and the trend toward growth in online enrollments had steadily increased, despite a decline in overall higher education enrollments, surpassing the growth of residential higher education programs (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018). In 2016 72% of public and 50% of private, nonprofit schools offered fully online programs (Xu & Xu, 2019). The National Center for Education Statistics IPEDS data shows that, in 2017, 3.1 million higher education students were enrolled in courses that were exclusively delivered via distance education across a variety of synchronous and asynchronous delivery technologies (NCES, 2019). Moreover, there is an increasing number of blended learning programs, which include a significant distance learning component. As the percentage of college students rises and access to broadband increases, online enrollments will undoubtedly follow suit (Learninghouse, 2019).

Literature Review

The Challenges of Online Learning

The emergence of online learning has changed the profile of learners, particularly within higher education. Higher education institutions now serve not only to full-time students who have recently graduated from high school but also to part-time mature students who bring their external commitments, including family and work and career responsibilities. Learners of today seek online educational opportunities for various reasons, including greater access, flexibility, and convenience (Sanford, Ross, Rosenbloom, & Singer, 2017). The flexibility and mobility of online learning make studying attractive, and learners can access education—even across borders—without having to interrupt their already active lives completely. Yet despite these benefits,

attrition remains an ongoing challenge in online programs (Berry, 2019). Together with the plethora of endorsement of distance education, comes the concern that something of educational value might be missing in the virtual environment. Working at a distance raises questions about the difficulties of isolation and motivation, with the sense of exclusion and detachment becoming potential barriers to learning (Bloomberg, 2005, 2006; 2007; Bloomberg & Grantham, 2018).

The Theory of Transactional Distance, developed by Moore (1997), explains the perceived “psychological and communication space” in the online learning environment, often causing students to participate minimally, disengage, or completely withdraw. This theory defines distance as pedagogical and social, rather than merely physical and geographical, and emphasizes the need for intentional structures that foster dialogue and collaborative learning. With the infrastructure of distance education being characterized by a clear separation in space and time of the majority of teaching and learning activities, distance education in the early years of its evolution was referred to as “disembodied learning” (Becket, 1998), and as a “pedagogy of (dis)location” (Edwards & Usher, 2000). These terms can still apply to the current online learning environment, if not intentionally and proactively addressed. While holding the promise of expanding the time and location boundaries of traditional education offerings, online learning thus gives rise to new constraints and raises questions about the difficulties of isolation and motivation for both students and instructors.

Student Engagement and Teaching Presence

Student engagement is a concept often discussed in educational literature. The construct of engagement is multidimensional and encompasses different aspects (behavioral, cognitive, and emotional), which operate together to reflect students’ quality of participation, commitment and motivation concerning their studies, and identification with school and school-related activities (Oqab, Huy, & Bing, 2016). Research has pointed to engagement as a critical predictor of student success (Baron & Corbin, 2012; Oblinger, 2014). Therefore, to mitigate the effects of transactional distance, it is incumbent upon course designers and instructors to intentionally and thoughtfully incorporate and implement strategies that will keep learners motivated and actively engaged (Bloomberg & Grantham, 2018). A central aspect to promoting student engagement, and in turn student success, is the sense of teaching presence (Bloomberg, 2005, 2006, 2007; Bloomberg & Grantham, 2018; Lehman & Conceicao, 2010). The implication is that instructors are visible, approachable, and available. As explained by Bloomberg and Grantham (2018), “presence refers to the instructor actively interacting with learners, and establishing and maintaining a collaborative and supportive working relationship. Through shared interaction, the instructor serves as a model for the discourse, and a learning facilitator” (p. 4). Teaching presence in the online education context also includes *student perceptions* of instructor involvement as a central factor, with higher levels of engagement leading to more profound satisfaction, higher levels of student achievement, and a greater likelihood of graduation (Oblinger, 2014).

Online Learning Communities

Creating strategic opportunities for students and faculty to connect informally and formally has the potential to foster a culture of inclusivity, connection, thereby developing a productive learning community. Developing learning communities has been at the heart of distance education

since its inception, and the challenge of fostering community remains a focal issue. Constructivist theories of learning, such as those of Dewey (1916, 1933), Vygotsky (1978) and Wenger (1998) proposed the interactions of individuals in social environments as essential to the construction of knowledge. According to Constructivism, when learners find their environment to be supportive and caring, they are more likely to develop a sense of “connectedness,” “belongingness,” or “community.” The notion of a learning community in the online environment is predicated on the value of connection and collaboration among students and instructors, where interaction and participation are ongoing, regular, and focused on shared goals (Bloomberg, 2005, 2006, 2007). Community begins with dialogue, reflection, and collaboration, and develops and evolves as members participate and interact (Bloomberg, 2006). Research repeatedly indicates that interaction and a sense of belonging significantly impacts motivation and success in online courses (Berry, 2017, 2019; Croxton, 2014; Moore 2014; Palloff & Pratt, 2005; Schwartz, Wiley, & Kaplan, 2016; Schwartz, Weiss & Wiley, 2018; Wang, Chen & Anderson, 2014). As Moore (2014) puts it, “community allows students to feel connected not only to their instructors and classmates but also to the content itself” (p. 20). Meaningful learner-to-learner interaction can take many forms and can serve as a support system, through sharing resources and collaborative work opportunities. Shared collaborative experiences allow learners and instructors to value the other’s perspectives, thoughts, and ideas, thereby learning with and from one another.

Fostering Social Belonging and a Sense of Community

In traditional classrooms, interactions occur mostly spontaneously. In the online environment, because of the distance, facilitation must be intentional. While learners will primarily be interacting with instructors, connections with classmates cannot be emphasized enough. This interaction, albeit informal, develop a sense of community and camaraderie, enhances engagement, increases persistence, and promotes deep learning (Bloomberg, 2006). To create a collaborative environment that encourages and fosters a community of learning, Riggs, and Linder (2016) explain that in the absence of physical space, an “architecture of engagement” must be intentionally created. When used wisely, interactive technologies can serve to foster meaningful connections, not only with the course content and with the instructor but also with peers. Bonds with fellow learners can lessen the sense of isolation and alienation, thereby deepening the learning experience. As such, the development of innovative practices to facilitate collaboration, nurture relationships, and build and community among geographically diverse faculty and students becomes a key component of successful online course design and delivery (Schwartz et al., 2016; Schwartz et al., 2018). Naturally, the ability to use technology to build teaching relationships and develop a sense of community and connectivity will depend on the learning management system available.

Northcentral University: The “Commons”

Northcentral University (NCU) is a fully online institution of higher education that has adopted a one-to-one teaching model. Each student progresses through their courses, interacting with an instructor, and learning by way of a pedagogical model called “Teaching through Engagement.” While NCU adopts a one-to-one teaching model, and there are no cohorts of students, our motto is that online learning should not be “alone learning.” Engagement involves the idea of being “present” for our students, which requires faculty to reimagine their role, moving

from a passive and quiet background presence or “lecturer” to become a more responsive and collaborative partner in the learning process. Being an engaged faculty member starts with understanding what engagement is and how to develop meaningful working relationships with students proactively. One of the most significant advantages of learning online is that if effectively managed, it has the potential to promote a culture of learning by offering learners the opportunity to become active participants in the overall learning experience. A primary goal, therefore, is to make the online learning environment optimally conducive to engagement and active participation.

In a one-to-one teaching model that offers personalized feedback, students can spend significant time in their studies with little or no communication with other faculty, students, or school administrators. Research consistently illustrates that the issue of isolation and disconnection is an essential consideration for student satisfaction with online courses and that such isolation inhibits the development of a supportive community. The University leadership began to look at ways to best support student communication and interaction. The realization that there was a need to do more than just provide students technological means to connect, the focus was on creating a way for students and faculty to develop a sense of community and connection within the learning experience itself that could support achievement and success.

In 2014, NCU instituted The Commons, a community engagement platform that provides students, faculty, and staff with the opportunity to connect virtually and support each other “outside the classroom.” By establishing the Commons, the University sought to initiate a transition in their culture from one of isolation to one of connectedness by increasing faculty and students' ability to engage and communicate with each other beyond their courses meaningfully. The Commons, created as a space for community interaction and engagement, has enhanced students' educational experience by creating a vibrant and dynamic learning community by providing a forum for learner-to-learner and learner-faculty interaction, improving collaborative learning experiences by connecting learners with others who have similar interests, or who are working on joint projects. Each of the University's Schools has appointed a Commons steward to lead the task of creating and facilitating forums and groups which promote meaningful interaction and offer relevant resources and support. Each of the Schools has also set up the community of practice groups where faculty and staff within specific specialization areas can meet virtually to discuss topics and issues of interest, and receive guidelines, support, and resources. Each of the community of practice groups has a faculty member who has volunteered to lead and monitor the group and facilitate group discussions.

Method

The Commons Engagement Evaluation Study

In 2017, the entire NCU Community was invited to participate in the Commons Engagement Survey to assess how and to what extent the Commons was serving the purpose of providing a platform for meaningful interaction and connections. The objective was to uncover community engagement preferences and more comprehensively understand students' and faculty members' experiences of using the Commons as a means to find and provide support and resources to each other. The findings of the Community Engagement Evaluation Study illustrate how the

Commons contributes to establishing and maintaining ongoing pathways to counteract isolation and disengagement in the online environment.

Procedure

All Northcentral University community members, including students and faculty in all of the Schools, received an email invitation with an embedded link to the survey instrument and several subsequent reminders. This research project includes several stages of qualitative and quantitative analysis. The Northcentral University Office of Institutional Research conducted a review of the raw data for all the Schools. Reports presented results of the quantitative response items, including those with response scales such as agreement, frequency, and multiple response items requesting reports for activities and participation factors. Data for School of Education student responses were further analyzed and reported by Linda Bloomberg, who has served as Commons Steward for the School of Education. The School of Education students constituted 36% of the total student population in 2017. The survey's findings uncovered community engagement preferences of students and faculty, enabling a better understanding of the experience of using the Commons as a means to engage meaningfully in the learning experience and receive support and resources. The findings that emerged helped identify ways to make improvements and changes to continue to enhance the Commons experience for both students and faculty.

The survey findings are presented by two groups: School of Education students and University faculty. Note that the results of other School's students were analyzed separately and are not included in this report. At the time of this survey, thirty-six percent were studying in the School of Education (SOE). Thirty-four percent of student respondents were studying in the School of Business and Technology Management (SBTM). Fifteen percent were studying in the School of Behavioral and Social Sciences, Department of Marriage and Family Sciences (SBSS-MFS). Fifteen percent were studying in the School of Behavioral and Social Sciences, Department of Psychology (SBSS-PSY).

Instrument Design

The survey contained thirty items and included both several quantitative response items along with a variety of short answer and open text items:

- Quantitative questions included: desired functions within the Commons, ways to participate, number and types of encounters, activities conducted, navigation experience, factors influencing the use of The Commons, and levels of participant engagement.
- Qualitative items included: what it means to be a part of the University community; additional support that could improve interaction and experiences; factors influencing use as well as problems or limitations within the Commons; and ways in which the Commons contributes to a successful and productive learning experience.

Findings

Sample Group A: School of Education Students

Demographics: Student Respondent Profile. The student population at the time of the 2017 Commons Engagement Evaluation survey was 9,932. The School of Education population included 3,491 students. The number of student survey responses was 1,755 yielding a response rate of 50%. School of Education student respondents were working toward all levels of degrees: Bachelor's (1%), Post Bachelor's (1%), Master's (30%), Post Master's (2%), Educational Specialist (2%), Doctoral (65%) and Non-Degree (< 1%). Of all the respondents, 62% were female, and 29% were male. An additional group of nine percent provided no reported data for gender. Respondents were of diverse ethnicities, which was comparable to the overall student population at Northcentral University. Of all the respondents, forty percent identified as White; twenty-four percent identified as Black or African American; seven percent identified as Hispanic or Latino; three percent identified as Asian; one percent identified as American Indian or Alaska Native.

Following is a summary of findings for School of Education students. The highlights of results are presented below under the following headings:

1. Overall Sense of Community
2. Belonging, Community, Relationships, and Support
3. The Functions of the Commons
4. Engagement: Feeling Connected Before & After Participating in the Commons
5. Factors influencing the use of the Commons
6. Additional Community Benefits derived from the Commons

Overall Sense of Community. Inquiry into this topic was accomplished through the following question:

Q1. What does it mean to you to be a part of the NCU community?

The following themes were found from the qualitative responses to this open-ended question:

- Opportunity for connection
- Opportunity for social interaction
- Means of communication with faculty and students/academic conversations
- Exchange of ideas
- Sharing of resources
- Reducing isolation
- Identification with others in the same situation
- Sense of belongingness
- Feeling part of an educational team
- Networking opportunities
- Support and collaboration

Belonging, Community, Relationships, and Support. Inquiry into this topic was accomplished through the following question:

Q2. What is the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements?

- My sense of belonging to my school increased as I participated in the Commons.
- I am able to relate to my school community.
- I feel that I have established a relationship with my school community.
- I believe that the Commons supports our students and faculty success.

The findings yield the average rating on a five-point Likert-type scale (see below), with higher ratings reflecting stronger agreement with each statement (see Table 1).

- 4 Strongly Agree
- 3 Agree
- 2 Neither Agree nor Disagree
- 1 Disagree
- 0 Strongly Disagree

Table 1

Students tend to agree that participation in the Commons has impacted them positively

| Response | Mean Rating |
|--|-------------|
| Commons supports student and faculty success | 2.74 |
| Ability to relate to the School community | 2.54 |
| Increased sense of belonging to the School | 2.50 |
| Ability to establish relationships with the School community | 2.20 |

The Functions of the Commons. Inquiry into this topic was accomplished through the following question (see Table 2):

Q3. As an NCU community member, in which of these functions (if any) would you like to be able to participate?

Engagement: Feeling Connected Before and After Participating in The Commons. Inquiry into this topic was accomplished questions 4 and 5:

Q4. How many of the people that you encountered in the Commons did you feel connected to prior to participating in the Commons? How many people do you now feel connected to as a result of your participation in the Commons?

Students reported an increased number of connections with colleagues in the Commons. On average, across Master's and Doctoral programs, students feel more connected to fellow students as a result of their participation in the Commons. The quantitative results reflect an overall

increase from six connections prior to participating in the Commons to eight connections as a result of participating in the Commons (see Table 3).

Table 2

Across Masters and Doctoral programs, reasons students seek connection with current course faculty and students

| Response | % Respondents |
|--|---------------|
| Provide feedback | 88 |
| Review announcements, news items, or articles | 83 |
| Participate in discussions around a specific topic or idea | 81 |
| Ask and/or respond to a question posed by an expert or the group | 80 |
| Ability to collaborate | 79 |
| Make and maintain professional and business contacts | 76 |
| Share resources | 73 |
| Share a quick opinion, reflection, or insight | 67 |

Q5. Who needs to be participating for the Commons to be useful for you?

Table 3

Participation of diverse groups is important to students: Mean responses overall groups

| Response | % Repondents |
|------------------------|--------------|
| Course students | 70 |
| Course faculty | 66 |
| School students | 54 |
| School faculty | 53 |
| Support services | 43 |
| Specialization faculty | 43 |

Factors Influencing Use of The Commons. Inquiry into this topic was accomplished through questions 6 and 7 (see Table 4):

Q6. How do each of the following factors influences your use of The Commons?

The numbers of responses and percentages of responses were calculated using the following scale:

- SE Strongly Encourage
- E Encourage
- N Neither Encourage nor Discourage
- D Discourage
- SD Strongly Discourage
- NA Not Applicable

Table 4

Responses for the overall group noted as either encouraging or strongly encouraging

| Response | % Respondents |
|---|---------------|
| Other members' posts | 70 |
| Members commenting on my post | 66 |
| Email notification of group activity | 64 |
| Activity feed updates | 61 |
| School steward responding to posts | 56 |
| Group invitations or quarterly emails from School steward | 56 |
| Private messages | 55 |
| System responsiveness | 54 |
| Ease of updating personal information | 48 |
| Prompts by School steward | 47 |

Open-ended responses yielded additional factors that encourage engagement:

- Camaraderie
- Feeling connected
- Sense of belonging to a professional community
- Being provided with relevant information
- Interest in topics
- Consistency of faculty communication
- Leadership of the Commons

Table 5

Response patterns for which 5% or more of respondents noted as either discouraging or strongly discouraging

| Response | % Respondents |
|-----------------------------|---------------|
| Lack of sense of what to do | 19 |
| Bugs and technical issues | 16 |
| Other obligations | 14 |
| Participation not required | 8 |

Q7. What really engaged you?

The following themes were discovered from the qualitative responses to this open-ended question:

- Ability to collaborate and communicate
- Being part of the educational dialogue with students and faculty

- Access to useful information
- Networking opportunities
- Obtaining assistance and information
- Hearing similar stories and experiences
- Instructor/faculty feedback
- Student support and ideas by way of productive communication
- Students sharing success
- Ability to access dissertation defenses

Additional Community Benefits Derived from The Commons. Inquiry into this topic was accomplished through questions 8 and 9:

Q8. What do you find most useful in the Commons?

The following themes were discovered from the qualitative responses to this open-ended question:

- Email notifications regarding webinars and School updates
- University announcements
- Communication with students and faculty regarding current issues
- Dissertation information and resources
- Dissertation defense dates
- Hearing others' experiences and interests
- Useful questions and answers
- Being kept informed
- Developing connections with others (reduced isolation)
- Comments from professors and advisors

Q9. In what ways, if any, does the Commons make your academic life more successful?

The following themes were discovered from the qualitative responses to this open-ended question:

- Interactive platform for communication
- Ability to share and receive advice
- Ability to receive quick answers to questions
- Ability to share support
- Engage in current conversations regarding relevant topics
- Access to useful academic resources and information
- Access to academic services (Academic Success Center, Library)
- Opportunities for networking
- Creates a sense of belonging and connection to students, faculty, and the University
- Reduces isolation
- Provides insight into student life

- Encourages motivation

Sample of open-ended responses about community engagement.

“The Commons is available 24/7 so as a student I can interact by asking questions when I need help, and I can get different feedback from many students from all over the world. Therefore, this is the most valuable feature of the Commons.”

“It [the Commons] is a platform for communications, interaction with professors, administrators, library and any important announcements. It is a laudable platform substituting a physical conventional campus classroom.”

“The Commons offers a platform to connect to other students and also an opportunity to participate in services to help you succeed.”

“Reading everyone's thoughts and experiences makes me feel I am not alone in the process.”

“The Commons provides a sense of community and connects me with others who can add to my engagement.”

“The ability to connect with other students helps diminish the feeling of being out there all on my own.”

“The Commons fills in the context that has been isolated or reduced to instructor-student relations/ideas/opinions.”

“The use of Commons should be communicated through a vast number of assignments.”

Sample Group B: University Faculty

Demographics: Faculty Respondent Profile. The employee population at the time of the invitation to participate in the 2017 Commons Engagement Evaluation survey was 925. This included staff, faculty, and administrators. The number of responses was 227 yielding a response rate of 26%. Of all the respondents, forty one percent were adjunct faculty, twenty one percent were core faculty, thirty six percent were non-faculty/other and two percent were administrators. Of all the respondents, sixty one percent were female, and thirty eight percent were male. An additional group of one percent reported no data for gender. Respondents were of diverse ethnicities which was comparable to the population working at Northcentral University in 2017. Of all the respondents, eighty percent identified as White; eleven percent identified as Black or African American; five percent identified as Hispanic or Latino; two percent identified as Asian; one percent identified as American Indian or Alaska Native.

All survey invitees who chose to respond began by answering an item regarding their level of participation in the Commons. Respondents selected from among four options which suggested the degree to which they had contact with the Commons social platform. They could state they were involving themselves in Commons activities as a steward manager, a member of one community, or a member of multiple communities. They could also indicate they were aware of the Commons and had been informed about it but they had not yet participated. Participants who had participated in the Commons at any level were shown items allowing representation of their attitudes and experiences with the Commons. Both groups were presented with items asking about potential improvements and potential user needs.

Following is a summary of findings from all University faculty that participated in the survey. The highlights of findings are presented below under the following headings:

1. Overall sense of community
2. Belonging, Community, Relationships, and Support
3. The Functions of the Commons
4. Engagement: Feeling Connected Before & After Participating in the Commons
5. Factors influencing use of the Commons
6. Additional Community Benefits derived from the Commons

Overall Sense of Community. Inquiry into this topic was accomplished through the following question:

Q1. What does it mean to you to be a part of the NCU community?

The following themes were discovered from the qualitative responses to this open-ended question:

- Opportunities for sharing and collaboration
- Sense of belonging with the University
- Active engagement with colleagues and students
- Connection across time and space
- Educational support/Scholarly peers
- Support system
- Camaraderie

Belonging, Community, Relationships, and Support. Inquiry into this topic was accomplished through the following question (see Table 6):

Q2. What is the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements?

- My sense of belonging to my school increased as I participated in the Commons.
- I am able to relate to my school community.
- I feel that I have established a relationship with my school community.
- I believe that the Commons supports our students and faculty success.

The findings yield the average rating on a five-point Likert-type scale (see below), with higher ratings reflecting stronger agreement with each statement:

- 4 Strongly Agree
- 3 Agree
- 2 Neither Agree nor Disagree
- 1 Disagree
- 0 Strongly Disagree

Table 6

Faculty responses on impact of participation in the Commons

| Response | Mean Rating |
|--|-------------|
| Ability to relate to the School community | 2.55 |
| Commons supports student and faculty success | 2.43 |
| Ability to establish relationships with the School community | 2.30 |
| Increased sense of belonging to the School | 2.15 |

The Functions of the Commons. Inquiry into this topic was accomplished through the following question (see Table 7):

Q3. As an NCU community member, in which of these functions (if any) would you like to be able to participate?

Table 7

Reasons faculty seek connection with current course faculty and students

| Response | % Respondents |
|---|---------------|
| Provide feedback for current course students | 33 |
| Share resources with other faculty | 31 |
| Share opinions and insights with students | 29 |
| Ask or respond to questions from students or faculty | 29 |
| Collaborate with other faculty in my School | 26 |
| Share resources with students in my School | 25 |
| Make and maintain business contacts with current students and faculty | 23 |
| Review announcements and news articles with students and faculty | 23 |
| Participate in discussions around specific topics and ideas | 22 |

Engagement: Feeling Connected Before and After Participating in The Commons.

Inquiry into this topic was accomplished questions 4 and 5 (see Table 8):

Q4. How many of the people that you encountered in the Commons did you feel connected to prior to participating in the Commons? How many people do you now feel connected to as a result of your participation in the Commons?

Faculty reported an increased number of connections with colleagues in the Commons. The quantitative results reflect an overall increase from 5 connections prior to participating in the Commons to 6 connections as a result of participating in the Commons.

Q5. Who needs to be participating for the Commons to be useful for you?

Table 8

Participation of diverse groups is evidently less important faculty than it was for students. Responses on average for the overall groups

| Response | % Respondents |
|------------------------|---------------|
| Course faculty | 51 |
| School faculty | 49 |
| Course students | 40 |
| School leadership | 34 |
| School students | 28 |
| Specialization faculty | 26 |
| University leadership | 26 |
| Support services | 21 |
| Alumni | 9 |

Factors Influencing Use of The Commons. Inquiry into this topic was accomplished through question 6 and 7 (see Tables 9 and 10):

Q6. How do each of the following factors influences your use of The Commons?

The numbers of responses and percentage of responses were calculated using the following scale:

- SE Strongly Encourage
- E Encourage
- N Neither Encourage nor Discourage
- D Discourage
- SD Strongly Discourage
- NA Not Applicable

Only one open-ended response that encouraged engagement was provided: quality of resources.

Q7. What really engaged you?

The following themes were discovered from the qualitative responses to this open-ended question:

- Active Communication among students and faculty
- Ongoing discussions
- Resources
- Friendly atmosphere
- Private communication
- Notification of system updates

Table 9

Responses for the overall group noted as either encouraging or strongly encouraging

| Response | % Respondents |
|---|---------------|
| Members commenting on my posts | 61 |
| Other members' posts | 59 |
| Email notification of group activity | 52 |
| Activity feed updates | 48 |
| School steward responding to posts | 44 |
| Private messages | 44 |
| Training materials | 44 |
| Group invitations or quarterly emails from School steward | 39 |
| Steward prompts | 35 |
| Ease of updating personal information | 35 |
| System responsiveness | 25 |

Table 10

Response patterns for which 5% or more of respondents noted as either discouraging or strongly discouraging

| Response | % Respondents |
|-----------------------------|---------------|
| Other obligations | 30 |
| Bugs and technical issues | 27 |
| Participation not required | 20 |
| Lack of sense of what to do | 20 |

Additional Community Benefits Derived from The Commons. Inquiry into this topic was accomplished through questions 8 and 9:

Q8. What do you find most useful in the Commons?

The following themes were discovered from the qualitative responses to this open-ended question:

- Communication with students and colleagues
- Faculty interaction
- Student collaboration
- Ability to share information quickly and easily
- Friendly atmosphere
- Student access to resources
- Steward posting
- Communication regarding webinars and activities
- Communication regarding dissertation defenses
- Training materials
- Fulfillment of faculty development requirements
- Updates on new processes and system changes
- Welcoming new students

Q9. In what ways, if any, does the Commons make your academic life more successful?

The following themes were discovered from the qualitative responses to this open-ended question:

- Opportunity to connect
- Platform for information and discourse
- Opportunity to assist or support others
- Updates regarding students' research
- Links to engaging information
- Connection to resources

There was a small percentage of faculty (7%) who do not see a use for the Commons in terms of academic success but rather for socializing, or who find the Commons cumbersome or difficult to navigate, or who do not derive a sense of community from the Commons, or who have limited time and therefore choose not to engage.

Sample of open-ended responses about community engagement. Individuals were permitted to provide additional feedback on their experiences. Examples of this are provided below.

“I am an active participant in the educational process of students at the university. In addition, I am a learner in that I take advantage of opportunities for my personal growth offered by peers or University staff.”

“I like discourse that begins simple between two people and others get interested and it is a discussion of sorts. I do not think this happens with every exchange but it can and it does. The possibility that a collaboration comes from it is very cool.”

“It [the Commons] makes some aspects of connection with others feel more natural.”

To follow up on the 2017 survey, a brief informal survey was administered to NCU students in early 2020, yielding positive comments in response to the following questions:

1. How would you describe the Commons?
2. What does it mean to you to be a part of the Northcentral University community?
3. How and in what ways does the Commons provide a sense of community for you?

“I think learning online and being in the doctoral process can be a double lonely place. For me the Commons has something new to read every day—so it makes me open my computer and get into the academic mindset—because this dissertation needs daily attention and there is no one forcing me to pick it up and work on it every day.”

“The Commons seems to be full of a great mix of people: we have the newbies who are trying to figure it all out, we have the dissertation series students who have been trudging through the process and need some inspiration (which often can be done by feeling like we are helping others), we have the alumni who still feel connected and hearing about their accomplishments helps the rest of us see that the journey is worth it, and then the faculty (especially the NCU leaders) who are very engaged and jump on any chance they see to help and encourage students.”

“To me it [the Commons] is meeting its intent—like your favorite coffee shop at a brick and mortar school where you take a moment to catch up with fellow NCU’ers and get ready to start your day of learning something new.”

“As a student and now as an alumnus, checking the Commons is the first thing I do each morning. The Commons provides connection, direction, and support, keeping me connected to like-minded individuals who are interested in expanding their learning experiences.”

“The Commons provides me with opportunities to 'listen' to the ideas of others and chances to 'speak' my mind and receive feedback from those who may have similar experiences or who offer innovative ideas. The guidelines for participation ensure that the connections made with

others support each individual and provide collective support, which for me, is the definition of community.”

“I love the Commons and describe it as NCU's "virtual cafeteria," the place to hang out and get (or give) answers, offer various types of support, or to share a good laugh. Being part of the community of students is so important to me. Helping others and receiving help from others takes away any of my feelings of physical or emotional distance from other people at NCU.”

“What the Commons represents takes the place of a commons in a brick and mortar school. It is a place where people come to gather to know about what is happening within the school and it is a place where students can connect with one another.”

“Being a part of the NCU community allows me to express myself with people that I have something in common with. They say that there is a small percentage of people that obtain their doctoral degree. This allows me to listen and express myself to those that truly understands the struggles of what I am going through.”

“I have tried talking to people who are not going through a doctoral program and they do not understand what I am going through. The NCU Commons is a support network for me as I do not have social media.”

“I check the Commons first thing every morning. The willingness of people to share their knowledge is wonderful. What better place to ask a question and get an answer quickly (most of the time.)”

“It's a safe place where one feels comfortable asking those weird or silly questions. The responses are, for the most part gentle, informative, and instructive. Professional also comes to mind. A favorite gathering place at a brick and mortar school is what our Commons is in the virtual world.”

Discussion and Recommendations for Future Research

An updated evaluation study is currently being prepared to capture how and in what ways the Commons currently serves the NCU community, and to determine possible areas in need of improvement. Ongoing evaluation can continue to monitor the perceived sense of community among Northcentral University students and faculty. Additionally, in-depth feedback might also be attained through interviews and/or focus groups. Such evaluation will shed light on what activities the students and faculty are participating in and whether or not these initiatives are helpful in their perceptions of community building. It will also be important to glean information about the potential barriers for participation. This information may be useful to develop and implement additional interventions to improve the sense of community in the virtual teaching

environment which can, in turn, enhance satisfaction and academic performance. Some specific recommendations for future research include the following:

Students:

- Students tended to agree that participation in the Commons impacted them positively, and that they have made new connections as a result of participation. Since the results were not overwhelmingly significant, additional research might focus on barriers or challenges with regard their participation in the Commons, and ways to address these.
- Examine ways to include the Commons within the curriculum in order to enhance engagement and maximize commons forums as community “learning spaces”. In this way the Commons could become a valuable formal educational space as well as a more informal social space.
- Examine ways for students at different stages of their educational journey to become engaged, so that the Commons can best support them academically and socially.

Faculty:

- Faculty tended to agree that participation in the Commons impacted them positively, and that they have made new connections as a result of participation. Since the results were not overwhelmingly significant, additional research might focus on barriers or challenges with regard their participation in the Commons, and ways to address these.
- Since there was less interaction and buy-in on the part of core faculty than part-time faculty, examine ways to encourage and support all faculty to engage more in the Commons so that the community experience can be of support and benefit to all.

Conclusion

The findings of the Community Engagement Evaluation Study illustrate the many ways in which the Commons contributes to establishing and maintaining ongoing pathways to counteract isolation and disengagement in the online environment. In terms of the natural pursuit to connect, students and faculty continue to utilize discussion forums to share material, resources, insights, experiences, achievements, and concerns; ask questions, and provide support to each other. Results indicate a positive but not extremely positive opinion of the Commons, which would suggest that this is something that participants like but see the possibilities for improvement, and this is noted as a recommendation for future research. The survey's findings did uncover some specific community engagement preferences of students and faculty enabling a better understanding of the experience of using the Commons as a means to receive support and resources. These findings have helped Northcentral University leadership identify ways in which to make necessary improvements and changes in order to continue to foster community by enhancing the Commons experience.

Since the implementation of the 2017 Community Engagement survey some specific updates and enhancements have been made. Aside from the larger forums that are available in the Commons, the specialization community of practice groups (managed and facilitated by School stewards) were instituted in 2018 to offer opportunities for faculty and students to interact. These

professional groups have become a space that is greatly utilized for connection and resources within students' practice and/or research areas. 2019 saw the addition of new forums including dissertation support group for students (managed and facilitated by School stewards); Faculty Share and Support Forum (includes mentoring and research groups); and the Career Resource Collaborative (CRC), which has created a new space for sharing career opportunities and resources. Every month a new theme is identified for the CRC to focus our efforts to curate a collection of resources. Recent themes include "Creating an online presence", "Tailoring your application and resume", "Identifying opportunities to apply your research post-graduation", and "Turning your dissertation into an academic article or presentation." Moreover, the Commons, as the University engagement platform, has evolved since its inception with the addition of new features and capabilities based on expressed needs in response to the 2017 survey:

- Integration of Commons in syllabus/curriculum/assignments (for example, through the Commons students can now more easily and intuitively access resources, view materials and presentations, and seek peer reviews of their work)
- Use of tagging for ease of searching for topics and issues, thereby aiding connections.
- Ease of access to daily summaries so that students can review and connect to all relevant communication and interaction at a glance.
- Ease of posting multimodal content including documents, graphics, audio and video materials

Participation in the Commons has steadily increased, and there has been a 41% increase in membership since the end of 2018. In addition, in this past year there has been significant increase in posts, comments and views. Students and faculty continue to share a variety of updates and useful material and resources in the Commons, and many rich discussions occur around key issues and experiences. From a support perspective, leaders of groups and forums are encouraged to continue to post relevant material on a regular basis, and to facilitate discussion and interaction among members in order to sustain engagement. Regular quarterly meetings are held with all School stewards to encourage them to foster a collaborative learning space, share experiences and insights, and receive guidelines regarding effective facilitation of online communities. The Commons director and the School stewards continue to monitor the various groups, facilitate discussions, provide support and assistance where necessary, and address any issues or concerns that arise, both with regard faculty and students. As a community engagement platform, the Commons thus continues to enhance students' educational experience by creating a vibrant and dynamic learning community.

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