Building Communities within a Diverse Adult Population

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Are your students older than the traditional-aged college students? Do they work full- or part-time and have family responsibilities? Do they focus on their academics, but spend little time involved in campus life? If the answers are yes, some may conclude that there is no sense trying to get them involved in campus life, to show them the resources on campus, and to have them build a social as well as academic community within continuing and distance education. However, the two community building models described in this article—one at New York University (NYU) and the second at Washington State University (WSU)—challenge the myth that adult students do not want to get involved in their institution, network with their peers, take on leadership positions, and build a supportive community within the school.

The interest in building communities among the adult students at both institutions is similar though the differences between the two institutions are

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many. In institutional type and size, NYU is a private large university; WSU is a public land-grant institution and relatively moderate in size. From the point of view of geography and demographics, NYU is an urban institution in the largest city in the US; WSU is a residential campus in a town of less than 30,000 people in rural eastern Washington. In program type and delivery, NYU's School of Continuing and Professional Studies offers continuing education and graduate and undergraduate programs through a variety of formats, including some online; WSU's Center for Distance and Professional Education offers primarily undergraduate programs exclusively online. However, both schools have found that their adult students are interested in being more involved in academic and social communities.

Research into the value of academic and social integration suggests that particularly for traditional-aged students, the degree to which students are involved in their academic classes as well as their out-of-class experiences affects their success in school (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993). Biel, Reisen, Zea, and Caplan (1999) explained:

> Tinto postulated that the extent to which students are integrated into the academic and social domains of the university community influences their level of commitment, which then influences the likelihood that they will remain at the university.

Both Bean and Metzner (1985) and Stahl and Pavel (1992) suggest, however, that social integration is not important to the majority of older students. Few programs for nontraditional students around the country have put much emphasis on social activities, partially because of the research that has been done into nontraditional students' interest in such offerings. However, experiences at both NYU and WSU suggest that these findings may have been over generalized.

This article describes two models for enhancing the social integration of nontraditional students in academic programs. The first explains ways to develop onsite communities for both graduate and undergraduate degree-seeking students at New York University. The second model is used with undergraduate students at Washington State University seeking their degrees through Distance Degree Programs (DDP), an online distance education program.

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

New York University's School of Continuing and Professional Studies (SCPS) offers 14 graduate and 16 undergraduate degrees to a diverse stu-

dent population of more than 3,500 students. This diversity can be defined in terms of age (traditional age and adult learners from 18 to 51+ years); ethnicity; nationality; time status (part time and full time); and experience (career aspirants and industry specific graduate learners, many of whom are experienced in their professional fields). They are residents, commuters, and transfer students. Classes are offered in different formats during the day, evening, and weekend; class offerings are on site and on line. Classes are offered at three different locations in Manhattan.

The mission of student affairs at SCPS is to create a school-wide community while also creating and supporting smaller communities representing cohorts of similar interests. A school-wide community is important as it enables students to feel connected to the larger institution and thus provides access to a wider range of support systems, peers, and the faculty and staff. Community strengthens the school's credibility internally and externally. When students graduate, the alumni community has a foundation upon which to grow.

A major challenge to developing a school-wide community at SCPS is embedded in the school's mission of being a professional school whose strength is applied to industry-specific programs that attract focused and established professionals seeking further education. In such an environment, students gravitate toward creating communities within the academic programs and seeking access to advisory board members from the industry. In addition, SCPS student clubs are organized around academic disciplines, further strengthening the connections to industries outside NYU. While this serves the students' career goals after graduation, it does little to support the formation of a school-wide community.

A second internal challenge stems from administrative perceptions that compared adult with traditional-age students and highlighted differences rather than similarities. For years, staff had been comfortable with the myth that adult students would not be interested in participating in a school community. It was believed that because student time was so limited and students were overburdened with responsibilities, adult students would not see the benefit of contributing to the development of a stronger educational environment through student government, clubs, and events.

Thus, general orientations were held; however, central university student services were not highlighted. Many university offices closed at 5 pm and services were not easily accessible to adult students. The skeletal infrastructure for student life was available, but there was limited student

involvement at events or in student government. The School of Continuing and Professional Studies was self-contained in its services to adult degree students.

However, as the school grew and a younger adult student population appeared, students asked for co-curricular activities and access to more resources that were available through NYU. SCPS responded by hiring additional staff to put more effort into responding to student needs. The student affairs staff began assertively advocating to NYU central administration that they expand services and consider the SCPS adult students. Meetings were held with key central offices, where SCPS staff presented the scope of the school, the demographic profile, and the needs of adult students. These presentations made university colleagues aware that "a student is a student regardless of age." New leadership in the school also drew attention to SCPS as a more vibrant community of learners.

A paradigm shift occurred when SCPS student affairs staff looked at the resources in the central university structure as additional opportunities to engage students rather than as competing communities. Although there are more than 400 student clubs at NYU, programs provided by multiple offices at the school and university levels, and a plethora of activity throughout New York City, student participation increased with the level and diversity of available activity. SCPS student affairs began promoting all services inside and outside the school, with various ways for students to be involved, and found that different students utilized different resources. Students began participating and networking with other SCPS students as well as with students from the other schools within the university.

SCPS student affairs staff made a conscious effort to partner with NYU colleagues in units outside SCPS in promoting services and planning activities such as Martin Luther King Week, Welcome Week, and special events. Internally, SCPS began strengthening the student government, establishing student clubs, and encouraging students to participate actively in university government and university life. After five years, SCPS has a graduate student council supporting 11 student clubs and an undergraduate student council supporting 13 clubs. Together these clubs and student-life units develop and deliver more than 100 events annually.

In reflecting on the current state of the NYU SCPS student affairs and student community, it is clear that the attitudes and actions of staff as well as students have evolved: students feel more connected to the university, utilize services provided by the university, and interact with students from

other programs and departments. NYU SCPS has new credibility within the university and is seen as a significant partner in collaborating with other schools. In 2007, for the first time ever, the NYU Commencement Speaker was an SCPS undergraduate, adult student. This was a great honor since only one outstanding student is selected from more than 4,500 graduating undergraduate students from all the schools.

Within SCPS, the student affairs department is viewed as a catalyst in building a stronger student life at NYU. The student involvement is high at orientation—more than 350 graduate and 200 undergraduate students attend each fall. Staff members from more than 20 central NYU service units attend a fair to talk with adult students about the services they provide and to suggest communities of which they can be a part. The SCPS student affairs staff has found that sending an e-mail message on the same day every week to notify students of upcoming programs has been well received. Many of the programs are offered on Friday evenings, as the students are in classes during the weeknights. The adult students appreciate the many ways available to connect with peers within the school and the university.

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

WSU's Distance Degree Programs' (DDP) online programs serve primarily place-, time-, and work-bound adult learners who are unable to attend campus-based programs. Asynchronous distance programs have been offered at WSU since 1992 and currently nine major fields of study are offered as undergraduate degree completion programs to learners who have completed at least 27 semester credits when they apply. The student population is diverse, ranging from career seekers to adults desiring personal enrichment, from recent community college graduates to those reentering higher education after a break of many years. Because of the relatively rural location of the campus, students served through its online programs are generally not within easy commuting distance of the campus. In fact, the majority live more than 300 miles to the west, along the state's population corridor between Seattle and Portland, OR. All of these factors make community-building a challenge, but the challenge has been met through a variety of venues—virtual learning communities, online student government, and site-based events.

Online courses provide an ideal environment for building virtual learning communities because the technology is flexible and allows opportunities for significant interaction. WSU has developed a program using

Virtual Mentors (VMs)—online course aides who interact with students, help to build a learning community along with students' connections to WSU, and empower students through effective facilitation. Virtual Mentors are current DDP students or recent graduates who have shown a talent for facilitation. They receive training for one semester and mentoring for a second semester, and then they are placed into course spaces where the instructor requests them (and where they are not enrolled students). VMs are not content experts nor TAs.

If, for example, students are not sure of assignment requirements, the VM will show them where to look, as opposed to telling the students the assignment requirements. If students appear lost—either by not participating in expected ways or by "disappearing" from the course space—the VM will step forward discreetly and point the student in the right direction or contact the student to see if there are problems with which the student might need assistance. As the semester progresses, the VM retains that non-expert status by asking students authentic questions (specifically in discussions that seem to be lagging). An example of this is a history course where the end date of the Civil War came into question. Several students dutifully answered with the correct year, but the conversation exploded with enthusiastic posts when the VM posted: "Why is the end of the Civil War even a discussion? My teachers always told me it was 1865, but it seems some of you think there might be another date. Please explain!" All of sudden, students were claiming that the Civil War went on in some ways for years after 1865, while others took staunch positions that 1865 was, in fact, the end. This authentic, naïve question from the VM sparked the conversation because the students knew the VM was a non-expert. Instead of reporting what they thought the instructor wanted them to say, the students became owners of their own knowledge—making a case, researching new information, and engaging with the content and their colleagues.

Students have access to a VM in another forum as well. As soon as students are admitted to the university and before classes begin, students are encouraged to interact in a specially developed electronic course space with specific discussions focusing on the degrees in which they have chosen to major. VMs play an important role in helping students by answering questions students have about such things as majors available, the courses they will take, and employment opportunities. VMs also serve as individual mentors to students who request such support. As always, the VM function is to empower students to find the answers—for example, how to contact

financial aid—rather than offering an answer. All of these roles assumed by the VMs help develop learning communities in online courses, help students feel more closely connected to WSU and DDP, and at the same time, help students to be more effective online learners.

Another resource developed at WSU to build both learning communities and online students' connections to each other as well as to WSU is the development of "First Semester Experience" (FSE) courses. The concept behind these courses is to develop an upper-division alternative for online transfer students that would be analogous to the "Freshman Focus" activities that were developed for freshmen coming to the Pullman campus. FSEs are content courses that are a regular part of at least one degree offered online but are specifically designed to develop skills for academic success and retention. These core courses incorporate aspects necessary for student success at the university level and in learning at a distance. Each course includes activities and assignments that require students to apply skills in writing, peer-to-peer collaboration, group work, library and Web-based research, and technology use. Advisors encourage all first semester students to enroll in at least one of these courses. A set of diagnostic tools is built into the courses for students who have difficulty with any of the skills, and VMs assist students in identifying resources to help them strengthen their abilities in those areas.

An instructional designer works with a faculty member to develop every course offered. Because of the value of collaborative pedagogies for enhancing student learning and the belief in the importance of building community, each course has a significant amount of interaction among students and with the faculty member in it. Students are required to introduce themselves at the beginning of each course, and VMs and faculty encourage students to describe the application of the course to their lives. Almost every course has a number of required discussion questions built into it; students usually are required to make one original comment and two responses to other students' posts each week. Some courses require group work to complete the course, which not only impels students to discuss among themselves but also builds on FSE courses and reinforces the building of communities.

In addition to the course-related efforts to promote virtual communities, WSU has developed an online student government for distance learners. This organization has allowed interested students, regardless of their geographic location, to be actively engaged in non-academic activities related

to the university. Business meetings and elections are all held electronically using Web-conferencing technology, and officers have served from states throughout the US. Students are nominated and campaign for their positions via the Web, hold office hours, and serve on various committees. They even work together electronically to raise funds for a selected charity each year. The student government Website (http://aswsu-ddp.wsu.edu/) also provides electronic venues for student communication, including a "Home Town Locator" where students can voluntarily register to connect with fellow students who live in their area.

DDP students' online courses and the various electronic communication options provided have been effective in developing communities that are virtual in nature. These virtual communities have become a foundation on which to build optional face-to-face communities. DDP has provided numerous opportunities for face-to-face connections among students, staff, and the larger WSU community. The student government has contributed in a significant way to this effort through the organization's sponsorship of events throughout the academic year. Examples include receptions in conjunction with WSU athletic events held annually in Seattle and a variety of activities that make up "Cougar Campus Connection" on a football weekend in Pullman. Each March the student government plans a "Rendezvous" Saturday in the Seattle or Tacoma area, where students come for seminars, tours of local museums, and a get-together luncheon. WSU has nine Learning Centers around the state (http://online.wsu.edu/current_students/as_learning_centers.aspx) that provide student support and deliver local programming for DDP students. Once a year each Learning Center hosts an open house with events that connect distance students who reside nearby with university support personnel and fellow students. The student government also hosts graduation ceremonies for students and their families prior to the December and May commencement ceremonies in Pullman.

CONCLUSION

The two models demonstrate that adult students become active participants in university life when given the opportunity. A variety of types of community building activities, both onsite and virtual, can be made available. The increase in participation in these activities at both NYU and WSU demonstrates that many adult students value opportunities to be better connected to their schools. Student affairs professionals, faculty, and staff

at both institutions see the benefit of the opportunities provided. In fact, WSU has seen an increase in retention rates over the past two years since community-building opportunities have been introduced and reinforced.

Student affairs staff can present a persuasive argument to university administration for building a community of adult students. Students are the best ambassadors for describing the value of activities, events and clubs to administrators. Support of the school dean and of colleagues throughout the university is also valuable. Data are certainly important, including a student-needs assessment, reports of numbers of students participating in various events, and success stories

NYU's SCPS has utilized available university resources to serve their students rather than creating their own events and activities that duplicate efforts, and the university has been willing to make some scheduling changes to accommodate adult students in its events. However, WSU has found its online students, who are unfamiliar with the campus and have not met face-to-face with faculty or other students, are sometimes reluctant to participate in larger university activities, so DDP has hosted some events specifically for its adult students.

Student affairs professionals know the importance of reviewing current practices, researching new possibilities, and revitalizing programming to meet changing student needs. This article describes another area to consider for enhancing student satisfaction and improving educational programming provided by continuing education units.

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