

## Chapter 55

# Initial Stages to Create Online Graduate Communities: Assessment and Development

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter introduces the authors' experiences to create three online graduate communities, focusing correspondingly on: (a) conducting program orientation for students enrolled in an online Master's program, (b) performing program assessment for Master's students, and (c) providing an environment for doctoral students to communicate and support one another. A logistic prediction model was generated from a pilot assessment on student needs and preference to an online community. Initial steps to design and develop the three online communities are described. The theoretical framework employed in the design consists of three design models: Information Technology Design (ITD) integration model, Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, Evaluation (ADDIE) design model, and Activity Structure System (ASS) model.*

### INTRODUCTION

Online communities, with the technology changes over the past two decades, have been gradually integrated into education and have become a growing feature in the field of using information technology in education (Mason, 2000; Santos & Hammont, 2007; Thorpe, 2002). Terms like “virtual community” or “online community” have received more and more attention in the literature. A key

word Google search with “online community” can result in 327,000,000 link items in 0.23 seconds. Most studies on this theme have explored the potential needs of online communities (Fernback, 2007; Neumann, Hogan, & MacDonald, 2005), areas where online communities can be used to facilitate or improve educators' work (Aviv, et al., 2003; Ginossar, 2008; Lau, et al., 2007), and strategies and methods to effectively use online learning communities (Ke & Hoadley, 2009).

A community usually serves a particular group of people with common characteristics

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and interests. The rationale for creating online communities for graduate students is based on the characteristics of this special population in universities. According to the latest Council of Graduate Schools report, more students enroll in the field of education than any other field, accounting for 25% of total fall 2007 graduate enrollment in the United States; in fact, of the 321,433 graduate students currently enrolled in colleges of education, 64% are part-time students (Bell, 2008). Numerous researchers in the area of academic persistence have identified involvement and emotional connectedness to the institution as key factors in predicting academic persistence (Lin & Lee, 2006; Norris, 2002). Specifically, the more often graduate students involve or integrate into the life of the college, the more likely they will persist (Tinto, 1997; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Involvement also influences learning; the more they participate in the academic life of the college, the more successful their learning will be (Davenport, 2001; Ke & Hoadley, 2009; Santos, 2007). Since involvement is often at a minimum among education-major graduate students working full-time as teachers and administrators, it is to be expected that teacher education programs register these dismal degree completion rates.

However, situation could be different if graduate students have a platform or a convenient environment that enables them to socially and academically be involved in college life. According to the technical functions, operational tools, and administrative flexibility of online communities (Farooq, et al., 2007; Henderson, 2007; Lutters & Ackerman, 2003), a well designed online community should be able to serve as one solution to this problem.

Procedures to design an online community are similar to the design of an information system, which should be guided through the five stages of the ADDIE design model: *Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation* (Gagne et al., 2005; Smith & Ragan, 2005). This chapter introduces the authors' experiences with

creating three online graduate communities, using mainly the stages of *Analysis, Design, and Development*. First, results from a pilot assessment on student needs and preferences for an online community are reported. Second, initial steps to design and develop the following three online communities are described:

1. An online community to conduct program orientation for students enrolled in an online Master's program
2. An online community to perform formative and summative assessment for Master's students
3. An online community to provide an environment of supports and communications for education doctoral students

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Online Community**

In the literature, there are a variety of descriptions that define the term *community* (Brown, 2001; Dede, 1996; Goodsell & Williamson, 2008). A definition from the Merriam-Webster dictionary, "an interacting population of individuals with a common characteristic or interest in a common location within a larger society" (Merriam-Webster, 2009), was used initially in our experiences to develop the three online communities. Basically, two major attributes of a community need to be defined first: (a) people who the community serves, and (b) purposes of the community (Brown, 2001). Then a list of decisions needs to be made on: (a) functions of the community, (b) format or platform on which all community activities take place, (c) operation and administration of the community, and (d) other considerations for the particular population involved (Liu & D'Andrea, 2009; Schlager & Fusco, 2003; Shrivastava, 1999).

Over the past decade, educators' online community practice and research have conceptually

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