

Chapter 14

If You Build It, They Will Come: Student Clubs in the Digital World

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ABSTRACT

Students attending traditional or online universities will benefit from membership in student-run virtual clubs. This chapter provides specific information about tools used to create, administer, and motivate participation in virtual university clubs. To enhance the club experience, suggestions are offered for creating interactive clubrooms, utilizing specific social media tools, and providing unique club events all as a virtual experience. A case study is included to demonstrate how students of a major online university participate in virtual club events. Results of this case study indicate a correlation between students who can easily access club tools and events with participation. Further, students who participate in clubs report greater satisfaction with their overall university experience and increased confidence in professional skills.

INTRODUCTION

When online universities built their first campuses twenty years ago, the focus was on providing a unique space for students and their professors to exchange messages and assignments. These learning environments were primitive as they mostly consisted of asynchronous chat boards. There was no way for students and professors to customize their experience of the classroom or to use it to socialize in it. Over the past twenty years, these learning environments have transformed from primitive chat boards to rich, interactive tools that provide opportunities for asynchronous and synchronous experiences. Whereas earlier learning environments were not technically advanced enough to support activities outside of the classroom, newer environments do. Many technological advances, even in the past five years, have created opportunities for professors and their students to develop online virtual clubs using both synchronous and asynchronous tools (Dede & Barab, 2018). The future of virtual clubs is exciting as some university club advisors utilize three-dimensional spaces (avatar learning) and embed social media tools (e.g. Facebook chat for club meetings).

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Most studies and articles of online learning focus on strategies for building strong online learning communities in the classroom and on tools for student retention. Most of these works describe strategies for creating active learning experiences. Further, much current research explores the use of social media as a communication tool for classrooms and by extension, student organizations. However, few studies suggest best practice strategies for the development and growth of virtual online student organizations using newer technologies and social media tools (Wang, Woo, Quek, Yang, & Liu, 2012). These concepts will be discussed through a review of the research literature, including a case study from one large online virtual student organization, and a discussion of newer technologies and strategies for employing them.

This chapter will introduce readers to best practices in the use of social media for creating a community that transcends classroom borders. The information can be used as a guide for creating new or strengthening existent organizations. The specific sub-sections will provide the reader with information related to components of online student organizations, use of social media as communication and retention tool, practical guide to types of social media tools, online security consideration, best practice strategies, psychology of virtual community participation and discussion of research into the future of online student communities.

Creating strong student organization has been shown to increase club retention, build community in a department, and strengthen student and faculty morale (Stewart, Goodson, Meirtschin, Norwood, & Ezell, 2013). Understanding how to bolster student participation by offering easy to access synchronous and asynchronous activities is important to the creation of a strong organization. The sections of the chapter will provide specific strategies to do this.

BACKGROUND

With the advent of online learning, students and their professors worked together to create learning communities in their classrooms. Most universities grappled with how to create authentic learning experiences in the abstract of virtual classrooms (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010; Smart & Cappel, 2006). To address this, many universities adopted a standard classroom structure that mimicked traditional classrooms. The structure of these classrooms included tools for collaborative learning such as discussion board, live chat areas (both synchronous and asynchronous), and areas for document storage (Zhu, 2012). Most universities who offer distance-learning classes purchase platform services from virtual learning companies who provide the framework for classroom shells. The arrangement of the components is selected and supported by these companies. Therefore, there is not much opportunity for rearranging course structure. Over time, online students and faculty gained comfort interacting within these conceptual spaces in the classroom despite their lack of control of the creation of it (Zhu, Valcke, & Schellens, 2008).

With the expanded use of virtual classes and the inception of online universities, more students warmed to the idea of creating a virtual, academic life. Many students developed relationships with their classmates based solely on virtual interaction creating new possibilities for collaboration (Smith, Coldwell, Smith, & Murphy, 2005). Like pioneers in a new world, college officials studied and proposed tweaks to the online format and course delivery (Veerman & Veldhuis, 2001). The goal was to create interactive experiences that felt like those of a traditional university. Most officials found that student and faculty satisfaction increased with the implementation of innovations that created a sense of personal control over learning (Santhanam, Sasidharan, & Webster, 2008). These innovations enhanced the student's ability to access synchronous (e.g. live lecture) and asynchronous (e.g. discussion threads) features of

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