

## Chapter 5

# Creating Care in the Online Classroom

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter explores care with respect to theoretical concepts including belonging and mattering. The authors utilize feedback from the academic resolution process and draw from faculty experiences to illustrate the unique challenges of the adult online learner and those who work with them. They highlight data from a study that aimed to give voice to the student as well, identifying elements of perceived care that may be particularly impactful in the online environment. Warm, inviting communication and recognition of individuality were particularly valued, suggesting a desire for connection. Finally, the authors identify clear strategies for practical actions to develop meaningful online relationships which may enhance student persistence.*

### CREATING CARING CONNECTIONS IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

Student persistence is one of the hottest topics in higher education. At the University of Arizona Global Campus (UAGC), one unique strategy to increase student persistence involves creating a *Culture of Care*. This culture urges faculty to provide flexibility and a more individualized approach to enhance student engagement. The initial phases of this shift emphasized flexibility, encouraging faculty to provide additional time and allow for resubmissions in the classroom to help students reach the learning outcomes in the course. Three members of the university community with a strong belief in this shift came together to focus on how they can reinforce and help this culture of care evolve. As we determined how we could

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-8908-6.ch005

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impact care and what that might look like in the classroom, we discussed the student experience from a Student Affairs perspective compared to the faculty experiences from the College of Arts and Sciences and the Forbes School of Business and Technology. We then sought to broaden our understanding of care in the online classroom, considering the characteristics of an adult online learner in light of research about student persistence.

Our research about student persistence leans on the work of Vincent Tinto and focuses on belonging, self-efficacy, and meaningful curriculum. (Tinto, 2017). We hoped to enhance and amplify the student perspective by reviewing Tinto's work and other theories for student mattering, connecting, caring, and supporting students. We focused on the student perspective as the best way to determine how and why the culture at our online university should continue to change. According to Tinto (2017), "Universities have to see the issue of persistence through the eyes of their students, hear their voices, engage with their students as partners, learn from their experiences" (p. 6) to understand how they can positively impact student persistence. Given the online modality of our institution, it was essential to understand our learners, what challenges they face, and how that fits within the broader concept of building trust and ensuring faculty engage with students in a way that is meaningful to them.

As staff and faculty of an online institution with a large nontraditional population, we wanted to better understand the experience of the adult learner. We therefore sought to find answers to questions such as how do we, as faculty and staff, impact an adult learner's sense of belonging and know how to support them without seeing them face to face? What are the challenges that students and faculty face in an online environment? How can we show care for our unique student population, thus increasing their connection to the university? How do we build trust in an online accelerated format? What does a meaningful online relationship look like? How can an online institution demonstrate care in a positively impactful way for students?

## **CONSIDERING CONTEXT: WHAT DO ONLINE LEARNERS WANT OR NEED?**

The adult online learner faces unique challenges, especially in an open-access institution, which brings a set of impacts that may not be visible through the computer screen. Adult online learners may come from varying backgrounds and skill levels. Though academic preparedness does play a role in failure to thrive at the college level, non-academic or affective factors (i.e., personal variables such as self-confidence or motivation) present additional challenges (Fowler & Boylan, 2010). With an accelerated online course format and little time to build lasting relationships, students pursuing online education may feel disconnected or unsupported, especially given adult learners' additional obligations (e.g., work and family life). To successfully navigate these challenges, students need adequate support. Though faculty members may be willing to support students, they may not be fully aware of existing resources or opportunities to demonstrate care or identify students who could benefit from additional support services. Students may drop, fail, or even leave the institution because they do not perceive or receive support and flexibility from instructors and staff.

## **Hierarchy of Needs as Applied to Students**

Student persistence is a crucial focus of higher education institutions. As the world changes, so do the needs of our students. Each year may bring about a different challenge for our student body, including

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