

Chapter 8

A “Behind the Screens” Look at Humanizing Online Learning Spaces

Crystal Neumann

American College of Education, USA

Audra Pickett

American College of Education, USA

ABSTRACT

With recent advances in technology and education, it is important to explore programs, applications, and efforts which assist with interaction and humanizing online learning. Achieving student engagement goals for an online institution were evaluated through observations, document reviews, and narratives highlighting the best practices and achievements from American College of Education (ACE). Techniques ACE uses to promote faculty and student engagement within the online environment will be identified. Get a “behind the screens” look at how online communities can be built by promoting engagement techniques, such as implementing additional software applications, developing digital toolboxes for students, promoting the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (DEI) Center, implementing a Virtual Student Wellness Center, and embracing the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI). The chapter explores the increasing availability of educational technology useful for engaging student interaction in the classroom.

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INTRODUCTION

The chapter aims to articulate best practices the academics and curriculum departments implemented to impact the goals of increasing student and staff engagement in the online teaching and learning environment. The strategies, tools, and examples of building an online community could support other institutions that are in the nascent phases of developing an online learning platform or seek to improve opportunities to humanize online teaching and learning. Collaboration was necessary to build a future to preserve academic quality and exceptional student outcomes. Diversity within the student body creates a need for modifications within the higher education environment (Williams et al., 2018). With a need to support a diverse population of students and the online learning environment, collaboration emerged to create additional resources to make the learning experience feel more humanized. The student engagement goals, obstacles, and successes implemented by a for-profit, Benefit Corporation, an online higher education institution, American College of Education are explored.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), 60% of college students take at least one of their courses online, and 47% of college students complete all their courses online. Courses are synchronous, asynchronous, or a combination of the two. Synchronous courses present student engagement challenges for reasons like decreased interpersonal communication and instructor feedback (Gimpel, 2022; Landrum et al., 2021). Asynchronous course disengagement is even more pronounced. Factors such as a lack of teacher and peer presence can adversely affect asynchronous course engagement (Ozogul et al., 2022). Several strategies exist to increase online student engagement (Gimpel, 2022; Tsai et al., 2021). Gimpel (2022) noted that student engagement is high when instructors are quick to respond to discussion board posts or feedback on assignments, refer to the student by name, use interactive tools like whiteboards or Zoom, and are actively present in the classroom. Tsai et al (2021) found that interactive technological course activities help keep the student's attention and increases student learning. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate best practices on how the academic and curriculum departments at the American College of Education (ACE) impact student engagement goals. The best practices were reviewed via observations, document reviews, and narratives from the academic and curriculum departments.

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