

CONNECTING STUDENTS AT A DISTANCE: DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING A VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

As the communication and information needs of academic programs with distance education components grow, outreach becomes a greater challenge. As a result, academic programs need to expand their perspectives and offer a flexible, informative, safe, and connected environment to fit the new paradigm of “virtual” community relationships for participants. This paper discusses one recent case of developing an online community to serve the interaction, communication, and information needs of a group of library and information science program participants.

KEYWORDS

Community building, online communities, distance learning

1. INTRODUCTION

Community building has been long upheld as a way to shape social interaction and provide a common foundation for connectedness among its members. Preece (2000) defines “online” communities in a similar manner in that they represent people who interact to satisfy their own needs or roles, have a shared purpose, act within a determined set of policies and guidelines, and are supported by a “computer system” which facilitates interaction, information sharing, and social connectedness.

However, there are subtle differences that characterize an online community compared to a traditional community. Palloff and Pratt (1999) defined several elements common and necessary to building the essence of an online community, including the ability for members to interact, to be assured of privacy (secure space), and to create a sense of presence, but not necessarily physical in nature. They further define community as a place where the participants are interdependent and can share common practices, involved in something larger than the individuals themselves.

As the University of South Florida School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) distance learning student base continuously grows, the need for student outreach and connectivity heightens. The program determined that a virtual community would create a more connected and informed group of students and faculty in which community members would be encouraged to interact within a secured virtual environment. The basis of the SLIS community is in alignment with much of the current research and rationale for developing online community between students and faculty.

2. CASE STUDY: THE USF SLIS VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

2.1 History

The University of South Florida School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) program exhibited vigorous growth in its distance learning student base over the past decade. SLIS characterizes its distance learning students as those that are in locations other than the Tampa campus, attend classes at other locations throughout the state of Florida, or take any of their courses via the World Wide Web. As more and more students follow a distance or blended student model, the SLIS program needs “electronically connect” to them. SLIS is now striving to create a virtual learning, socializing, networking, and mentoring environment that encourages the professional/educational growth and development of program participants.

For years the USF SLIS program served distance students in various learning environments, from face-to-face teaching at distance campuses to web-enhanced and fully web-based courses. As the number of distance students and program sites increased, the need to communicate rapidly with distance students became essential. The first attempts at outreach were in the form of electronic communication lists that served both students and faculty. Students joined the main list when they enrolled in the program and often lingered after graduating, continuing the USF SLIS connection, contributing to discussions, and keeping up with what was happening in the SLIS program. Announcements, discussions, program changes, course offerings, and current events in the field were common topics discussed on the list. The list became so prolific in its content and so diverse in its audience over the years, the need was felt to create a defined virtual community specifically for important program information, announcements and student/faculty interaction.

Initiating a virtual community received positive support from faculty, students, and staff as it expanded the service, information, and communications between the program and students. After a brief test period, the faculty voted to establish the community as the program’s official communication tool. The decision was partly based on the alignment of the SLIS program community with communications initiatives and practices at the university level. USF uses a global student email system as its official communication device. In addition, USF adopted a customized portal from Blackboard, known as myUSF, as its primary course and communication system, with plans to evolve it into a “one stop shop” for course access, communication, virtual library access, registration, financial aid, accounting, grades, and an array of other services.

2.2 Planning and Organizing

Once the decision was made to construct an online community, fundamental planning began concerning its development, implementation, and maintenance. Because the need for outreach and communication was an immediate priority, the community was initially implemented in a basic beta version. This strategy allowed the SLIS program to attend to the immediate needs of the community while the long-range goals, elements, and organization could be determined and a USF system upgrade could be implemented. Program announcements, program related documents, contact information, and topical discussion boards were the mainstays of the community. The myUSF environment was chosen for the virtual community because it was immediately available, user friendly, familiar to students and faculty through current web course participation, part of USF’s long-range web portal strategy (which includes a continuing commitment to support and develop the portal), and contained ready-to-use communication and other tools. This “rapid prototype” model provided a pragmatic approach. Once the crucial processes and methods for communication were established, a needs assessment and formative feedback instruments could be developed and deployed to assist in the continued development of future community goals and supporting tools. As a value added component, including the community members as part of the developmental process could act as a community building exercise in itself, as it promotes ownership and collaboration among the members.

2.2.1 Developmental Strategies

The initial design team was developed as an ad hoc committee of the Student Affairs Committee under the SLIS governance structure. It consists of administrators, faculty, staff, an instructional designer, and a student representative. The group determined the initial structure, administration, and communications processing of the community. As the community initially functions, a needs assessment survey is being constructed and administered and focus groups comprised of faculty, students, and other affiliates (alumni, school supporters,

employers, and advisory committee members) are being developed to provide formative feedback concerning the purpose, elements, structure, and functioning of the community.

During the initial development stages, the primary considerations for the community were communications and community building among students, faculty, and the program. Particular areas were given first consideration in development. A screen capture of the community interface entry page (Figure 1.) and descriptions of the community areas appear below:



Figure 1. myUSF SLIS Community entry page

2.2.2 Announcements

Announcements act as the primary method of SLIS program and course-oriented communications to students. Because most of the students are taking a course (fully web-based or web-enhanced) that has a Blackboard component, they are logging into the myUSF portal multiple times per week. The announcements feature of the interface alerts them of any new announcements from the SLIS program community. In addition to the announcements area, important or timely information is also emailed directly to students through the community portal interface to ensure that the student will receive the communication.

2.2.3 Documents, Forms, Resources and other Information

Relevant documents and information are available to program participants (faculty, students and staff) within the community site where they can be easily organized, stored, and retrieved from within the community folders. They include electronic versions of forms and information pieces such as the student's program plan of study, fieldwork guidelines, comprehensive exam requirements, and independent study forms. Documents are made available in multiple formats to facilitate accessibility. Valuable Internet resources on relevant topics for students in the program are also provided.

2.2.4 Communication and Communication Tools

The SLIS program encourages effective and timely communication. One-way and two-way communications are facilitated through various means available through the myUSF SLIS community site. Particular communications devices are utilized based on the purpose and goals of the communication.

Synchronous communications occur through scheduled chat sessions and provide a real time discussion venue for faculty, students, advisors, administrators, graduate assistants, and staff. Current program issues, online orientations, and Q & A sessions take place using this format. When a more elaborate or content rich presentation is warranted, a virtual classroom with chat, Internet, and whiteboard capabilities is available.

Creation and utilization of discussion boards allow various topics to be presented and discussed asynchronously by those interested in the particular topic. Staff check daily for general program questions posted by students or other community members. Frequently asked questions are identified and categorized into a FAQs page on the school's website. Community members can request that discussion boards be created to stimulate dialogue and idea sharing among members on various topics.

As mentioned above, announcements are used to provide a stable archive of program information, event, or procedural communications. Students receive announcement prompts when logging into their web courses. Email is used when a more timely manner of communication or when information needs to be proactively "pushed" to community participants. It is often used in conjunction with announcements, providing multiple communication channels to community members.

Document sharing is used when particular forms or existing documents communicate ideas or information between the program and community members. A document-sharing tool, the Digital Drop Box, allows

groups (among designated group members, such as an advising group) or individuals (between the individual and the SLIS program) to send and receive particular documents through the community site.

2.2.5 Student Advising

Advising is a major consideration in outreach and communications between SLIS students and faculty. In response to the recommendations by the American Library Association (ALA) Committee on Accreditation (COA), a team of SLIS faculty conducted a review of the current advising process and practices. It was determined by the reviewers that an advising process that would provide accurate documentation, consistency in the process, and increased outreach and connection to students, especially at a distance, was needed. The process is under development and is intended to be a vital part of the SLIS virtual community.

Virtual advising “groups” were established comprised of a faculty advisor, their student advisees, and supporting staff (to provide maintenance and technical support). The advisor (faculty) uses the private virtual space, complete with communication tools, to advise and mentor students as a group or individually. The available tools include a virtual meeting place with chat and whiteboard, electronic discussion boards for asynchronous dialogue, an email list, and document sharing capabilities.

3. CONCLUSION

There are several considerations in the development of the SLIS online program community that are vital to its success. Preliminary feedback from participants indicated that timely and relevant communications is one of the most critical aspects of the community. Therefore, program administrators found it necessary to communicate with students concurrently via email and announcements to increase the probability of the students’ receipt of information. Using the myUSF portal allowed program administrators to take advantage of the global mail list that was already mandated as the official communication tool by the University.

A second favored feature reported are the electronic discussion boards which help distance participants stay connected to their peers and program administrators/faculty. Participants interact and keep abreast of pertinent information, such as scholarships, career information, courses offerings, and library related issues.

Another consideration is the mechanism to maintain and encourage an extended SLIS community. Currently SLIS faculty, staff, and students all have the ability to become community members as part of the official USF system, but outside community affiliates such as alumni, prospective employers, and advisory board members indicate that they want to be part of the program community, but are excluded from official access to the portal. SLIS is determined to keep those affiliates connected to the school’s program and activities and is developing alternative solutions including supplemental communication lists, updated electronic newsletters, “off-site” discussion boards, websites, and providing “guest access”.

Finally, faculty-student advising groups, a much anticipated and essential feature, are getting positive support from participants. SLIS is currently testing the online advising process and user tools, along with developing guidelines for the effective use of the groups and training and support for users.

The USF Graduate School of Library and Information Science Program Community is in its infant stages. Its longevity and effectiveness depend greatly on keeping the underlying administrative infrastructure in tact and the technology functioning, and having appropriate back-up communications methods in place outside of the portal. In addition, SLIS must continuously encourage the interaction and information exchange among participants, keep clear goals, promote member buy-in, and establish guidelines for the community’s purpose to ensure future success.

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