

1. Working Concept

"Fostering Student Success through Online Learning Communities"

We propose the creation and implementation of online learning communities to improve retention rates, success rates, and completion rates for online learners. An online learning community is defined as a group of people united by the same interest—for our purposes the interest is the successful completion of online coursework by our college students. According to Jones, Laufgraben, and Morris, learning communities enhance college students' experiences in several ways:

- 1) enhancing the curriculum;
- 2) supporting the transition to college by creating connections between and among students and their peers, teachers, and disciplines;
- 3) extending learning beyond the classroom;
- 4) empowering students to be more active participants in their learning and in their academic decision-making. (249)

Learning communities also increase students' levels of intellectual engagement and engagement with their peers, which, in turn, leads to higher retention rates, success rates, and completion rates¹.

2. Rationale for the Topic, Problem Statement, and Opportunity for Growth

E-Learning has grown significantly since its inception at MGCCC, and many students take online courses. However, students do not perform as well in online classes as they do in traditional face-to-face classes² and far fewer of them complete their studies within three years³. Students have cited a lack of community as a shortcoming of online classes. One of Ashleigh Ferguson's students actually requests an online community:

Both the MGCCC and the Canvas websites/apps are somewhat cumbersome to navigate, which increases the time commitment to the online learning process. Also, because online students have minimal interaction with peers and instructors, they are unable to take advantage of the community learning experience that traditional students find useful, such as peer review and collaboration, as well as real-time feedback from instructors. Perhaps MGCCC could consider developing an online community, or virtual campus, specifically designed to cater to distance learners, which would improve and enhance this experience for both students and instructors.

Another of her students shares a similar sentiment:

Online courses are a great and innovative way for students to broaden their way of learning in this era of laptops and iPhones. Students can now stay within the comfort and familiarity of

¹ Bonet, Giselle and Barbara R. Walters. "High Impact Practices." *College Student Journal*. 224-235.

² Institutional Research reports that online-only students have an 82.78% success rate (earn A, B, or C) whereas traditional-only students have an 87.68% success rate. Online-only students also have a higher withdrawal rate, 14.17%, than traditional-only students, 11.02%.

³ Of the cohort that entered MGCCC in fall 2013, 11.76% of online-only students graduated within three years while 30.07% of traditional-only students graduated within three years.

their home or some local hotspot they like to go to. The only con to this slightly new concept is the lack of humanity behind it. Instead of physical interactions with teachers and fellow students does cause great concern for future students and teachers alike.

To address these problems, we propose the creation and implementation of online learning communities. In Gómez's virtual community of practice dissertation, his research concluded that online learners create a safety-net with their ever-present group of participants to whom they can reach out for assistance. Additionally, the constant engagement and feedback among learners and the online instructor provided a feeling of belonging, as Gómez concluded. For these aforementioned reasons, we propose that MGCCC's online learning communities will replicate the success of face-to-face classes in the areas of increasing student retention, success, and completion^[1].

3. Expected Outcomes/Impact on Student Learning or Student Success

We expect to retain more online students⁴, and we expect online students to have a higher success rate and higher completion rate. The ultimate goal is to have retention rates, success rates, and completion rates meet or exceed the retention rates, success rates, and completion rates of students in face-to-face classes.

4. Strategies/Actions to Be Implemented

Admissions will create groups of no more than twenty-four students based on the students' area of academic interest; i.e., students interested in science, art, humanities, math, engineering, etc. These students will take at least two classes together each semester throughout the Associate of Arts core. E-Learning will ensure that the students are placed into the same sections of these two classes each semester.

The research on communities of practice by Wenger-Trayner support the strategies and actions that we will implement for MGCCC's Online Learning Communities. Wenger-Trayner posited that a community of practice is guided by three main characteristics: (1) the domain; (2) the community; and (3) the practice.

When creating MGCCC's Online Learning Communities Wenger-Trayner's three characteristics will be followed. First, instructors of the two core classes should provide weekly discussions and collaborative assignments that require not only the various tools that are included in the Canvas Learning Management System (LMS), but also the use of different applications that are connected to Office 365. Students will be required to check in and contribute to their courses each week. Wenger-Trayner define the domain as the "general area of interest", thus for MGCCC's Online Learning Communities, the domain is then the utilization of Canvas and Office-365 for online instruction/learning.

In addition to taking at least two classes together, each group of students will be placed into a one-hour, non-credit support/mentoring class. The instructor of the virtual mentoring course might be an instructor from one of their core community courses, or she or he might be an instructor who is

⁴ From fall 2016 to spring 2017, we retained 54.14% of online-only students whereas we retained 75.96% of traditional-only students during the same period.

not teaching one of the core community classes.

According to Wenger-Trayner, in order to maximize the benefits of being part of an online learning community, participants of the community must be readily "engaged in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information; they will learn from each other" (qtd. in Gómez 24). This practice among students in MGCCC's Online Learning Communities is what Wenger-Trayner posit as the community. Furthermore, the online learning community instructors will share information and advice, help students solve problems related to online learning, and because online students come with varying degrees of technology knowledge, encourage students to contribute to the virtual mentoring course any knowledge about navigating through Canvas.

Consequently, the ongoing virtual communication between the instructor and his/her students will create what Wenger-Trayner label as the practice. The practice is the "development of a share repertoire of resources, experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems". This virtual toolbox of technology resources that will have been created in class will always be available to help our MGCCC's online students succeed in other online courses.

5. Student Cohort

The initial cohort will consist of incoming freshmen who are 100% online students. By participating in the cohort, these students will (a) support and encourage each other in their online courses; (b) exchange new learning methods with various technology tools; and (c) discuss problems that they all have in common about their online college career.

6. Measurement/Assessment

We will use retention rates, success rates, and completion rates, along with student feedback, to assess the success of the learning communities. We will measure retention rates and success rates each semester. We will measure completion rates every three years.

7. Resources

While admissions, eLearning, and each department will be involved in its implementation, this proposal should not require a large expenditure of funds. We will need to compensate instructors for teaching the one-hour support class. Instructors will volunteer to teach the courses selected to be included in the virtual community initiative, but the courses will be part of their regular course load. E-Learning will ensure that the students are enrolled in the proper sections of the courses.

8. Name(s) and Contact Information

Contributors:

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