Story of a conference: Distance education students' experiences in a departmental conference

Marisa Exter *, Nichole Harlin, Barbara Bichelmeyer

Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, W. W. Wright Education Building, Room 2276 201 North Rose Avenue Bloomington, IN 47405-1006, USA

Abstract

This case study examines the impact of a program-wide event on the sense of community in a distance education program. The departmental conference examined in this study is intended to help students gain experience in sharing their ideas and plays a large role in building a sense of community among residential students and faculty. This study examines an effort to extend this community-building role to students enrolled in the department's fully online Distance Masters and Certificate programs. The study explores whether these students felt a need for such community-building experiences, what they gained from this experience, and what can be learned from what went well and what could be improved in the organization of the conference. Findings indicate that active participants felt an increased sense of community, but that not all students were interested in this type of community-building activity.
© 2007 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Online learning; Distance education; Distance education program; Sense of community; Graduate education; Post-secondary education; Social interaction; Community; Connectedness

This case study examines a graduate-student-run departmental conference at a large Midwestern US university. The conference started out as a class project in one of the department's residential courses. Its purpose is to provide a safe venue for graduate students to practice planning, organizing, attending, and presenting at professional conferences. Over the last 7 years, the conference has grown into a departmental activity that includes a conference coordinator, special events, and keynote speakers. The attendee population for the conference has grown over time to include residential PhD and Masters students, Distance Masters and Distance Certificate students, faculty, alumni, recruiters, and guests from other departments and universities. In previous years, each conference coordinator has put his or her own mark on the conference.

In Spring 2007, the authors served as the conference coordinator, assistant conference coordinator, and faculty research advisor. Because of the first author's previous involvement in the department's Distance Education program evaluation and the second author's position as the Distance Education coordinator for the department, we decided to include students from the Distance Masters (a fully online Masters program) and Distance Certificate (an online non-degree-seeking program) in the planning and organizing of the conference by involving them in the conference planning committee and sub-committees. We felt that it would be valuable to understand what motivated students to become involved as volunteers or participants and how participation in this type of event impacted their experiences with the degree or certificate program as a whole. The organizers hoped that participation in this type of event would foster a program-level sense of community for the distance students, who do not have many opportunities to interact with others not enrolled in their courses.

1. Literature review

Distance education has been traditionally defined as "instructions through print or electronic communications media to persons engaged in planned learning in a place or time different from that of the instructor or instructors" (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004, p. 358). However, as web-

---

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: mexter@indiana.edu (M. Exter), nharlin@indiana.edu (N. Harlin), bic@indiana.edu (B. Bichelmeyer).

based technologies mature and distance courses are used to teach more diverse subject matter, the definition of distance education is being expanded to include interactive, two-way communication (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004). With the rise in the number of fully online degree programs from traditional universities, it has become important to determine how these programs can support other types of interactions which have long been seen as critical factors in traditional residential programs (Kuh, 2006; Rovai, 2002a).

Retention issues are a particular concern for universities supporting distance education options. The dropout rate in distance education programs has been cited as anywhere between 10 and 50% in various studies (Berge & Huang, 2004; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Raven, 2000; Rovai, 2002a,b; Tyler-Smith, 2006), and is generally assumed to be 10–20% higher than in traditional programs (Rovai, 2002b; Tyler-Smith, 2006). Reasons for retention issues are complex and include the students' backgrounds, student support available at the university level, as well as various types of interaction (Berge & Huang, 2004; Rovai, 2002b; Tyler-Smith, 2006). A few recent studies indicate the importance of a sense of community in student retention and success (Dawson, 2006; Shea, Sau Li, & Pickett, 2006).

Within educational contexts, the concept of community plays a role at multiple levels. In a review of previous social psychology literature, Rovai (2002a) found the following common proposed features of sense of community: "... mutual interdependence among members, sense of belonging, connectedness, spirit, trust, interactivity, common expectations, shared values and goals, and overlapping histories among members" (p. 4). Wilson (2001) categorizes sense of community into what he called five *learning groups*: *courses, learning cohorts, academic programs and schools, professional groups,* and *volunteer interest groups*. Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap (2003) divide them into *university-level* and *local social* contexts. Wilson's courses learning group and Ludwig-Hardman's and Dunlap's local social contexts both refer to the sense of community with a single course. However, sense of community can also play an important role outside of individual courses and specific learning goals. Wilson refers to this in his learning groups as *academic programs and schools*. Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap refer to this as the *university social context*. For the purposes of this paper, we will refer to *program-level community* as the sense of community that students perceive outside of courses but within an academic department or degree program.

Several authors suggest that program-level sense of community is vital to developing a quality distance education program (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2001b; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; The Faculty Initiative, 1998; Wilson, 2001). The Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (2001a) includes in its best practices recommendations "including off-campus students in institutional publications and events, including these students in definitions of the academic community through such mechanisms as student government representation, invitations to campus events including graduation ceremonies, and similar strategies of inclusion" (p. 12). Wilson (2001) suggests offering "extended opportunities for collaboration … user-friendly communication tools … [and] tools for

organizing, evaluating, and publishing knowledge, available to all group members with expectations for use" (p. 4).

Although we have not been able to locate many empirical studies about building a sense of community at the program level, we can learn from studies aimed at investigating and creating a sense of community at the course level. For example, Rovai (2002c) conducted a study of 27 online courses examining whether sense of community was related to perceived cognitive learning and persistence in online courses. He found that sense of community has an impact on both dropout rate and perceived cognitive learning, which are important factors in program-level success. Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap (2003) conducted a case study at a university about the impact of learner support services for online students. Although the scaffolding described in their study focuses on building course-level sense of community, similar scaffolds might be useful at a program level.

2. Purpose of the study

This preliminary case study will examine the impacts of a program-wide event on the sense of community in a distance program. The departmental conference studied was originally intended to help students gain "experience writing and sharing their ideas with each other" (E. Boling, personal communication, March 27, 2007). However, in the 7 years of its existence, the annual conference has taken on an additional role in building a sense of an academic and professional community among the traditional residential students and faculty in the department. This study describes the impact of an attempt to extend this community-building role to the Distance Masters and Distance Certificate students, who attend all online courses and, for the most part, do not live in close proximity to the campus. This study will explore whether these students feel a need for such community-building experiences, what they gained from this particular experience, and what can be learned from what went well and what could have been done better in the organization of the conference.

The research questions addressed in this study are "How does a departmental conference effect distance education students' perceptions of their own role in the program-level community?" and "What factors influence distance education students' abilities to participate meaningfully in a departmental conference?"

3. Materials and methods

Because this was intended to be an exploratory study of the impact of this event on a specific group of students, a case-study design was used to provide a rich preliminary sketch of students' responses to their experiences.

3.1. Context

The conference lasted 2 days. The conference organization offered two attendance options: the traditional in-person attendance and remote attendance via Macromedia Breeze© teleconferencing software (referred to as Breeze). Approximately 125 residential students, distance students, faculty and