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Online Student Community Building

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Abstract

Online students are a relatively new concept to the education world. With the rise of the Covid-19 pandemic and the changing needs of the public, online courses have become much more prevalent and popular for several reasons. Online students are at a great disadvantage when it comes to in-person activities such as networking with community members, making friendships, and building relationships with both their peers and professors. The Boise State Treehouse Program has elected to try and combat these problems by introducing an online meeting place like a club setting. The treehouse program has held weekly meetings focused on giving students the opportunity to network in an online setting, and giving students time to meet peers who they can better connect with and relate to.

Keywords: Networking, Community Building, Online

Section 1: Introduction

The sole reason I became an online student was because it was the only way I could take the degree path that I wanted, but because of that decision I found myself craving social interaction. Not only did I crave social interaction, but I felt as though I needed an outlet to de-stress and spend time with others. According to an article by Purdue Global (Purdue 2018), “45% of college students said they experience "more than average stress," and 87% said they felt overwhelmed by all they had to do”. One of the direct ways to combat stress, as outlined in the article, is to “Surround yourself with family and/or friends who lift you up, encourage you, listen without judgment, and provide sound perspective.” As an online student there is never any in-person interaction with professors, peers, and there is also a lack of resources for those online-students who are seeking some sort of relationship building. To find some form of social interaction I turned to taking unnecessary in-person classes, joining on-campus clubs, and finding people with whom I could actually interact with face-face. I felt as though there was simply a lack of resources for non-traditional students in need of resources that were readily available for students on-campus. At this time, I learned about the Boise State Bachelor of Applied Science Treehouse Program (BAS/IPS Program). The Treehouse Program is an online Zoom meeting meant specifically for online students to interact with other students and create opportunities for online networking and professional development. The expected outcomes of this program are: increased social interaction for online students, the ability to directly answer questions that students have regarding their degree path, and to provide a space where students can interact freely with one another. I joined the Treehouse Program as a student leader in charge of hosting meetings, announcing events, creating topics of discussion, coordinating special guest speakers from the community, and ensuring student engagement. Over the course of 14 weeks, I

hosted meetings in coordination with other program instructors including Margaret Sass, Jovy Schur, Michelle Bennett, and Boise State Alumni Jeff Cullers. Throughout the course of these 14 weeks several topics were discussed such as: what does it mean to be a graduate student? how to prevent anxiety and burnout, and how to find a job once a student has passed graduation.

Meetings were open to all online students in the Bachelor of Applied Science or Interdisciplinary professional studies degree paths at Boise State. As such, meetings largely consisted of online students wanting to learn more about their degree and spend time with peers of similar interests. To qualitatively measure the outcomes of this project, a student survey was conducted at the end of the 14 weeks, instructor feedback was obtained, comments and social media were reviewed.

Section 2: Elements Coming Together

One of the main benefits of the Treehouse Zoom meetings was the flexibility of the meetings. Catering to the needs and wants of the students was a focal point of every meeting that was held, and discussion topics centered around questions that students were facing. Moreover, the structure of our Treehouse meetings is very different from a traditional Zoom meeting. In a traditional Zoom meeting, a teacher usually lectures to a group of students who are silently taking notes. According to an article by The Outlook in reference to the difficulty of making friends in an online setting (Quintanilla 2021), “Many have found it difficult to create connections with their peers and professors...It is harder to start a conversation with someone on Zoom.” To combat the struggle that is attached to creating connections during a Zoom meeting, the Treehouse Zoom meetings were much more an open discussion than a lecture. Students were free to openly talk during the meetings and share personal experiences with their peers, students were also able to come as they pleased. Some students listened to our meeting as background

noise while working on assignments, while other students were in the process of cooking dinner while attending our meetings.

I have found through my work in the Treehouse Program that I am not alone in the need for social interaction as an online student at Boise State. Many of the helpers who helped to lead or who attended our meetings were past alumni of the Applied Science and Interdisciplinary Studies programs who had a passion for the Treehouse program. More than just social interaction, part of the Treehouse program has been addressing the emotional intelligence of those in attendance. The needs of the students who attended Treehouse meetings varied greatly, and as such our meeting topics were changed to meet the needs of our students. Discussions were centered around various topics such as work-life balance, how to properly use Linked-In effectively, the various degree paths in the BAS/IPS program and finding a job outside of college. These discussions reflect the needs of the students in attendance. While the courses students take within their programs seek to teach general knowledge to the student base, students obviously have more questions than what the coursework of a class can teach. I see the Treehouse meetings as providing not only a means for social interaction, but an outlet for deeper learning and career development. According to an article by Concordia University (Concordia 2022) “Networking is important because it enables you to find job opportunities, help others looking for work, and advance your career.” The Treehouse Program encouraged networking through the lens of peer-to-peer connections and learning from the experiences of others.

According to an article by Grand Canyon University pertaining to the benefits of school clubs,(Grand 2022) “clubs can build your social support network...lower stress levels...expand your professional networking opportunities.” In many ways, the Treehouse program seeks to provide the same benefits as a school-sponsored club but in an online capacity. Treehouse

meetings are not like a traditional classroom but much more akin to a social gathering where people are free to be themselves. I think that this distinction of our meetings being much more open and freer, opens the way for the audience to be much more willing to participate and ask much harder questions. On top of our club meetings being much more sociable, they also have ever changing topics which can be customized to cater to the questions and needs of those in attendance. Lastly, the Treehouse Program is a space where students from similar backgrounds can relate to each other. One of the sections of our Treehouse program is the after-party. The first thirty minutes of our discussions are based around a topic that has been preselected based on questions students have asked previously. The last thirty minutes of our meetings, students were able to discuss freely with one another about their lives, shared struggles, and even discuss how to start a podcast. At Boise State University, there is no other online program like the Treehouse Program approach to creating a meeting space where online students can interact socially as if they were in a physical club-setting on campus. This alone makes our program unique and innovative.

One of the reasons that the Treehouse Program is called a Treehouse is to denote the fact that, like a treehouse, the setting of our meetings is very casual and playful. People are meant to have fun at our meetings and truly be free from judgment to learn and bounce ideas off their peers. This is similar to the focus of many on-campus clubs seeking to form a space where like-minded individuals can brainstorm ideas and form strong bonds. Many of the students who attend our treehouses come from similar backgrounds. Our attendees are mainly individuals returning to college after spending many years within the workforce. According to an article by News in Health (U.S. 2021), “Positive and negative peer influences can affect more than just your behavior. They can also change the way you feel.” Social interaction is a necessity of life

and by establishing a peer connection, students can establish moments to de-stress and refocus themselves on their studying.

Section 3: Results

There are several ways that I have sought to measure the impact and outcomes of this project. These include: a) a survey given to attendees of the Treehouse meetings, b) feedback given to me from the instructors with whom I have been able to work h, and c) feedback received in the form of likes, comments and RSVP's made on our program's Facebook page. Our attendance between meetings varied greatly whereas some nights we would have up to ten people in attendance and other nights we would have four. Looking at the survey results (see appendix) some of the responses to students' favorite part of our Treehouse meetings include: *"In this online program, it was great to see people connecting."* and *"Meeting others in the program and feeling as though my experience can help someone"*. Students enjoyed the ability to interact with one another and truly be able to learn from the experiences of others. I would say that students who attended truly benefited from the ability to meet people in similar walks of life who have varying degrees of experience in different fields. The various backgrounds of the people in our meetings can provide great insight into some of the problems students are facing. Going further into the survey, most students responded that they were neutral to returning to our Treehouse Meetings. This could be a result of many factors, one student said about the meetings themselves *"More casual! No "real" agenda. Just show up to chit-chat. I love the name "Treehouse" but maybe it should be changed altogether to completely revamp everything to make the whole initiative fresh and new."* It is possible that even though the aim of the meetings was to be extremely casual, students still crave an even more relaxed atmosphere. In discussions with the supervisors I worked with on this project, they suggested that it is possible students do

not want to learn during these meetings, but would rather spend time simply interacting with others and spending time with peers having casual discussion. Lastly, in relation to the topics that were discussed throughout the semester, one student said they would love to learn more about “ *general topics like how people meet their social needs, how to stay motivated, etc.*”

Attendance at our meetings was generally very scattered. Looking at announcements advertising our events on Facebook, certain events definitely held more appeal than others in terms of the discussion topic. Nights that surrounded topics such as “How to Market Yourself on Linked-In” had several people RSVP to attend, but other topics such as “ Certificates in Public Health” had much fewer electing to attend. General topics that appeal to a greater variety of people attract a larger audience and as such changes could be made to reflect that in the future.

Section 4: Conclusion

Overall, from the results of the survey, I would conclude that students did enjoy the Treehouse meetings, but there was still a sense of rigidity to the meetings themselves. I believe that our meetings were very casual, and people were able to mostly relax, but after seeing the results of the project I would say more could be done to make the meetings even less structured. It surprised me that many people were neutral about continuously attending meetings, and I would be interested to learn more about whether this is a result of outside influences, or a problem with the meetings themselves. It is possible that weekly one-hour meetings are simply too much time to ask from students, or having the meeting occur weekly is too frequent to encourage reoccurring attendance from students. I anticipated that people would overall enjoy the meetings, but I truthfully did not expect there to be a desire for the meetings to be more casual and free-flowing as opposed to being centered around a specific topic of discussion. While I still see a need for some meetings to have a topic to address student’s needs, it is possible that

some meetings are free-flowing and once a month meetings could have a discussion topic. Furthermore I think that I would revamp the way meetings are advertised by creating a texting list, and group chat for those interested in our meetings. Not everyone looks at their facebook pages or Linked-In pages regularly. I believe that we lost a lot of visibility for our meetings by simply posting our events on Facebook and Linked-In. Lastly, I think it would be interesting to convert the Treehouse program into an official campus club to increase visibility for online students and gain access to certain resources the college provides for clubs. I think I gained a lot from my time as a student leader such as collaboration skills, coordination skills, leadership skills, enhancing my ability to work with others and overall event management abilities. Given the chance, I think it would be interesting to see how much further this program could be expanded upon.

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Appendix

1. Link to survey results and a copy of the actual survey sent out:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1jG7NXan9Cg5zWvyeIG4ErPQeWGpAnNLe?usp=sharing>

2. Link to a folder containing screenshots of social media posts, comments and

events:https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1KgoCOigcC4pGcPrZJ_7_NBOfqs81JL02?usp=share_link

3. Link to a video created announcing a Treehouse

Meeting:https://drive.google.com/file/d/1jB5XKf0kctSobUCxmgIYpbPI2CxulRzD/view?usp=share_link

4. Link to emails sent to faculty and staff announcing Treehouse

meetings:https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1EIr3pLGNLeOS6fkrq_iVJQ3phq5G5YTy?usp=share_link