

FOSTERING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN BLENDED LEARNING: CREATIVE STRATEGIES AND BEST PRACTICES

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Abstract

Today, students can graduate from an institution of higher education without ever setting foot on campus. While blended learning and virtual spaces are fostering new opportunities for students to engage and form communities, simply providing these spaces is not enough. This article will illuminate various approaches and creative strategies that can be employed to help strengthen student relationships to their institutions and to each other through blended learning environments. Student engagement with faculty, peers, administrators, and the campus community are indicative of overall student success and sentiment about virtual learning spaces. Nurturing student engagement, through mentoring, networking, and advising should not be an afterthought, but rather integrated into every aspect of programmatic endeavors. As students are increasingly made to navigate both geographical and virtual worlds throughout their academic career, technology and mobility are two constants in their lives. The Masters of International Relations Online Program in the School of International Service at American University in Washington, DC, recognizes the importance of employing a myriad of technologies to foster student engagement and serves as a case study of best practices.

Keywords: student engagement, blended learning, virtual communities, technology, mobility.

1 INTRODUCTION

We don't accomplish anything in this world alone... and whatever happens is the result of the whole tapestry of one's life and all the weavings of individual threads from one to another that creates something. — *Justice Sandra Day O'Connor*

Justice O'Connor was the first woman on the Supreme Court and a strong proponent of civic education, weaving together the efforts of individuals to create sustainable change. Blended and online learning is providing opportunities to bring more and more individuals together for international service and coalition building to address civic concerns across the globe. Creating a virtual or blended learning environment is the easy part. Engaging faculty and students in that tapestry or space can be difficult. Weaving together threads of engagement only further illustrates O'Connor's sentiment, that only through engagement, collective action, and mutual reliance can something be created. Virtual and blended learning environments offer opportunities for students to engage with institutions, peers, administrators, and faculty in a myriad of ways that were unthinkable only a decade ago.

Within American University's School of International Service (SIS), connecting with students by rethinking how available technology provides spaces for interaction and reconceptualizing how students live their lives out across a myriad of boundaries, generates creative and critical opportunities for collaboration through mentoring, networking, and advising. Against a backdrop of the increasing use of technology in learning spaces and the mobility in student's lives, this article will share best practices for creating threads of engagement for online students.

2 TECHNOLOGY: RETHINKING SPACE

Rethinking the ways to conceptualize collaborative spaces to include virtual spaces opens new doors for student engagement with peers, faculty, administrators, and professionals. An increasing number of institutions and individuals are rethinking space and the opportunities that virtual spaces offer. The figures are telling. Sixty-three percent of institutions believe that online learning is an integral part of their long-term strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2016). Institutions are investing in the development and adoption of new technologies, programs to train faculty and staff to incorporate technology into the curriculum, and offices to support the ongoing needs of the campus community. Twenty-eight percent of students take one or more class online throughout their academic program, with convenience, flexibility, and work schedules consistently cited as the top reasons for enrolling in online courses (Levitz, 2016). Students who enroll online are investing their time to learn new technologies,

collaborate virtually, and recognize that the convenience and flexibility of an online degree do not come at the expense of quality. The internet and mobile technologies are revolutionizing how students and faculty locate, share, and construct knowledge. Perceptions of online degrees as they relate to quality of education are beginning to take a turn for the better.

Rethinking space allows for more personalized and student-centered learning, the opportunity to overcome institutional or course capacity issues, access to digitized library holdings and academic literature, and interaction and learning outside of classroom. Creating online spaces and threads of engagement support a community of inquiry that extends well beyond the online classroom and creates dynamic and responsive learning environments.

3 MOBILITY: THE ACADEMIC NOMAD

The School of International Service launched the Masters of Arts in International Relations (MAIR) Online Program in the summer of 2013, with 10 students enrolled in two courses. Three years later, the MAIR program is the largest graduate program in SIS, with approximately 275 students enrolled in over 40 sections each term. In addition to coming to campus for an Immersion experience at some point throughout the program, the MAIR Online curriculum requires students to take core courses in international relations theory, global governance, intercultural communication, international economics and statistics and methodology. Students in the program can choose one of four concentration tracks: International Development, Global Security, United States Foreign Policy and National Security, or International Negotiation and Conflict Resolution. A capstone experience, either a substantial research paper (thesis) or a practicum (group consulting project with a client), and demonstrated foreign language proficiency are the final requirements for graduation.

Courses for the MAIR Online program are created by American University faculty members called course creators, who work with a technology partner to develop professionally recorded lectures, simulations, and interviews with experts in the field. Course creators also develop the curriculum, syllabus, readings, and assessment for each course. Students are expected to watch 80 minutes of asynchronous lectures each week before coming to a synchronous class session lead by content experts called section faculty. Students are expected to watch the lectures, complete the readings, and come to class prepared to engage with the material through debates, simulations, small group work, and discussions.

The MAIR Online student population is diverse and highly mobile.—Students in this program are typically slightly older than their on-campus counterparts. Approximately 40% report some affiliation with the military, stationed stateside and abroad, and 30% are working professionals with 5-7 years of experience in a field relating to international relations. The remaining 10% of the student population consists of recent college graduates with some international experience, such as AmeriCorps, Peace Corp, the Japanese Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program, or other work/study abroad experience. The student body covers 14 different time zones. When you couple this with the number of students that travel and relocate during the program, logging on each week from military bases, hotels, and temporary housing in the field, this presents a unique challenge to program administrators. One student completed coursework from nine different countries before graduating from the program. Mobility is a common narrative thread that dominates the lived realities of students or academic nomads.

Our faculty number close to 100, with course creators and section faculty included. Faculty come from over a dozen countries and speak over 25 different languages. Throughout the duration of the program, faculty have conducted live synchronous sessions from various international destinations where they are permanently based, temporarily traveling, or engaged in work in the field.

With a lens focused on the MAIR Online Program, each of the following sections (mentoring, networking, and advising) focus on developing human connections and creating a sense of belonging to an institution and a campus community in which students may set foot only once in their academic tenure. While academic nomads are, by nature, mobile individuals, with no academic “home”, they do share one constant: the sustained relationships and support networks that come as a result of their engagement throughout the program. How do we achieve that engagement, and keep the student relationship to the university and the program active?—Through a lens grounded in authentic student engagement and inclusivity, below are some of the best practices that offer insight into the ways faculty, administrators, peers, and the campus community at one institution of higher education are connecting with online students.

4 MENTORING

The literature on mentoring is vast and complex, evidenced by the myriad of circumstances, relationships, and outcomes it incorporates, yet resides mostly in the realm of business and organizations. Research looks at the implementation of mentoring to create protégés and prepare individuals for professional pathways. The circumstances surrounding mentoring relationships and the intended knowledge sharing between a mentor and a mentee idealistically illuminate the dialectical relationship, acknowledging there is something for both to learn through the process. The power relations, identities, and circumstances that bring a mentor and mentee together garnished attention in the field as well.

Yet, there are two areas in which the mentoring discourse falls short. First, is a paucity of literature aimed at cross-cultural mentoring. Developing intercultural competency and global dexterity are dependent on mentoring across cultures through authentic experiences and critical dialogues. The increased need for professionals with global perspectives makes cross-cultural mentoring more paramount than ever before. Mentoring is an important activity in education, as students enrolled in institutions of higher education come from varied social, economic, political, and cultural contexts. According to Betty Neal Crutcher (2014), "Cross-cultural mentoring involves an ongoing, intentional, and mutually enriching relationship with someone of a different race, gender, ethnicity, religion, cultural background, socioeconomic background, sexual orientation, or nationality" (p. 24). Cross-cultural mentoring "provide(s) an opportunity within which both individuals can explore cultural differences and experience cognitive and psychosocial growth," (Barker, p. 206). Ideally, cross-cultural mentoring relationships are characterized by and provide a space for assessing culture, valuing diversity, managing the dynamics of difference, and adapting to diversity within a specific context. Yet, cross-cultural mentoring is not without sites of struggle. Trust, power, racism, individual attitudes toward diversity, and organizational climate have the potential to derail well intended cross-cultural mentoring efforts (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2002).

The second area in which the mentoring discourse falls short is the lack of attention given to formal mentoring programs within higher education, which is different from an advising relationship. Yet, because of the diversity among the faculty and the student body, the MAIR Online Program in SIS have a unique opportunity to expanded student engagement through cross-cultural mentoring in a higher education environment, addressing both shortcomings. As SIS continues to prepare students for roles as leaders in the international relations arena, mentoring relationships become an important aspect of engagement for all students, but even more so for online students. Although the School does not have a formal mentoring program, the following best practices illuminate several ways the online student population engages with faculty, peers, and administrators in dialectical forms of mentoring.

4.1 Mentoring: Threads of Engagement

Research agendas: Within SIS, students collaborate with faculty on research and benefit from learning alongside scholars and practitioners in the field. The students in the MAIR Online Program, who are not on campus contribute to research agendas by conducting research on the ground from the international locations where they reside or by virtually connecting with organizations, resources, and databases. Regardless of a student's physical location, the opportunity to be involved in research and a mentoring relationship within the academy provides another aspect of engagement with the campus community. As a result of these collaborations faculty and students travel to conferences, where they present research findings as part of panel discussions or paper presentations.

Peers: The MAIR Online Program student body includes professionals working in an international relations related field and recent college graduates. With students at varying points in their careers, informal mentoring relationships have the potential to develop as students engage in immersive components of the program, attend study groups, or work collaboratively on course projects.

Introductions: Faculty engage students online in many ways, and often well before the start of the course. Students are required to post introductions on the course wall, update their online profiles, schedule an individual appointment with faculty, and exchange emails. Faculty are in contact and sometimes talk with students weeks before the semester begins. These conversations are often the starting point for mentoring relationships, as faculty and students learn more about what motivates and inspires each other. Connections are made and the ability to mentor across physical boundaries is more and more becoming a reality with available technology. In addition, faculty in the program are encouraged to make an effort to connect students who are not on campus with resources and

individuals on campus. Retention and success in the program is ensuring students feel connected to the university, and mentoring is one way to establish that sense of belonging. As faculty listen to student introductions at the beginning of the class, mentioning and then following-up to connect them with another faculty or student who has a mutual interest or background, continues to create threads of engagement.

Feedback: Feedback offers a plethora of opportunities to develop mentoring relationships, learn from each other, and engage in formative assessment. Yet, all parties involved need to be open to respectfully sharing feedback and receptive to listening to the feedback of others. Constructive criticisms and feedback are integral parts of the learning process. Overwhelmingly students in the MAIR Online Program appreciate video feedback on their written assignments, as it is a more nuanced way of having a conversation with students about their work. Constant feedback loops through the multiple modalities of communication help to better understand from a holistic perspective where the potential lies to engage students.

Practicum: In a blended learning environment, practicum provide opportunities for students to engage in an authentic consulting experience working with a client. Students research and conceptualize a problem, define the scope of the project, and break it down into workable components. By working effectively as a team member, students identify key tasks, share the responsibility for the project, and ensure all deadlines are met by sharing resources, expertise, and mentoring each other.

Mentoring, and ideally cross-cultural mentoring, are important parts of the School's Online Programs. Ideally, not only do mentoring efforts help prepare students for the academic environment, for their chosen professional pathways, and for a world that requires a vast amount of intercultural competence, but also helps to envision ways the relationships built throughout their time in the program can serve as a springboard for continued opportunities to mentor others through international service and engage in networking.

5 NETWORKING

Networking is an important part of engaging students within an academic community and within their chosen profession. Networking does not come easy for everyone and often puts students outside of their comfort zone. For students who do not consider themselves experts in their field, often reaching out to established academics or professionals can be challenging. Yet, it is their identity as a graduate student that provides the most leverage for networking, getting individuals to share stories about professional pathways, and creating linkages that can prove beneficial in the future. Networking is not only crucial for getting a job, but is "also crucial for getting things accomplished and making change inside organizations in both the public and private sector" (Pfeffer & Walker, 2013). Evolving into a leader, content expert, or change agent are all aspects of a professional trajectory that are strengthened by networking.

Networking hones and cultivates a number of skills relevant to the international relations professional. The ability to develop a personal brand, tell a good story, and listen and engage with others through questioning are examples of some of those skills. The nature of work inherent in international relations requires professionals are able to reach out across borders and cultures to create relationships and linkages among organizations and communities. Networking helps students foster the social skills they need in order reach beyond boundaries and across borders. With these social skills, students will later pursue careers in diplomacy, community organizing, education, building coalitions, civic engagement, negotiations, and grassroots movements. Networking is not only about getting a job, but about forming reciprocal relationships that will continue to inform and expand spheres of influence and knowledge.

For students already working in international relations, networking is an inherent part of getting the job done. Knowing who makes policy decisions, approves grant proposals, or is an organizational gatekeeper, is important information for being effective. Upon graduation, students not yet grounded in the professional world of international relations will soon find themselves seeking employment and making life altering decisions. Ideally, through the myriad of networking opportunities available throughout the program, both groups of students are prepared to be successful.

Students in the MAIR Online Program are in a unique position to expand international professional networks and develop cultural diplomacy. The diversity inherent in the faculty and among the student body provide pathways for the sharing of stories, community building, and knowledge construction. With over 200,000 SIS alumni worldwide and dozens of institutional relationships with organizations worldwide, students in the MAIR Online Program have an extensive network to take advantage of

throughout their time in the program and after graduation. What follows are some of the networking opportunities the program purposefully constructs for students. The following best practices allow students to expand their professional networks through events and opportunities embedded in the program.

5.1 Networking: Threads of Engagement

Live streaming campus events: Throughout the School, there are efforts to live-stream campus events. Students are not always available to attend campus events. For some students, geography may be a challenge. Student studying abroad or taking their courses online are not able to physically attend campus events. For other students, internships or work schedules might prohibit attendance due to the timing of an event. Yet, for some students who might not be able to attend, live streaming an event often means they can still interact with speakers and the audience by asking questions live or via a chat box, providing an opportunity for technology to bridge the gap and engage students from around the globe.

Virtual career events: A dedicated career advisor within the SIS Online Program office provides different forums throughout the academic year for students to connect with alumni in the field, speak with administrators at organizations that sponsor fellowships, and network with professionals at organizations that align with the areas of concentration within the program. These connections produce internships, opportunities for research, and job offers.

Capstone experiences: Students in the Online Program are required to complete a capstone experience, either a significant research paper (SRP) or a practicum. Both options require students to engage with experts, think tanks, researchers, academics, and professionals in the field. Advisors encourage students to do informational interviews with experts, connect with organizations doing research on related issues, and attend virtual events or panels about topics of interest to learn more about trends in the field and expand their networks.

Immersion: Immersion are on campus experiences that take place over a long weekend twice a year. Students in the program are expected to attend at least one Immersion before graduating, joining classmates in person on campus to expand their network. The immersion includes a one-credit hour skills institute of varying topics, a day full of site visits to headquarters and organizations central to government, foreign relations, politics, education, development, and national security. Throughout the weekend, students engage with professors and leaders through various social events as well.

As students build networks of support, the blended learning environment only enhances the opportunities that students have to engage in relationship building. For those students logging on in from remote locations, cities with varying educational or professional opportunities, or work schedules that don't allow to fully participate, the opportunity to network through various educationally grounded experiences is just one more way to engage students across the spectrum of the program and the online platform.

6 ADVISING

Next to faculty, who meet with and talk with students on a weekly basis, academic advisors are the individuals who have the most contact with students. Garnering a sense of the ways academic advisors play an integral role in students' engagement is crucial to the success of any program. Students need to know who to turn to with concerns or to get answers to questions.

While academic advising in blended environments closely mirrors that in its on-campus counterparts, chiefly involving guidance, tracking, and enforcement of University policies, advising students in the online or blended environment adds a different dimension: that of student engagement. Online and blended learning programs traditionally face greater retention issues than on-campus programs. As one of the threads of connection between students and the university, those who serve as academic advisors to students in online and blended environments bear the responsibility of more fully acting as agents of student engagement. In the MAIR Online Program, academic advisors keep students engaged and accountable through a variety of methods.

6.1 Advising: Threads of Engagement

Timing: Each new students' registration for MAIR courses triggers a number of actions, the first of which is a "welcome call" which introduces students to the technology surrounding the MAIR Online

learning platform, and asks them to schedule a training with a support agent. The fact that there are many things about the online platform that can seem “unfamiliar” or “new” to the student means that the transition between admission and registration is especially fragile. Academic advisors and support agents take extra care to usher the student through this process in a way that both softens the complexity of the technology and solidifies the students’ relationship to the school.

Mid-semester calls: Being especially attuned to the complexities of the online student population, academic advisors and support agents in the MAIR Online Program reach out to students proactively on a regular basis throughout the semester in order to keep them engaged and focused. Each student is recommended to schedule a mid-semester call with an academic advisor to discuss, among other topics, requirements, concerns, and registration requests. Keeping the student aware of academic options and resources before the end of the semester prevents student attrition.

Webinars and live-streamed events: One of the ways advisors remind students of their academic options is through the presentation of live-streamed events and online webinars at various points throughout the semester. Webinars typically target only students in the MAIR Online Program, but can be held on a variety of topics and often feature figures from university leadership. In order to include the online student population in on-campus programming, the university also offers virtual live-stream versions of all its events. For example, when Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau paid a visit to the School of International Service in 2015, the event was live-streamed, and virtual participants were able to tune in and submit questions to the speaker online.

Weekly emails and newsletters: Students who enroll are also automatically subscribed to a listserv, which allows them to receive weekly mailings and newsletters from their advisors. Information included in these mailings may cover study abroad programs, commencement ceremonies, and career and scholarship opportunities. An online monthly bulletin boasts the highest readership across programs within SIS, tying its success to the dynamic environment of the MAIR Online program, which in addition to facilitating online learning, keeps students aware of university messaging.

7 CONCLUSION

Blended learning and online education provide new challenges and new opportunities in the ways universities, administrators, faculty, and peers can collaborate and engage in meaningful conversation outside of the classroom. The threads of engagement are plentiful, the technology is available, and students are eager to become a part of the campus community. Student voices are important and an integral part of program success. Reconceptualizing the ways programs and individuals can create inclusive learning environments that privilege student voices and engage students through a myriad of virtual spaces is an evolving consideration in the development and design of blended learning. However, creating these spaces or threads of engagement only opens up the options for students, who need to feel empowered through mentoring, networking, and advising to participate in them.

As the mobility in the lives academic nomads continues and technological innovations expand the realm of higher education, organizations and programs will need to adapt and adopt new practices and policies for engagement. By sharing ideas and creating a community of best practices, programs will be able to better ascertain what initiatives and idea work within institutional confines and program resources. Renowned educator Marshall Ganz once said that “leadership is about enabling others to achieve purpose in the face of uncertainty.” At the end of the day, student engagement can foster professional growth, create strong school loyalty and produce a meaningful student experience. Ultimately, through the means of mentorship, networking, and student advising, the MAIR Online Program aims to empower students to improve themselves through a unique blend of learning and social engagement to meet this goal.

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