

# **Building an Online Community Through Research**

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*One of the more complex things to do when becoming a new faculty is meeting the scholarship expectations of your role. A finished dissertation does not easily equate to a peer-reviewed publication later. What if we could give students the tools to embrace scholarship before graduating? This paper outlines a process for engaging online learners in research endeavors outside the course room. It also shows how this unique method can increase community and belonging among peers. The model presented here can be used for research and other community-based projects. While it is useful for faculty development, it is designed to benefit both experienced and new faculty. However, the primary purpose of this model is student development. This model is meant to give the students the skills and tools they need to become researchers on their own.*

*Keywords: research in online programs, community building, faculty development*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Research has shown the effectiveness of online higher education (Nguyen, 2015; Shambour & Abu-Hashem, 2022). As professionals in this arena, we are always looking for new ways to improve the experience and build strong online communities while giving students the tools they need to thrive. Research is nothing new in the online environment; ask any online thesis or dissertation student. However, there are few opportunities to participate in research projects outside the usual curriculum. This paper will outline effective steps for implementing extracurricular research projects and show how these projects can also lead to community building.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Models like those used in this paper benefit both students and faculty, and it is the institutions' responsibility to develop and train their faculty. This responsibility becomes significantly more critical for those universities that harbor mostly minority students (Donham, Pohan, Menke, & Kranzfelder, 2022; Rajasekar, Al-Asfour, & Boomer, 2023). Faculty are needed to mentor students' progress (Pollard &

Kumar, 2021). Faculty development opportunities are important to keep online faculty up to speed on best practices (Johnson, Hewapathirana, & Bowen, 2023). Studies have shown that more developed faculty lead to higher student satisfaction (Erchul, 2023; Khan et al., 2023).

Like development, community building is pivotal to online education (Brennan, Packard, & Newman, 2022; Chu, 2022; Dennis, DiMatteo-Gibson, Halbert, Gonzalez, & Byrd, 2020; Eodice, Geller, & Lerner, 2019). The engaged student is more likely to continue their education online, and now students are seeking new opportunities to grow their academic network (Archambault, Leary, & Rice, 2022). Online students desire to engage in more activities outside the course room with faculty and other student peers (Berry, 2019; Clayton, Medina, & Wiseman, 2019). The recent pandemic of 2020 has led to an even greater demand for online learning modalities (Clary, Dick, Akbulut, & Van Slyke, 2022).

## METHODS

Conducting research on an Online Campus requires intentional organization and a time commitment by the facilitator and the students involved. Our team realized that many of our faculty are willing to work on research projects but may not have the tools to start one themselves. Knowing this, we developed a “how-to model” to help the online community thrive in research. Dissertation and thesis faculty will be excellent with this as they already know the steps involved in mentoring research. However, this model can serve as an instructional guide to help develop those faculty who are not as familiar with the process. Table 1 below shows the six steps to building a research community on an Online Campus. This model was created from our own experience facilitating research through an online degree program.

## THE MODEL

**TABLE 1**  
**COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH TO RESEARCH MODEL**

Step 1: Topic Creation	For this step, the facilitator can use a topic they already know well or hold off this step until the research group/s are formed. Then the students will decide.
Step 2: Recognizing the Chief	In most cases, the faculty pulls all the strings; however, students or alums can also facilitate their projects with the faculty member taking the back seat. Either format can be successful. It’s important to know this first, then to make a facilitator change in the middle of the project down the road.
Step 3: Forming the Group/s	This step takes some finesse, as you may already know who you want to be in your group. However, it’s best to offer the opportunity to all students through a selection process unique to your project.
Step 4: Commitment	This step can be the most crucial. You will want to ensure you have team members to carry the project through. It will be essential to include this step in the selection process. A meeting time is also needed for all group members to meet.

Step 5: Delegate Roles	Each member of the group will have a function. Some students will work on the lit review, and others may work on the methods, etc. Each member is responsible for the role they are assigned.
Step 6: Finishing Well	If the facilitator wants to take the back seat, they can assign a student to look for publication opportunities. Once the paper is published or the presentation is accepted. Be sure to celebrate together.

**TABLE 2  
SELECTION PROCESS**

Step A: Send out a recruiting email	Explain to the students the idea/topic for the research group (if this has been chosen already), and the group end goal. Ask them to reply if interested
Step B: Reduce the participant pool	Once you know the interested students, remind them of the commitment involved, GPA needed, etc., and that they will also be responsible for attending weekly/biweekly meetings until the project is over.
Step C: The students left will have to apply for the role through a selection process unique to the study.	See our example in <b>Appendix 1</b>
Step D: Congratulate the selected, and be transparent about the process to all applicants.	Our application process was lengthy on purpose to weed out those students who would not commit, so in the end, we congratulated all those who were chosen and let all the applications know why these certain individuals were selected for the roles we needed.

## RESULTS

### Population

Using the selection process in Table 2, we received over 250 responses. After organizing a Zoom meeting and communicating what was expected of the 250 students, we narrowed the pool to 35 students. We asked those 35 students to complete the rigorous application process. With 11 applicants, we quickly determined the five final candidates. The final team consisted of two master's students, three doctoral students, the student alumni who led the team, and the faculty member.

## **Going Through the Steps**

In step one, we needed a topic. Although it would have been much easier to initiate a research group with a clear process and design already in place, we quickly realized not to underestimate the students. During the brainstorming phase of our first two meetings, an excellent academic project developed. It required more time and effort rather than using a project already thought out. However, the reward was great for the students as they worked through their ideas; they were already forming a community, a workforce, and a dynamic team. Step two, while the easiest way is for the faculty member to lead/facilitate the group based on their own project, the authors tried releasing the urge to control the outcome and let the graduate students, cohort leader, and alum take the wheel.

In step three, it was time to build the group. It was best that the group not be too large. This way, students get to know each other well, and no student gets lost in the process. It is also easier to manage a small group of five students than 30. However, this means a selection process was needed. We developed a selection process to help move this project forward that was equitable and fair. This is shown in Table 2. In step four, all students would have needed to commit to the timeframe and duration of the project. All students knew what was expected of them during the recruitment process. In step five, we delegated the roles to each group member. Since there were five students, each part of the paper was designed evenly. Meaning they were in charge of getting that part of the paper done. However, it did not mean they had to do the entire section alone.

## **DISCUSSION**

Following the steps in Table 1 allowed us to create a research community that is not always available for online students. In step 2 of the model, we noticed the community-building potential by allowing an alum who recently graduated after writing her thesis to lead other potential graduates into a research project. As part of her thesis, the alum produced belonging tactics to establish fair, equitable, and respectful interactions (Carter, 2022).

This taught the students that they could work more efficiently working as a cohesive team and sharing the workloads of each section for the finalized version. We went from an idea to a finished paper in 16 weeks. Bearing in mind that these were inexperienced researchers, this is a noteworthy accomplishment. The faculty member sat in the Zoom meetings, took a back seat to the project, and observed a wonderful display of community building and cohesiveness.

It is also important to note that because of our selection process outlined in Table 2, we were able to get qualified student researchers that worked well together. Many of them were meeting for the first time. If a facilitator picks students they know without making it equitable to everyone, it can cause discontent with those not selected. Even though these were online students, the students belonged to different cohorts and communicated regularly. The purpose of this model was to bring about a community and a learning experience unlike any other. If the unselected students felt that they were not picked because they were not well-liked by the faculty, this would cause another problem for online education. Our rigorous selection process leveled the playing field for all potential researchers.

## **CONCLUSION**

Yes, we can organize research via Zoom and publish in high-impact journals. While this experience is welcoming for faculty needing help with their research projects, it dramatically benefits students as well. Going through the different steps in the model, we acknowledge that one size does not fit all, and some aspects of the model may need to be amended to fit one's purpose. The authors encourage all readers to amend and publish their research process in these proceedings/journal.

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## APPENDIX 1

### *Belonging In The Workplace Research Team Selection Process Form*

Please share the following information so that we can select the initial and future Belonging In The Workplace Research Teams.

To be considered for the Fall 2022 Research Team, submissions must be made by Wednesday, September 28th at 12:00am EST.

Required

This form will record your name, please fill your name.

Your Name \*

Your Degree & Program \*

Why do you want to participate in this research? (Please explain in 250-300 words) \*

What Do You Value About This Research & Focus? (Please explain in 150 words) \*

What skills & abilities do you have that will be valuable to this team and research? \*

Is there anything that may prevent you from being able to complete this research paper by end of December 2022?

Please be as honest as possible, there will be future research projects, so please indicate if you want to be on the December 2022 team or a 2023 team below. \*

Please upload your CV \*

 Upload file

File number limit: 1 Single file size limit: 100MB Allowed file types: Word, PDF

By dating this form you indicate that you give us permission to consider you for the Belonging In The Workplace research team and that we may contact you for correspondence regarding this and future projects. \*

Please input date (M/d/yyyy)



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