

BUILDING AND MAINTAINING COMMUNITY IN A TWO-YEAR DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAM

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Summary:

The focus of our work is relevant to those seeking to build and maintain cohesive online cohorts. The Associate Fellowship Program at the University of Arizona uses unique instructional design and programming techniques to achieve a strong sense of community, with a minimal learner attrition rate.

Abstract:

Traditional educational formats are rapidly giving way to new delivery methods. The technological ability to provide learning opportunities to students separated by time and space creates both challenges and opportunities. The learners' experience and learning outcomes are central to any programmatic evaluation of educational programs in traditional or distance learning environments. Often in the promotion of new technologies and the hyperbole of the advantages of distance education, the importance of a sense of community or cohesion among the learners is often overlooked. We plan to present a model in which a strong sense of community is the main predictor of positive outcomes for a distance-learning program. Creative and innovative means must be identified which build a sense of "belongingness" and community. In this effort, the University of Arizona's **Program in Integrative Medicine** created the Associate Fellowship program. The model is evaluated based on usage data and self-report surveys from three groups of past participants (n = 118) as well as data from current participants (n=115) in a medical education distance-learning program.