WSU Online:

VIRTUAL MENTORS’ SUPPORT OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Rebecca Van de Vord, Margy Fotopoulos, Korylone Pogue, Sally Horton, Janet Kendall, David Cillay

Student satisfaction = student success = student retention

Researchers have paid substantial attention to distance learner attrition, but less has been done to find specific remedies to improve their persistence (Nash, 2005).


   - Providing technical and logistical support
   - Forming community, alleviating feelings of remoteness and isolation
   - Providing technical and logistical support

   “There is an important need to create a learning community that encompasses the needs of all students, connects them to each other, to the institution, and to the resources that they need to succeed, and allow them to get responsive help.” Rovai, 2003

2. VM training program goals:

   - Understand the goals and purpose of mentoring
   - Identify group participation roles and support group formation
   - Build community and facilitate connections between students
   - Assist in addressing conflict and facilitating conversation under adverse conditions
   - Understand the resources available to them, students and faculty

The characteristics we look for in a VM include:

   - Highly motivated students, those that are early with assignments, posts and are quick to respond to others and navigate easily within the course space. Critical thinking is obvious in their work. They are able to handle debates and conflict with integrity and show strong leadership skills.
   - As a group, the current VMs can be described as intelligent, focused, organized, willing to be vulnerable, and wanting to give back to WSU through helping other WSU Online students be successful.

How can the Virtual Mentor (VM) address the unique non-content needs of online students, thus allowing faculty to focus on teaching?

- The Virtual Mentor program was started in Fall 2003 with 85 courses.
- In Spring 2010 there were 77 courses that utilized the services of 16 Virtual Mentors.

*VM Job description: The purpose of placing a VM in a course space is to assist students in non-content related areas in order to enhance the students’ experience with online learning. The VMs priorities are to help students feel connected and comfortable in the online environment, provide navigational assistance and troubleshoot technical difficulties.

3. Anecdotal evidence

Three additional sources of information were reviewed for indication of the daily tasks of the VM in the online course spaces, how they interact with students and apparent strengths and weaknesses of the program.

1. Each VM was asked to detail what she does as a part of the job.
2. VM to VM discussion forum. Conversation about the issues they are seeing and working with in the course space.
3. Student/VM discussion space in each individual course where students ask questions and VMs post tips.

The most consistently mentioned items include:

- Keeping students involved and engaged via the discussion board. Teaching and engaging students who aren’t participating or are falling behind.
- Encouraging connections between students via the discussion board. Addressing social issues and encouraging active debate.
- Facilitating group formation and community building.
- Providing guidance regarding course space navigation, best use of Angel tools and technical support.
- Keeping students on task. Making students aware of support resources and how to access them.
- Providing positive feedback and support (morale boosters).

Program Evaluation

1. Student survey (Fall 09) What do students say about the VM in the course space?

   - 1659 students e-mailed survey link. 166 responses = 10% response rate
   - 81% of students aware of the VM in course
   - 61% of students aware of VM agreed the VMs work was consistent with the job description
   - VMs were rated as helpful to extremely helpful in the areas of supplying tips and suggestions to help students be successful in online course space and providing navigational assistance.
   - Only 19% of respondents felt they didn’t benefit at all from the VM’s presence in the course space.

2. Faculty evaluations Each faculty semester are asked to evaluate the VM in their course.

   Faculty evaluations average ratings on a 1-10 scale (38 faculty, 20 responses, 53% response rate)

   - Highly present and contributed to enhancing and building community in the online class, including promoting student to student dialog and identifying connections among students
   - Showed respect for all student contributions
   - Exhibited proficiency with the technology and was able to assist students to familiarize themselves with the environment and software
   - Identified students as necessary to the syllabus, lessons and objectives of the discussion

3. Anecdotal evidence

Three additional sources of information were reviewed for indication of the daily tasks of the VM in the online course spaces, how they interact with students and apparent strengths and weaknesses of the program.

1. The VM program seems to be successful in supporting students in online courses in non-content areas. By placing them in the right courses, with the highest need (large enrollment, first semester online courses, instructors new to online teaching and blended courses) online students receive the support they need to successfully navigate an online classroom without the faculty being distracted from their teaching focus.

2. It is virtually impossible for VMs to support community building in courses with no online discussion. They do provide some support to students via e-mail, but to utilize fully the strengths of the VM the course should have a discussion board. The instructor and course design should promote community building as well.

3. Improved communication about the function of a VM with both faculty and students may assist the VM in doing their job better. Many questions for the VM were content instruction related, which they could not address.

4. VMs may be able to be proactive in helping instructors clarify information in course spaces if allowed to review the course space before students are enrolled. The VMs are uniquely qualified to review the course space through a student’s eyes.

5. Overall, providing logistical and technical support, access to resources and fostering community building appear consistently to be a part of what VMs are accomplishing in WSU Online courses.

Conclusion

The instructor and course design should...

1. The instructor and course design should...

   - Be a part of what VMs are accomplishing in WSU Online courses.

2. blended courses) online students receive...

3. Improved communication about the function of a VM with both faculty and students...

4. VMs may be able to be proactive in helping instructors...

5. Overall, providing logistical and technical support, access to resources and fostering community building appear consistently to be a part of what VMs are accomplishing in WSU Online courses.