Build Peer-to-Peer Relationships

Setting up peer support groups early in the course can encourage peer-to-peer relationships that serve to increase engagement and persistence and can increase feelings of belonging. Begin by creating intentional opportunities for students to get to know one another to build trust and foster a sense of community (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011). You can also ask students to complete a simple survey that allows you to create peer groups of students with similar interests or availability.

Although some faculty may wait until they need their students to work on a group assignment or until after add/drop to create groups, establishing peer groups early on will begin to build community and engage students from the very beginning and may encourage students to stay in the course. If the groups are large enough (four or five students), it becomes easier to add late enrollments, and if a student drops, the group will still have enough members to be successful. Follow the strategies below to establish peer support groups.

"Getting to Know You" Introductions

Introductions should serve as a fun and nonthreatening icebreaker to ease students into the course and to begin building the learning community. These "getting to know you" introductions can work in face-to-face classes and in online discussion forums or small breakout rooms. Effective introduction activities, such as the ones suggested below, should require that students:

- share something personal,

- respond to one another's introductions,

- find something in common with several others in the learning community, and

- be imaginative or express genuine emotions or openness.

Some good introduction discussion prompts include:

- What experience do you have with this course topic?

- How does this course topic relate to your career goals?

- If someone were to visit your town or your state for the first time, what are your top five recommendations of things to do, places to eat, or sights to visit?

- What was the best class (online or in person) that you ever had? Why was it so good?

- What was the worst class you ever took? Why was it so bad?

- What is your biggest fear or hope about engaging in online classes?

Online Survey Questions

Creating an initial survey using Google Forms, SurveyMonkey, or a survey tool in your LMS will allow you to gather information regarding preferences for communicating with team members. Possible survey questions include:

- What is your preferred form of communication?

    o phone, text, email, chat, in person

- When do you prefer to work?

    o morning, afternoon, early evening, late evening

- Do you work?

    o full time, part time, full-time student

Forming Groups

You can use both the responses and the ways students interact in the discussion forum to make groups. For example, you can form groups of students who have similar interests. Or you may want to consider spreading students who post early and often throughout the groups rather than placing them all in one group. You can also use the results of the preferred communication and schedule survey to create groups that have similar approaches to coursework.

Source

Conrad, R. M., & Donaldson, J. A. (2011). Engaging the online learner: Activities and resources for creative instruction. Jossey-Bass.