Virtual Programmatic Strategies to Foster a Sense of Community Among Online Learners in a Sport Management Program During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The coronavirus pandemic has caused a dramatic shift in course delivery in higher education. With the rapid pivot to predominantly online learning, students face several challenges. Distance education programs have higher attrition rates (DiRamio & Wolverton, 2006; Stanford-Bowers, 2008), increased feelings of isolation (Rovai & Wighting, 2004; STodel et al., 2006), and a lower sense of community among undergraduate and graduate students (Rovai & Jordan, 2004). However, research reveals instructors play a critical role in managing the virtual classroom to optimize student learning and satisfaction. Incorporating opportunities for students to interact with peers and the instructor (Dixson, 2010; Roby et al, 2013), consistent and substantive feedback from instructors (Zen, 2008), and fostering a sense of community (SOC), improves student perceptions of online instruction (Croft et al., 2010).

To counteract feelings of isolation and greater rates of attrition (Rovai & Wighting, 2005), a SOC can be fostered (Rovai & Jordan, 2004), acting as a buffer to disconnectedness and attrition among students learning online (Oomen-Early & Murphy, 2009). A SOC can be fostered through open dialogue between students and instructors (Coomey & Stephenson, 2001), and interactions with peers and faculty in various virtual platforms (Tang & Hew, 2017). Creating an inclusive, supportive environment where students can engage socially with peers and instructors, can foster a greater SOC (Roddy et al., 2017), and may contribute to online student success.

While researchers have revealed various factors that promote a sense of community in online courses, research assessing a sense of community is lacking in sport management. Despite a SMEJ special issue (2017), addressing online teaching methods, a sense of community has yet to be explored. Martinez and Barnhill (2017) reviewed the community of inquiry (COI) framework as a method sport management instructors can use to foster a community of learning for online learners. The authors highlighted course strategies to promote the interaction of social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence that may improve student learning and satisfaction. However, this paper was only conceptual, reinforcing the need for empirical research in this area.

Therefore, the current study examined if a virtual program-wide initiative can foster a sense of community among sport management students (undergraduate and master’s) at a large, public, predominantly white institution in the United States. The initiative aimed to connect students with peers and faculty through three avenues each month: The Broadcast (general announcements, alumni guest speakers), Beyond the Field (conversations with experts about current issues in sport management), and Team Huddles (small group discussions about courses, and advising).

Findings from the initiative can grant insight into key programmatic strategies that may significantly impact online student satisfaction and retention. Impact is being assessed through pre and post SOC surveys with participants and comparison programs’ students, and focus groups at the conclusion of the Fall 2020 semester. During COVID, students can easily disconnect from faculty and their peers. For this reason, sharing the outcomes of the virtual program-wide initiative aimed at promoting SOC is beneficial to sport management educators and students.