Chapter 12
Creating a Motivated Online Graduate Community

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a case study of the problem solving processes of a faculty who developed a new graduate program in communication studies. Students could take all courses online, all onground, or use a combination of the two delivery formats. For the totally online program, a key desire was to help students and faculty achieve a sense of a collaborative community. Students needed to get to know each other and feel a part of the whole program, even though course delivery for some students was totally online. Further, the faculty sought to motivate students to engage in a challenging program of research and application.

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A student forwards fun animal picture emails to her professor. A professor sends out postcards to students directing them to the online café where they can “Expresso” themselves. A student sends hatching eggs to classmates on Facebook. Two students conduct class discussion via Skype. These are a few of the ways students and faculty are creating a sense of community in a new graduate program.

Communication technologies can provide networking opportunities for individuals to build and maintain relationships (e.g., Boase, 2008; Stern, 2008). Social networking sites are popular among college students, and they can be used to build relationships online (Tufekci, 2008). One study in China, for instance, suggested that an online community could accomplish “maintenance of harmony, revelation of identities, articulation of nostalgia, and reiteration of values” (Zhang, 2008). Many people like to use social networking sites, as evidenced in the relationship building with the political candidates during the 2008 political campaign for President of the United States (Erikson, 2008). Social network-
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This kind of mediated small talk may be quite useful in building and maintaining relationships (Miller, 2008). Thus, social networking sites can provide new communication channels so students and faculty can get to know others.

Teaching communication studies online can be challenging (Vanhorn, Pearson, & Child, 2008). Communication technologies can provide networking opportunities for students and faculty so that they can stay motivated. Collaborative learning—which may be one of the most effective learning strategies for the widest number of students—through groups has been successfully used in the distance learning process (Cho & Lee, 2008; Staggers, Garcia, & Nagelhout, 2008). Another advantage is that communication technologies can be used to motivate students (Edwards, Bresnahan, & Edwards, 2008; Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007).

Research suggests that online groups use a form of interpersonal communication (Wang, Walther, & Hancock, 2009), which can create community. Communication technologies can provide social networking opportunities for students and faculty so that they can create a feeling of community. News websites, for instance, can be used to help build a sense of community (Fisher, 2008). People use various communication channels in their effort to achieve interpersonal communication with people they do not know (Westerman, 2008), which suggests that such channels could be useful in building feelings of community between students in distance locations. These communication technologies are transforming higher education in ways that provide both prospects for improvements and challenges (Slevin, 2008). Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to discuss the use of communication technologies and the opportunities and challenges faced during the development of a new online and onground graduate program. By explaining strategies used in this case, the reader may gain insights into community building approaches that may prove useful in other contexts.

BACKGROUND

This section provides a historical orientation to the case.

The University in this case had an established undergraduate program in communication studies, which uses traditional, face-to-face, distance location, and online courses. The administration of the university has actively worked to encourage faculty to develop more online courses, as has happened in other universities (Applegate, 2002). A key faculty member in the department developed the proposed graduate program, which was designed to be available onground and online, or through a combination of courses.

The University attracts many nontraditional and transfer students. Although distance education, continuing education, and online courses have been available at the institution for many years, the online graduate programs are relatively new. The new program means that faculty continue their traditional work while learning how to develop and teach effectively in both formats at the graduate level. Faculty have needed encouragement to engage in the diverse work and administrative complexities of putting a program online, which is consistent with findings at other universities (Matthews, 2008; Panda & Mishra, 2007).

With an expectation of rigor, the University’s faculty have been particularly concerned about the quality of instruction and learning in the new program. Like at other universities (Matthews, 2008), the faculty seem divided on how to best employ learning technology in instruction.

Online Groups

With the advent of electronic listservs and the Internet, opportunities for support and information-
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