Greetings from GAINESVILLE

BUILD: Building Understanding, Inclusion, and Longevity in Distance Education

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UF COLLEGE OF EDUCATION — *Transforming Lifelong Education Through Innovation & Research*

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RiTL RESEARCH IN TEACHING & LEARNING

Introduction

Dear Student,

We know that asynchronous distance education (DE) programs offer flexibility and broaden access for diverse learners. But many students experience feelings of isolation, which can undermine engagement, satisfaction, and persistence (Blackmon & Major, 2012; Rasheed et al., 2020). **Studying at a distance can sometimes feel exactly that—distant.** While the importance of community-building in online education is well established (Walton et al., 2012), designing scalable and sustainable strategies to foster connection remains a challenge.

To meet this challenge, we must embrace innovative, technology-driven approaches that intentionally support connection and belonging in DE (Means et al., 2010).

Your Distance Education Team

ENTOMOLOGY & NEMATOLOGY Department

Theoretical Framework

This initiative addresses student isolation and aims to improve retention in online programs through a three-phase model rooted in **Social Presence Theory** (Reio *et al.*, 2013; Short *et al.*, 1976), focusing on intimacy and immediacy, and the **Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework** (Garrison *et al.*, 2001).

By aligning design choices with these dimensions, the initiative seeks to foster a more connected, engaging, and supportive experience for distance learners.

Research Question: How can a structured, technology-driven approach improve belonging and retention in asynchronous distance education (DE)?

Methods and Implementation

2023
Phase 1: Student Support and Resource Access

2024
Phase 2: Inclusion and Departmental Integration

2025
Phase 3: Personal and Professional Development

Objective 1: To improve students' confidence and clarity in navigating program requirements through a centralized, accessible Community Hub.

Dedicated Canvas Community Hub:

- clarity on program expectations, requirements, capstone, graduation procedures, and available resources.
- integrated advising & support services

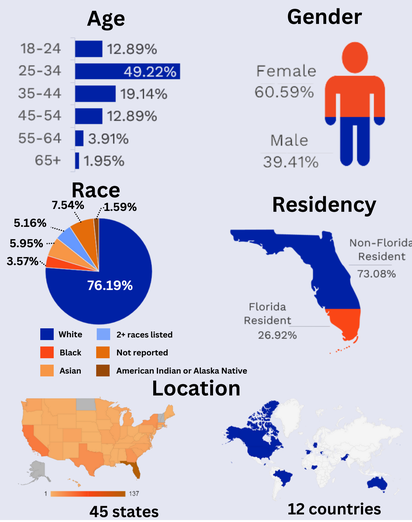
Objective 2: To increase students' sense of connection to faculty, peers, and the department by integrating community-building and visibility strategies into the online experience

- Structured onboarding, including virtual departmental tour and faculty/course introduction videos to increase familiarity with instructors and departmental offerings.
- Integrated course registration services.
- DE student inclusion in weekly departmental seminars.
- Milestone recognition program.

Objective 3: To foster a sense of academic and professional belonging by expanding access to career resources, mentorship opportunities, and pathways for student contribution (e.g., TA roles).

- Semesterly professional development course.
- TA and internship opportunities, and peer-led projects to enhance career readiness.
- Career resources and job listings.

Participants



Analyses

Mixed-methods approach to assess impact on engagement, belonging and retention:

Quantitative data:

- **Pre/post student surveys** (6 point Likert scales, Reio *et al.*, 2013) measuring:
  - Social presence (modified from Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997)
  - Satisfaction (adapted from Morton; 1993)
  - Enrollment intent (modified from Cammann *et al.*, 1983)
- **Retention analysis** (Fall 2023–Spring 2025)
- **Learning analytics** for student interactions within the Hub

Qualitative data:

- **Focus groups** exploring student experiences, perceived value, and improvements

Results

Quantitative data:

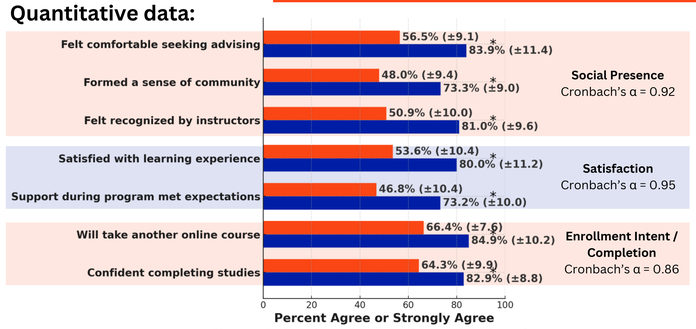


Figure 1: Student Perceptions of Belonging

Qualitative data:

'I just wanted to say this hub is great for making us distance learning students feel part of the department at UF!'

'This new system makes registration a breeze!'

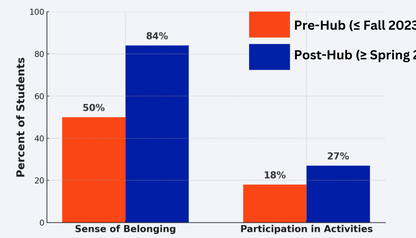


Figure 2: Impact of Onboarding Initiatives on Engagement

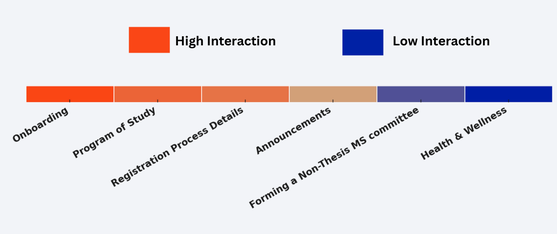


Figure 4: Learning Analytics for Student Interactions Within the Hub

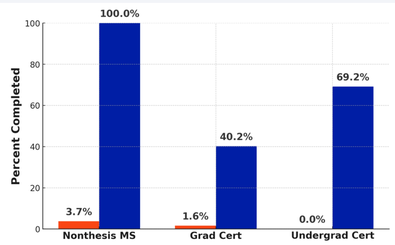


Figure 3: Program of Study Completion

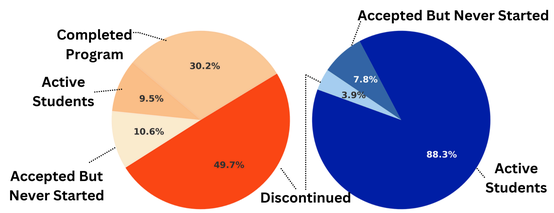


Figure 5: Retention Analysis (Fall 23 - Spring 25)

Implications

This research bridges theory and practice to address the persistent challenge of **fostering connection and belonging in asynchronous programs.** The hub offers a **scalable, replicable model** for enhancing student engagement and retention through technology-enabled, community-driven design. By applying established frameworks to real-world design, this offers inclusive practices and new perspectives in:

- **Innovation:** technology-driven approach intentionally supports connection & belonging
- **Learning Continuity:** maintaining access to instruction, resources, and support systems to ensure students stay on track with their academic goals
- **Equity:** removing systemic obstacles and ensuring inclusive practices

Ability to transform higher education:

- ***Beyond DE:*** Entomology and Nematology Department **formed undergraduate and graduate hubs for in-person students**
- ***Set Precedent in College:*** train departments in hub design
- ***External Institution Uptake:*** training & resources for other institutions.

References & Resources

SCAN ME!

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