

Bridging the Gap for On-campus and Distance Students with Innovative Graduate Student Association Activities

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Introduction

- Online learners can feel disconnected, lonely, and isolated (Zembylas, Theodorou, & Pavlakis, 2008)
- Student satisfaction in online programs influenced by quality of interactions with peers and faculty (Levy, 2007)
- Experiences that promote faculty-to-student and student-to-student engagement are recommended for online Master's degrees (Burbuagh, Drape, & Westfall-Rudd, 2014)

University of Georgia Situation

- **Master of Agricultural and Environmental Education**
 - Mix of on-campus (30%) and distance (70%) students
 - Attend courses online, primarily synchronously
- **Goal: enhance sense of community among all students**
 - Graduate Student Association (GSA) started in 2013
 - Blackboard Collaborate used to connect students
 - Monthly **professional development** and **social networking** opportunities

Objectives

1. Identify specific GSA activities which on-campus and distance students believe have enhanced their graduate experience.
2. Describe student reactions to the activities and technology used to help bridge the gap.

Methods

- Informal conversations with GSA executive committee members and general membership
- Online questionnaire (qualitative)
- Responses summarized using content analysis



Findings

- **Most influential activities**
 - Informal, less structured **social networking** activities involving storytelling among on-campus and distance students and faculty
- **Meet in a central location for all**
- **If meeting online, web cameras help**



Findings



Findings

- Student reactions – **Professors Are Real People**
 - *“The GSA has allowed for us as students to see our professors as people, and not just instructors. It gives us the opportunity to have meaningful, real-world conversations with our superiors.”*
 - *“When we went to the zoo and you brought your wife along, I loved getting to talk to her and learn more about you both.”*



Findings

- Student reactions – **We Are In This Together**
 - *“Sometimes it’s easy to feel alone...but hearing that other students struggle with the same stuff that I do helps me know I’m not crazy.”*
 - *“The GSA has allowed me to have a voice in our department...”*
 - *“Just seeing my peers on the web cam and Dr. F’s animal visitors really helps.”*



Recommendations

- Balance professional development with face-to-face social networking activities (if possible)
 - If meeting online, use a web camera
- Allow time for storytelling and venting
- Bring your partner and/or kids along

