

Adopting Orphaned Students in Cyberspace: Creating Institutional-Level Communities

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Introduction

Pedagogically-oriented assessment of teacher-to-student and student-to-student relationships within online classes dominates much of the research aimed at improving online programs. One reason for this intra-course focus is that studies show that a primary reason students do not successfully complete courses or do not receive as good an educational experience as desired is a lack of connectedness with instructors. One study shows that the most important variable in rates of student satisfaction is "faculty being responsive to student needs....This study's findings support research indicating that regardless of the course delivery system, students still have an expectation of faculty interaction and support" (Herbert, 2006). A lack of responsiveness by online instructors has led to the problem of students feeling like they are "lost in cyberspace" (Carr, 2000; Halvorsen, Mahfood, and Beckmann, 2009). It has been noted that such students may be progressing through particular courses, or entire programs, almost on their own with no connection to other students, instructors or the institution -- in what amounts to a correspondence course (cf. Halvorsen, et al.), thus negatively impacting retention and satisfaction rates.

Davidson and Sosulski emphasize the importance of communities within an online course as being "essential for student engagement with peers and faculty" (2007, p 1469), indicating that such engagement within a course is not merely a social act but directly impacts the academics of online courses. Elbaum, McIntyre, and Smith, furthermore, emphasize the need of community within a course as "a necessary and integral part of a functional learning group. Students need to bond in a community in order to have a sense of trust with each other and respect for each other's ideas" (2002, p47). Such community-building efforts therefore fall within the responsible realm of the institution and are not activities that are best left up to students to effect or not effect.

Such studies and literature clearly highlight the need to improve the community of students and instructors within online courses, and while such intra-course communication is vital to the success of

online learning, it is essential that institutions likewise consider creating various types of non-course specific academic communities that mimic the successes of brick-and-mortar communities. Such communities would yet be oriented toward cyberspace and capitalize on the unique paradigms found therein, transcend individual courses, and have the potential to create long-lasting communities within the larger institutional setting, often leading to life-long friendships with other distance learners. It is my contention that in order to prevent online students becoming orphaned in cyberspace, institutions need to also think outside of the virtual classroom when addressing community-building efforts.

Before discussing such communities, we ought to outline some other concerns impacting online programs to ensure that it is understood that community-building endeavors are not panaceas which will successfully address all concerns; a holistic approach with various strategies is needed. While Herbert's study emphasizes the need for instructor responsiveness vis-à-vis student satisfaction, he found that the overwhelming reason for non-completion of courses was time commitments, with a distant second reason being personal problems followed by instructor-related issues. Allen and Seaman found that the lack of student discipline was the main barrier to widespread adoption of online learning (2007, p20). Royer found that the conflict between the competing needs of school, work, and family was the primary reason for students not successfully completing courses (2006, p6). Miller, Rainer, and Corley found that the main factors influencing the quality of an online course were related to the technology employed -- in how easy the technology was to use and how useful the technology was perceived by the student in furthering the student's educational goals (2003). Diaz states there "[t]here could be many reasons why some students remain and others drop an online (or traditional) class," including student personalities, life situations, and instructor influenced variables ("quality of the class or its instruction, the course's discipline...") (2002).

Influenceable factors

While institutions and instructors may not be able to address all of the issues affecting student retention and satisfaction even within a holistic approach, they can tackle many of the problems through

modification of individual courses (format, required participation, and student discipline) or at least create "doors" through which students must pass that would help ensure student compatibility with online courses, such as requiring demonstrated computer competency and establishing guidelines that might "weed out" at-risk students vis-à-vis available study time and life issues. Institutions can provide training for online instructors (such as the National Catholic Educational Association's course The Online Course on Online Teaching and Learning) and implement guidelines regarding instructor responsiveness and interaction with students.

Such has been a major focus of research in the field of educational technology, with Halvorsen et al. recently advancing the discussion of how to improve online programs. They propose the adoption of a Distance Learning Bill of Rights addressing these types of issues "[i]n order to better accomplish the objective of cultivating dynamic and healthy learning communities in cyberspace" (2009). Most importantly, they note one aspect of online community-building which has been rather neglected, the concept of creating differing types of communities as necessary components of online programs: "Cultivating holistic learning communities in cyberspace should be one of the primary objectives when designing new distance learning programs." Their contribution is that rather than focus solely on one type of community -- that which exists within individual courses -- three types of communities should be established: course-level communities that seek to create connectedness between instructors-and-students, and students-and-students within individual courses; institution-level communities that seek to connect students across courses and degree programs; and mission-level communities that bring together students and instructors from different institutions who have similar missions.

Transcendent holistic communities

The purpose of this paper is to expand upon Halvorsen et al.'s introduction of the Institution-level Community. Just as we need to establish "a sense of *presence* among the participants" within a course (Halvorsen et al., emphasis original), we need to establish a sense of communal presence among the entire body of institutional participants. This type of intra-institutional association transcends individual

courses, existing outside of them and the micro-learning communities contained therein. Such communities include a cross-section of students in any particular online degree program as well as students in other degree programs who would not normally interact with one another. Halvorsen et al. briefly discussed one such organization, the Dead Philosophers Society of Holy Apostles College and Seminary. This author was president of this association and worked to bring together distance learning students of the Philosophy and Theology programs who would not otherwise interact with each other.

Such communities can bring together students of various disciplines, thus helping to alleviate the increasing specialization of academia that isolates and divorces the parts of the whole from each other. These communities can also provide student representation within the institution, an important factor for online students who are also geographically distant from the campus. Such communities can be incubators in forming student teaching assistants and, after graduation, mentors. They can enhance student loyalty to the institution as they create deeper connections with fellow students and, if so integrated into the format of the communities, with faculty of the institution and campus events and goings-on. A further consideration is the possibility that community-building exercises can lead to alumni association membership, with the advantages generated thereby (to be discussed below).

Taken together, such advantages may likely impact some of the factors which adversely affect student retention and satisfaction rates but are beyond the direct influence of institutional- and instructor-level variables. These advantages may also help provide support when life interferes with a student's academics, provide a place to request help in institutional matters, create an atmosphere of academic options outside of one's chosen field, or simply give students a venue to discuss favorite, or not-so favorite, professors and courses -- all of which are not addressed in, nor appropriate for, course-level communities.

The online environment learns from the brick-and-mortar environment

Allen and Seaman found that the number one reason institutions offer online courses is to improve student access (Allen and Seaman, 2007, p2), while a close second is to attract students from outside the

institutions' traditional service areas (ibid., p17). As this is the case among the over 2,500 colleges and universities who responded to the survey, combined with the increasing numbers of students who take courses online, a growing need exists to provide Institutional-level Communities that include both student-to-student and institution-to-student community-building techniques. In fact, the need is most felt by those who are enrolled in degree programs that are entirely online, a rather substantial amount of all post-secondary programs: "More than two-thirds of all higher education institutions now have some form of online offerings, with the majority of these providing programs that are fully online" (ibid., p5).

The proposals in this article reflect the purposes of institutionally recognized brick-and-mortar communities such as student associations, fraternities and sororities, and student councils. What is not addressed herein are spontaneous, informal relationships and micro-communities that occur in dining commons, residential housing units, hallways, libraries, and other informal physical spaces. Such informal communities occur in online programs as well, facilitated primarily by private email correspondence and personal social networking pages like blogs and social networking websites. The types of communities addressed herein are overt community-building efforts that can be instigated and supported by the institution in furtherance of specific mission-oriented goals in improving the academic and institutional experience of online learners.

While the situational paradigms of brick-and-mortar community-building efforts differ greatly from those in cyberspace, the goals of formal models of on-campus, institutionally-recognized communities are worth mentioning as beginning points to help ensure that institutionally-sponsored online community-building efforts do not simply begin and remain at the phatic, or social/chit-chat, level common to informal communities, but work toward emulating successful and necessary efforts at creating communities similar, at least in purpose, to those that are available to on-campus students. Such purposes include bringing together people interested in similar topics, interests, hobbies, charities, etc., and harnessing the homophilous energy and enthusiasm thereby created for positive ends; building up communities of students separate from the classrooms, which tend to lump students together vis-a-vis

program requirements and pre-requisites and less around student interests and passions; and providing students a forum in which to discuss coursework across the curricula, often leading students to consider courses and professors they would not have otherwise considered, or conversely, to deter others from taking disappointing courses or instructors.

Brick-and-mortar alumni associations offer graduates varying degrees of career-oriented assistance along with a continuance of the network of friendships developed during their student days. They enhance collaborative efforts between alumni, such as professional collaboration and co-authorship of articles. They create relationships between alumni and current students, such as mentorship programs, internships, and the potential of student employment. Long-term institutional benefits include refreshing student relationships with the institution (such as campus events for alumni, social events at local restaurants for those residing away from the school's town, newsletters/magazines highlighting current happenings at the school, etc.), increasing institutional reputation (by creating visibly loyal graduates), and fund raising efforts.

Both alumni- and institutionally-oriented goals therefore enhance the continued viability of the institution by maintaining positive and current connections which, in turn, help promote the visibility and financial viability of the institution. Such goals also give the institution credibility in the form of loyal graduates whose personal and vocational successes reflect positively on the quality of the education received (cf. Rump, 2008). Rump highlights this often-overlooked aspect of alumni associations by quoting Bruce Berman, vice president of institutional advancement at the Community Colleges of Baltimore County: "Indeed, our students constitute our major 'product.' When we have graduate students who are trainable and, thus, employable, we can prove our accountability to our constituents and funding sources" (Rump). Alumni associations, therefore, enhance the experience of current students and vocational lives of graduates while augmenting the future viability of the institution.

But such institution-to-student and student-to-student community-building efforts for the online

paradigm cannot simply be cyber-copies of brick-and-mortar efforts. Geography prohibits it, for one. Golf tournaments, local social and fund raising activities, and homecoming events are not practical for an online community spread over multiple states or countries. And while a brick-and-mortar school can rely on local newspapers to "provide the impetus for a direct 'congratulatory' letter to an alumnus" (Rump), online programs cannot rely on such geographic-dependent sources of communications. Secondly, opportunities for community-building are available online that can be presented as natural extensions of the online learning experience. One example is the usage of a Course Management System forum which is available to a large group of students, regardless of degree program, in which students are required to submit postings related to their current study. One example, to be examined below, comes from Briercrest Seminary in Caronport, Saskatchewan, Canada, a Protestant institution.

Building on the experience the students have while enrolled in online programs takes advantage of the strengths of online learning -- limitless geography, the ability to fit in class time around family, work, and life, the emphasis on self-motivation, the plethora of Internet applications available to online students, etc. These drew the students to the online program in the first place, so we need to build on these same strengths when creating online Institutional-level Communities.

Just as institutions should harness the advantages of the online environment when creating such communities, so must we recognize their disadvantages. While it is agreed that distance students need a sense of cohesion with other students and later with fellow alumni, as Halvorsen et al. pointed out can be the case with online instructor-to-student relations which are devoid of physical contact, online communities can easily become "out of sight" and "out of mind," thus leading to the invisibility and forgetability of online communities. Further, an institution can establish online communities that appear wonderfully efficacious on paper, but with each student tending to study independently of others in the privacy of his or her own home and at his or her own pace, the "cloistered effect" of such study can render participation in extra-course online communities as nothing more than another burdensome requirement. Complicating such participation are personal and vocational demands, especially if the

students are older and hold demanding career positions (Davidson and Sosulski, 2007).

Implementing online Institution-level Communities

Perhaps as many different community-building options exist as there are institutions. Discussed here are those efforts in which the author is or has been personally involved, divided into two sections: social and institutional considerations. Community-building efforts created primarily for social considerations seek to create social-academic communities of learners based on commonalities -- from broadly defined commonalities as the fact that students are enrolled in the same school to specialized commonalities such as ethnicity, geographic region, hobbies, or interests (these latter communities may best be utilized at large institutions). These types of communities help alleviate the "lost in cyberspace" syndrome and may positively impact in-class participation as Elbaum et al. indicated.

Community-building efforts aimed at institutional considerations are also socially oriented and seek to enhance student-to-student relations, but they are more formally organized and oriented toward creating communities that direct the interest and efforts of members toward institutional goals. Student and alumni associations which incorporate the mission of the institution are prime examples in this category.

Depending on how the institution supports and directs the various social and institutional communities, their effects can overlap or can be compartmentalized. In either case, the over-arching goal is that social communities also assist the mission of the institution and that institutional communities also enhance the academic and personal lives of the students.

Socially oriented communities

Socially oriented communities allow the students to develop the formats, decide upon individual participation, and direct the efforts. They are institutionally supported but student-created and managed. The institution would need to provide official permission concerning the use of logos, trademarks, and copyrighted materials that may be used by such social communities; this would, of course, provide an impetus for ongoing administrative oversight. While it may be tempting for an institution to set aside the

social communities discussed in this section because of the informality of the format, it should be noted that the social fabric of our world has become increasingly interconnected via technological means, requiring a priesthood and lay leadership that can meaningfully engage a culture that has become habituated to interactive electronic communication. Rejection of such options could then set future priests and lay leaders at a social disadvantage and is, in fact, incongruent with the program advanced by Pope John Paul II in his directives to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications concerning Catholic use of the Internet (namely in *Church and Internet*, which reads in part: “Hanging back timidly from fear of technology or for some other reason is not acceptable, in view of the very many positive possibilities of the Internet” (§ 10)).

Social networking sites provide various opportunities to bring students into contact with other students utilizing videos, pictures, blogs, and random thoughts. If managed properly, such opportunities have the potential to improve student-to-student relations and provide modest brand recognition in these social settings. Crossing over into the institutional considerations category below, institutions and instructors can create their own sites to provide information to current and potential students by augmenting extant static institutional websites with interactive personal sites, and current students by providing additional course material or a more public forum in which to present completed assignments (while grouped together as a class, rather than posted on disparate, individual sites with no connection to the actual course). Social networking sites include MySpace, Facebook, Multiply, Windows Live Spaces, Kaneva, Second Life, Twitter, Blogger, WordPress, and Google Blog, among others. Some sites may be less beneficial than others when building communities: Twitter, for instance, is primarily an instant message service; blog sites like Blogger, WordPress, and Google Blog are more monologue, or private-diary, sites allowing the presentation of current news and thoughts, with limited and restricted comments from others. Of interest, however, are those sites that are primarily oriented toward connecting with "friends" via individual presentation of one's interests, hobbies, and life events. These can be utilized to create communities of learners or present institutional- and instructor-based

information with interactive elements -- MySpace, Facebook, Multiply, and Windows Live Spaces fall into this category. A third category of social networking sites allow "groups" to be formed in which individuals can join. Such sites that provide this option are Facebook, Kaneva, and Second Life (these last two are virtual, 3-D worlds). This option is not infrequently used by student associations and institutions to provide institutionally-sponsored virtual meeting places for students and central locations containing information regarding the association or institution. Possibilities contained therein are static information, lists of future events, student dialogue, and highlights of past events and happenings with videos, pictures, and text -- these all combine to give the impression that the association or institution is alive and well. The advantage of such "groups" is that they can be managed by several administrators, allow public or restricted access, and can present both static and revolving information (the attributes of static websites and blog sites combined).

Such sites can have an impact on the reputation of the institutions, as indicated above; therefore, it is advisable that at least one institutional staff member hold administrative privileges so as to ensure the integrity of the content and membership. Membership may be restricted to include only those who are students and alumni while being closed to the general public (the Dead Philosopher Society's Facebook site follows this protocol). This helps ensure that postings and links are more germane to the institution and its students, helping to alleviate the potential of becoming a cluttered collection of disparate cyber-artifacts and non-related chat. In the instance of any usage of social networking sites, caution must be recognized: many of these sites are used by members in ways that are incompatible with the beliefs and morals of the Catholic faith -- voyeuristic endeavors, gossip, and sexually-oriented activities among them. Pope Benedict XVI warned against this in his message entitled "New Technologies, New Relationships. Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship" prepared for the 43rd World Day of Communications. Another danger concerns the personal information that members share on such sites which can be used, and abused, by anonymous persons around the world (see guidelines for youth posted by the Federal Trade Commission, <http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/pubs/consumer/tech/tec14.shtm>).

A final word of caution regarding the types of community that can be created on social networking sites comes at us from 2,350 years ago when Plato's *Phaedrus* has Socrates tell the story of how writing was created as a "gift" to man while being problematized as a barrier to interpersonal relationships and authentic community. So long as institutions, instructors, and students remember that these communities are not substitutes for, nor necessarily accurate representations of, real-world interpersonal relationships, the advantages of such communities can be harnessed for the Kingdom.

Online student conferences give students outlets to present their academic work to a larger audience than what is available in individual courses. Such community-building events are good introductions to higher-level scholarly activity and prepare students for future professional conferences. The Dead Philosophers Society at Holy Apostles has hosted five conferences over the last two years, for example. These conferences are divided into three segments: pre-conference, conference, and post-conference activities. During the pre-conference stage, student papers are made asynchronously available for several weeks, allowing students to pre-read the presented papers. Conference activities are live, using various methods to provide synchronous communication among conference participants. We have variously used live, threaded discussion forums, call-in teleconferencing services, Skype, and WebEx. As the papers have been made available beforehand, it is assumed that the participants have already read the papers and prepared questions for the presenters. Presentations, consequently, are not readings of the papers themselves but rather are discussion sessions regarding why the presenter chose that topic, his or her methods of research, personal conclusions, etc. We have found this format to be very useful, informative, and interesting. It also greatly enhances the relationships of those in attendance. Keynote speakers are invited from the scholarly community, which gives the student presenters a post-graduate school perspective and presentation model to follow. Whenever possible, a recording is made so that those who were not able to participate live may read or listen to the presentations and discussions later. Post-conference asynchronous discussion of papers is made available in the institutionally sponsored Course Management System along with the recording of the conference itself. Participants are then able

to ask follow-up questions of the presenters, or if they were not able to attend the live session, the papers and presenters are still available to them.

Institutionally-oriented communities

Formally organized communities include activities that occur within the parameters of a Course Management System but are not tied to individual courses, and institutionally supported student organizations that have formal social structures including bylaws, boards, elected officers, etc.

Mandatory cross-curricula posting of assignments brings together students who may not otherwise have contact with each other. Students enrolled at Briercrest Seminary normally attend a one-week intensive seminar on campus and complete related pre- and post-course work. When students, because of scheduling conflicts or for other reasons, are not able to come to campus for a course, they may register for a distance learning course. Briercrest requires seminary students taking distance learning courses to post discussion topics of their choice in a common forum. Required minimum words-per-posting are indicated, and students must also respond to the postings of other students. Students then provide digital copies of these postings to their respective instructors (professors do not assign grades to such assignments, but merely mark these postings as having fulfilled the requirement). These two requirements ensure that students engage in theological, moral, and biblical discussions with those outside of the degree program in which they are enrolled as well as bridge some of the gap between students who are separated geographically.

On-campus student associations are familiar organizations, but those which cater specifically to distance learning students are rare. The Dead Philosophers Society is one such organization which began in the fall of 2006 when three of the students who had just entered the Philosophy program, Dr. Sebastian Mahfood, Dr. Roman Krzanowski, and Dr. James McNerny, decided it would be meaningful to put together a forum for student-to-student interaction. The mission of the Dead Philosophers Society, as it came to be called, was to strengthen the community of learners within the online Masters of Arts in Philosophy program. Over the past three years of its existence, the Society has grown its membership to

incorporate almost half of the distance learning students at Holy Apostles, including both the Philosophy and Theology students. An important lesson learned which has been mentioned above is that online community-building efforts must be intentional and overt. We found that such efforts are best engaged in by those who possess a gift of communication via mass emails and in one-to-one interpersonal communications. A community, after all, consists of persons who, first, recognize that the community exists and, second, actively participate within it to whatever capacity they are able. Another lesson learned involves the differing time zones in which the various members reside. Asynchronous communications must augment synchronous communications, especially in matters of decision making - if a conference call is utilized to facilitate an association meeting where decisions are expected to be made, allowance must be made for those who cannot participate because of the difference in hours. Asynchronous communication is then used to include those members who, say, live in Australia, with final decisions being made through the fusing of synchronous and asynchronous methods to arrive at the necessary quorum.

Through these interactions, the Society has developed the capacity not only to sustain the learning of its own members, but also to assist the school in problem resolution and in the dissemination of institutional information. In the first case, the Society surveys the students concerning their needs in the program and runs the course evaluations, and in the second provides a website (at <http://www.deadphilosopherssociety.com>) and a student clubhouse on Blackboard which helps students adjust to institutional life as distance learners.

Further, the institution has extended invitations to Society members to assist the school with various goals, such as those concerned with programs, policies, and resource acquisition. It is in such invitations that, according to Fr. Sergius Halvorsen, Director of the Distance Learning program, the institution “has a correlative opportunity to facilitate the work of the Society,” thus improving the institution-to-student relationship.

A recent survey of Society members shows that being a member of the Society enhanced the

distance learning experience for 88% of its members and is composed of loyal students (all Society members indicated they would recommend the program to others). Half of the respondents also found that the Society provided many opportunities to better connect with other distance students at Holy Apostles that they would not otherwise have. A companion survey of distance learning students who are not members of the Society showed that a higher percentage of non-members compared to Society members: 1) found that the classes were not what they expected once enrolled; 2) have had to postpone taking classes due to life-issues; 3) have dropped classes once enrolled due to a dislike of the material, format, professor, or topic; 4) would not recommend Holy Apostles to others; 5) have made less long-lasting friendships with fellow students; and 6) have less communication with other students. A last discovery is the inferred impact this student association has on the viability of an alumni association, and by extension the benefits an alumni association may give to the institution: Society members all agree that an alumni association would be beneficial to current students with over 80% either agreeing or strongly agreeing, while only 40% of non-members agreed or strongly agreed with another 20% completely disagreeing. Thus, compared to non-members of the Society, members tend to be more loyal to the institution, are more involved with Holy Apostles' community of distance learners, and engage in a more positive distance learning experience.

While only about half of Society members have actually connected with the aggregate community of distance learners at Holy Apostles, the data suggest that even those students who are not "plugged in" are aware that a distance learning community exists which has therefore positively impacted their course of study at Holy Apostles. Perhaps just knowing that an active distance learning community exists gives them a sense of belonging, a sense of presence of others in their cyber-learning lives.

Student associations can also be vehicles for creating Teaching Assistants composed of current students. It is agreed that instructors must keep students engaged, requiring much effort on the part of the instructor (see Carr, specifically the comments of Emilio Ramos). Online TA's can be drawn from student associations to help in classes that they have successfully completed. Members are already

familiar with the online format as students and are likely quite sensitive to the needs of other cyber-learners regarding the many essential understandings of the problems and opportunities of online courses. Such understandings from a student perspective can be molded into a more instructor-oriented understanding through institutionally sponsored training within the paradigm of student associations. Conversely, their input into the distance degree programs can help the institution mold its online paradigm to better fit the needs of online learners, take better advantage of new technology, and better integrate the students into the educational endeavor. Standards and parameters need to be established, but such can take place in the formation process within the student associations aligned to best practice standards established at the institutional level for online instructors.

Translating the many advantages of alumni associations as previously mentioned to a purely-online distance community holds the same challenges and opportunities as the other community-building activities proposed above, but is well worth the effort. Such alumni associations already exist that can serve as models for those that have yet to come into existence. For instance, the private for-profit schools University of Phoenix and Walden University offer alumni associations that are directed towards professional development, with references to outside resume services, head hunters, and job banks.

The recent creation of Holy Apostles College and Seminary's Alumni Association, conceived by Dr. Sebastian Mahfood and this author as a way to help students transition from an active online student community into an ongoing, active post-graduation community, may include such career assistance, but it will be more focused on developing graduates in line with the mission statement of Holy Apostles while it furthers institutional concerns. It will seek to increase the graduates' vocations (lay and clerical) vis-à-vis Holy Apostle's mission, support and encourage the ongoing work and ministry of alumni, enhance long-term loyalty to the institution, provide alumni assistance to current students, and assist in fund-raising opportunities and institutional brand recognition. This platform is very compatible with the need to address the problems of orphaned students lost in cyberspace in that it seeks to ground the alumni in the physical institution which has existed for over a half-century.

Perhaps one of the most unique considerations in this regard is the integration of the distance students with the residential students. Holy Apostles is primarily a brick-and-mortar seminary, with over eighty residential seminarians and religious. Its distance programs -- Master of Arts degrees in Philosophy and Theology -- are primarily directed at lay Catholics who live in the United States and other countries. Around 135 students are currently enrolled in these two distance-degree programs. Hence there are two distinct groups of alumni: clergymen who have physical ties to the campus and lay Catholics who live around the world, many of whom never set foot on campus except for graduation ceremonies, such as the author. Fr. Sergius Halvorsen recognizes that once seminarians graduate and become priests, they tend to leave the immediate vicinity of the campus in Cromwell, Connecticut, thus their status vis-à-vis the physical campus becomes more in line with that of the distance learning graduates. An integrated alumni association, while primarily existing within cyberspace, would focus the graduates on the campus itself, drawing back the priests while connecting the lay graduates to the physical institution. A secondary issue that is being addressed is the reality that online students are often segregated from the brick-and-mortar students. This association will seek to highlight and enhance the shared experiences of the graduates to create a homogeneous community, for they received their formation from the same professors, all studied Thomistic philosophy, and are all grounded in orthodox Catholic theology.

Conclusion

Institutions and instructors have discerned that online students will not organically create learning communities simply because there is a list of the names of other students who are enrolled in the same course. What is needed are institutionally sponsored community-building efforts through the creation of pre-made structures within which students can enter and therein create student-to-student, instructor-to-student, and institution-to-student relationships. Halvorsen et al. proposed three levels of communities that need to be created. Expanding on their work, we have outlined herein the theoretical and practical considerations in the creation of Institutional-level Communities.

Without such overt holistic community-building efforts, online students may have little opportunity to connect to the aggregate institutional community or the institution itself. Further, it is not difficult to ascertain the vibrancy of a physical institution -- such as crowded parking lots, many students walking from building to building, posters of student clubs posted on light posts and community bulletin boards, etc. Such visible vibrancy evokes a sense of purpose and worth which draws potential students to the institution. Distance programs, however, do not have such "passive" methods of conveying vitality and must therefore create "assertive" methods at the three levels of course, institution, and mission to ensure current and future students of the institution's vitality and legitimacy.

In addressing the issue of orphaned students, one must keep in mind Herbert's conclusion that one cannot point to a single variable but rather must address "a holistic view of student demographic and institutional variables [that] must be examined in determining the overall 'weather' of the online experience as opposed to the single variable, or daily forecast" (Herbert). While student retention rates (significantly below those of brick-and-mortar students according to Herbert and Diaz) and satisfaction of instructional quality are items that can be directly influenced by the institution and instructor through pedagogical methods, it must be understood that these factors are also influenced by many subjective and life-situation issues. It is hoped that these difficulties can be appropriately addressed through the creation of Institutional-level Communities which transcend individual courses.

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