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Making Connection With Students in the First Year Seminar

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This paper discusses engagement tools for cultivating students' collaborative experiences and accessing faculty through an effective online learning environment. One of the primary goals of the First Year Seminar (FYS) courses for the business discipline is student retention. Students in their first year must overcome many obstacles to succeed academically, and faculty at LaGuardia Community College (LAGCC) need to be able to address these needs so that they can graduate on time. Thus, the Business and Technology (BAT) Department at LAGCC provides the opportunity to use collaborative online tools such as Connect To Completion (C2C) and ePortfolio simultaneously to meet these needs while helping them understand the importance of timely graduation. Faculty in the FYS courses use the virtual advising tool C2C to communicate with their students about various needs, while the ePortfolio serves as a tool that influences student learning. Both tools provide an opportunity for first-semester students to reach out to their faculty and advisors, which creates a strong support system. The C2C tool facilitates students in developing a strong bond with their advisors and faculty through receiving constant alerts about their performance in the course. Both applications are easy-to-use for all the stakeholders, making the students feel welcome at and invested in LaGuardia. The approach of using the C2C and ePortfolio tools simultaneously not only helps students to think comprehensively about their

needs but also helps them to understand the importance of graduating on time.

Introduction

Students' first-year experience is always challenging because they are transitioning from high school to college life. In addition, they struggle during this first year navigating to college resources and obtaining the right help to understand their major and to identify their academic goals. Although LaGuardia Community College (LAGCC) aims to have a strong support system and to respond effectively when students seek help, students still struggle to adjust to using the new tools needed to reach out to the appropriate divisions when they need guidance. According to the CCSSE (2012), data suggest only about 45% of community college students complete a degree. These data indicate that either students lack the skills to persevere in college or the institution lacks a collaborative tool for addressing the students' needs. Such support is important as students should be able to think critically in establishing their academic goals in a realistic manner so that they don't waste time at the community college figuring out what courses to take next semester or simply dropping out for a semester because they are uncertain. Students in the first semester need to develop the academic skills for solving problems not only for selecting appropriate courses but also for reaching out for academic support when needed. LAGCC addresses this

issue by using a single sign-in system to access the robust online tools; in the FYS courses, students get a chance to explore these tools and to learn how to stay connected with the campus and to cultivate their learning experience.

First Year Seminar

LAGCC offers a discipline-based First Year Seminar (FYS), where faculty members remain involved in understanding students' needs. In other words, faculty remain very open with the FYS students throughout the semester so that they feel welcome to ask for help. The FYS course is designed to include lecture hours and lab hours where students are facilitated by a mentor known as a Student Success Mentor (SSM). During the lab hours, SSMs serve as role models and help the students to work on their ePortfolios. Conversely, in the lecture hour, faculty help the students develop the academic skills to succeed in college while ensuring students learn how to use the technology suites that include CUNYFirst, Blackboard, Connect To Completion (C2C), Degree Audits, ePortfolio, email and many more options. FYS is one of the high-impact practices (HIP) that demonstrate student engagement and success (Chen et al., 2016; Conefrey, 2017). In FYS courses, faculty implement a series of activities to engage the students, all of which are necessary for student success. Donaldson et al. (2017) defined engagement as “the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimize the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution” (p. 2922).

Lack of engagement can create frustration for the students because they don't find the learning meaningful, resulting in a disconnect in their studies. Students may also experience disengagement when they do not feel connected to the campus. Donaldson et al. (2017) defined active learning as meaningful learning activities that allow the students to remain engaged. Active learning includes collaboration,

participation and involvement through which learners are enabled to learn from one another. Technology supports the active learning process if used to create the “sense of community and connectedness” that is crucial for students' academic success (Donaldson et al., p. 2922). Faculty in the FYS seek ways to engage the students by using the ePortfolio platform and C2C so that students find ways to connect with the campus and achieve academic success which may lead to graduation on time. One of the most meaningful assignments in the FYS is Planning my Degree; students appreciate it primarily because this assignment leads to a clear curriculum guide. Later students have less confusion in choosing the appropriate courses since they can easily refer to this assignment facilitated in the FYS courses.

ePortfolio

Technology usage is a common practice in academic institutions, and the expectation is that students use online tools in submitting their assignments, registering, and searching for course materials, among other tasks. In the FYS, the students are introduced to the login procedure of the LaGuardia portal, where they can easily access the online tools. As soon as they login, they can view the dashboard, which includes the features of the C2C system and the link to ePortfolio. Students in their first year of study struggle to understand the use of the different tools being offered to them, and faculty in the FYS courses continue to reinforce the use of ePortfolio and C2C to help students gain a sense of belonging to the campus. FYS students can easily become frustrated especially if they do not understand the array of technology suites. To motivate them, students receive kudos via the C2C platform to encourage them. Similarly, if students actively use the ePortfolio platform to add their academic work, they can see their longitudinal growth.

Though students do not at first appreciate the use of ePortfolio, they slowly understand its purpose when they look at one another's work.

Because defining academic goals can be confusing for students, the completion of the Advisement form by the faculty member can assist them in understanding their current status in relation to their goals.

Today social engagement is a popular trend that students can easily adapt, and ePortfolio can serve as a social pedagogy tool that facilitates not only student engagement but also a means to exchange dialogues between learners from an academic standpoint. This use of an ePortfolio can be seen as a social space where students can foster growth and a sense of belonging throughout the semester (Eynon & Gambino, 2018). They also receive comments from their peers, inspiring them to continue editing their ePortfolios.

C2C

At first, faculty thought that the C2C application was just another tool that requires the students to remember their login credentials and to learn how to use the platform. However, because the C2C application is integrated with the LaGuardia portal, students do not need to struggle to login. As Bayne (2010) mentioned, it is important to consider student energy, adding “if a technology is requiring too much of the students’ energy, then we need to refocus on the learning” (p. 12). The Business and Technology Department (BAT) piloted the C2C system, a communication tool that allows students to exchange messages interactively with their faculty and advisors, in the Spring of 2017. The system incorporates additional features that allow the faculty to:

- Provide feedback to their students using the kudos—Thumbs Up, Heads Up, Reminder
- Add referrals for their students based on their needs
- Exchange messages with students and advisors
- Prepare a programmatic plan using the Advisement form

- View students’ records/dashboards

Students also benefit by using the system. They can easily connect to faculty and advisors to discuss their needs on a one-on-one basis rather than looking for office hours and office locations. When students receive kudos from their faculty, they are encouraged to do better in their studies and to stay focused throughout the semester to achieve their academic goals. Because defining academic goals can be confusing for students, the completion of the Advisement form by the faculty member can assist them in understanding their current status in relation to their goals. The Advisement form in the C2C platform also clearly defines each step. As a result, students in their first year of study are able to comprehend the bigger picture, so moving forward, they are confident and have developed a sense of belonging to the institution.

Survey Results

A C2C survey including five questions was administered in six FYS courses in the 2018 Spring and Fall semesters to capture students’ experiences using the C2C system. Based on the survey results, the use of C2C can significantly impact students’ academic success. On average we noticed an increase in awareness and use of C2C as the semester progressed. The findings reported here represent the comparison between the end-of-semester survey data. The survey results from Spring 2018 to Fall 2018 demonstrate the encouragement the students felt upon receiving the kudos—thumbs up, heads up, reminder (Figure 1). More specifically, approximately 62% of the students felt encouraged when they have received a thumbs up (see Figure 1). Students further expressed that the system helped them to stay focused and acted as a reminder to graduate on time (see Figures 2 and 3). In addition, the survey results indicate how the application created a strong sense of encouragement, which students appreciated. Students also appreciated how they can use the application to get in touch with the faculty and staff members at the institution. Hence, the ease-of-use of the C2C application enabled

the students, faculty and advisors to create a strong bond.

Though the C2C survey has not been able to capture college-wide data, we have shared the data we have collected from our colleagues to investigate the students' perceptions of the application. The survey would have to be implemented and documented on a large scale to obtain enough data to identify root cause

analysis and implementation of best pedagogical practices. As depicted in these figures, we noted significant, supportive and correlative observations (Figures 1-3). The fact that the FYS seminar is comprised of recent high school graduates as well as returning or transferring students along with the dynamics of the class may explain some of the preliminary variances found from semester to semester.

Conclusion

Students exposed to the C2C and ePortfolio tools are more likely to have a better understanding of how to use the system effectively. Because both tools are so interactive, students remained engaged throughout the semester and created a bond with their faculty and advisors. The system also stores evidence while keeping track of the messages exchanged. Students, faculty and advisors can then reflect on the previous messages to make future academic decisions. At the end of the semester, students had gained confidence, and they knew the support system better and how to reach out to the appropriate staff members. As a result, students could stay focused and continue their academic journey to graduate on time. The student dashboards helped them to view their academic progress while understanding the importance of the Grade Point Average (G.P.A). They gained a sense of responsibility while keeping close connections to faculty and advisors. Students also became aware of the need to become involved in the curricular activities. In their responses to the survey, students expressed positive attitudes towards and valued the opportunity of using the C2C and the ePortfolio.

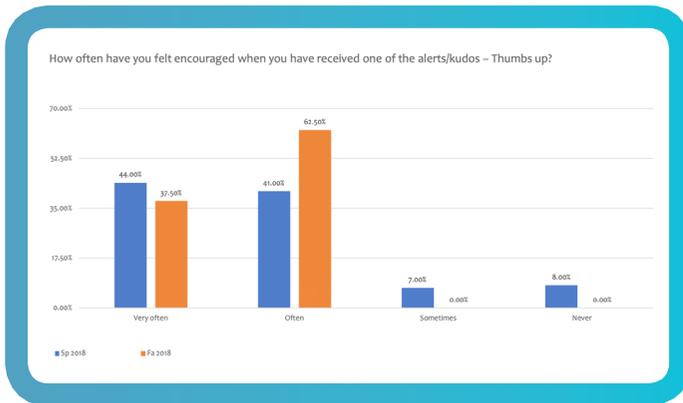


Figure 1. Responses to encouragement question

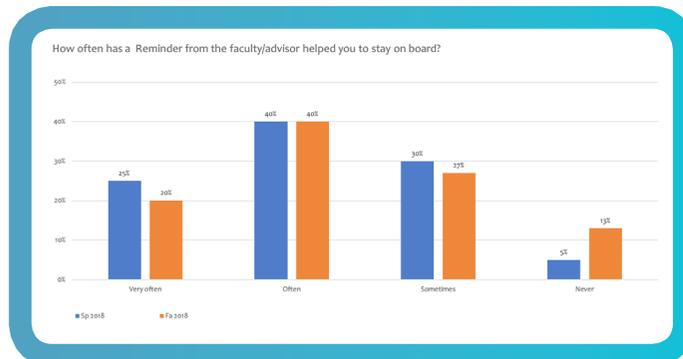


Figure 2. Responses to Reminder question

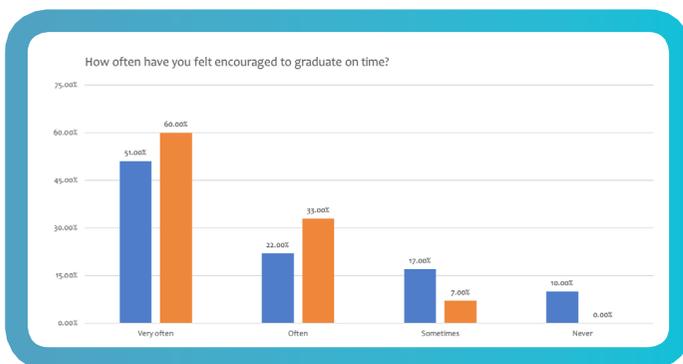


Figure 3. Responses to graduation question

About the Authors



Professor Ahmed Abdelhalim is an Assistant Professor for Business & Technology Department at LaGuardia Community College, CUNY. Professor Abdelhalim has been teaching Accounting and First Year Seminar Business courses for the past nine years. Professor Abdelhalim is a certified public accountant and a chartered global management accountant.



Javier Serna is a full-time Lecturer with Business and Technology Department at LaGuardia Community College. His role at the College includes teaching accounting courses, engaging in scholarly and committee activities, and supporting various strategic initiatives as the College such as the Peer Advisor Program. Prior to becoming a full-time Lecturer at LaGuardia in 2017, Javier has had the opportunity to work with and support students since 2003 in his role as Adjunct Lecturer at the College. Javier is currently pursuing a Masters in Business Management & Leadership at CUNY, School of Professional Studies.



Sada H Jaman is the faculty of Business and Technology department (BAT) at LaGuardia Community College (LAGCC). She got her Associates Degree in Programming and System, from LaGuardia, the Bachelor's Degree in Computer Systems from New York City College of Technology, the MBA from University of Maryland (UMUC). Currently, she is pursuing Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA). She has been involved with the First Year Seminar (FYS) at LAGCC since 2010 and perceives First Year Experience as one of the key elements towards academic success. Her strong involvement with the FYS helped her to better facilitate successful transition of incoming students where students can cultivate the essential academic skills to strengthen awareness of the disciplinary themes, program curriculum, dispositions, co-curricular activities and technology tools.

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