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# Building Community among Distance Learning Graduate Students

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**Building Community among Distance Learning Graduate Students**

**Erin M. Meyer**

**Winona State University**

**A Capstone**

**Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree**

**Master of Science**

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## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

This research focuses on understanding how community building takes place among distance learning graduate students. Building community can create a greater sense of well-being, increase the flow of information and support, and commitment to group goals (Rovai, 2000). The sense of community is of great importance for online education. Sun and Rosson (2017) found that personal details of students can be essential but may be less so over time. This study investigates social presence strategies within the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Garrison, 2017) used in online learning in graduate courses at the Midwestern university. Garrison (2017) identified the need to have a deeper understanding of the social presence and the importance of “academic identity (course goals) or shared social identity (interpersonal relationships) (p. 160).” This study explores strategies used in graduate courses to ensure students are engaged and achieving course outcomes.

### **Statement of Problem**

The lack of community building in distance learning at the graduate level can have negative effects on learning, professional networking, and specific course outcomes.

### **Background of Problem**

Over the past two decades, technology has continued to expand leading to more opportunities for students and new pedagogical research. Development of online community is crucial for satisfaction and the overall learning experience (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012a). The National Center for Education Statistics (2014) reported 22% of graduate students enrolled in higher education were taking online classes exclusively, and 7.8% of students enrolled in some distance education courses in 2012. Rovai (2003) concluded that the Internet had become the most popular way to obtain an education for both undergraduate and graduate students.

A sense of community can decrease isolation and distractions, especially for distance learning students. It is important to recognize that building community does not have to occur in the same location. A community is what people do together, and it can become separate from geography. Socio-emotional interactions mostly self-generate, and these interactions can take place in the virtual world (Rovai, 2000; 2001a; 2004; Rovai & Downey, 2010).

“Students who have a greater sense of community tend to have an improved educational experience within the distance education courses, and the improved educational experience has the potential to improve retention (Reinhart, 2010 p. 224).” Many learners that have a perceived sense of community also perceive that they are learning the material. When learning, students are less likely to quit a program. Course design is vital to students building community.

The learning possibilities using the Internet have almost become endless. It is critical that educators provide the same connections between online students as they would traditional students in a classroom setting. However, the pedagogical discourse must be constructed differently for distance learners compared to face-to-face students. The sense of community can increase information flow, support, commitment, and cooperation among students in an online learning environment.

Distance learning has become a key component in higher education. Often, graduate students are working full-time, have families, and enrolled in higher education. Additional research is needed on building community in master’s degree-seeking students who balance a variety of obligations.

There has been a great deal of research on distance learning and a variety of measures that contribute to building community in that environment. Most of the literature focused on specific sections of students. For example, some focus on doctoral students, undergraduate

students, doctoral students in specific departments, etc. This research expands the knowledge through interviewing distance learning graduate students from a midsized university in the leadership education department and conducting a focus group with faculty that teaches distance learning graduate students. Additionally, documents related to distance learning at the University have been reviewed.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Community of Inquiry framework was first brought to light by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer in 2000. This framework is utilized explicitly as an “online learning research tool (Garrison, 2007, p. 61).” There are three main components to the framework: social, teaching, and cognitive presence (Figure 1). In the past decade, there has been a considerable amount of momentum to revise the framework as well as include quantitative analysis portions to replicate in large populations and other universities (Garrison, 2017).

Social presence incorporates the three components of “effective communication, open communication, and group cohesion (Garrison, 2007, p. 63).” Social presence reflects the students’ ability to create relationships. The overlap of social and cognitive presence was “of concern (Garrison, 2007, p. 63)” when the model was first created. He reflected that it is of importance to sustainability that the group of students be able to communicate. “Social presence must move beyond simply establishing socio-emotional presence and personal relationships. Cohesion requires intellectual focus (i.e., open and purposeful communication) and respect (Garrison, 2007, p. 63).”

Cognitive presence is the second concept associated with the framework. It was incorporated, primarily, due to previous research. “It is defined as the exploration, construction, resolution and confirmation of understanding through collaboration and reflection in a

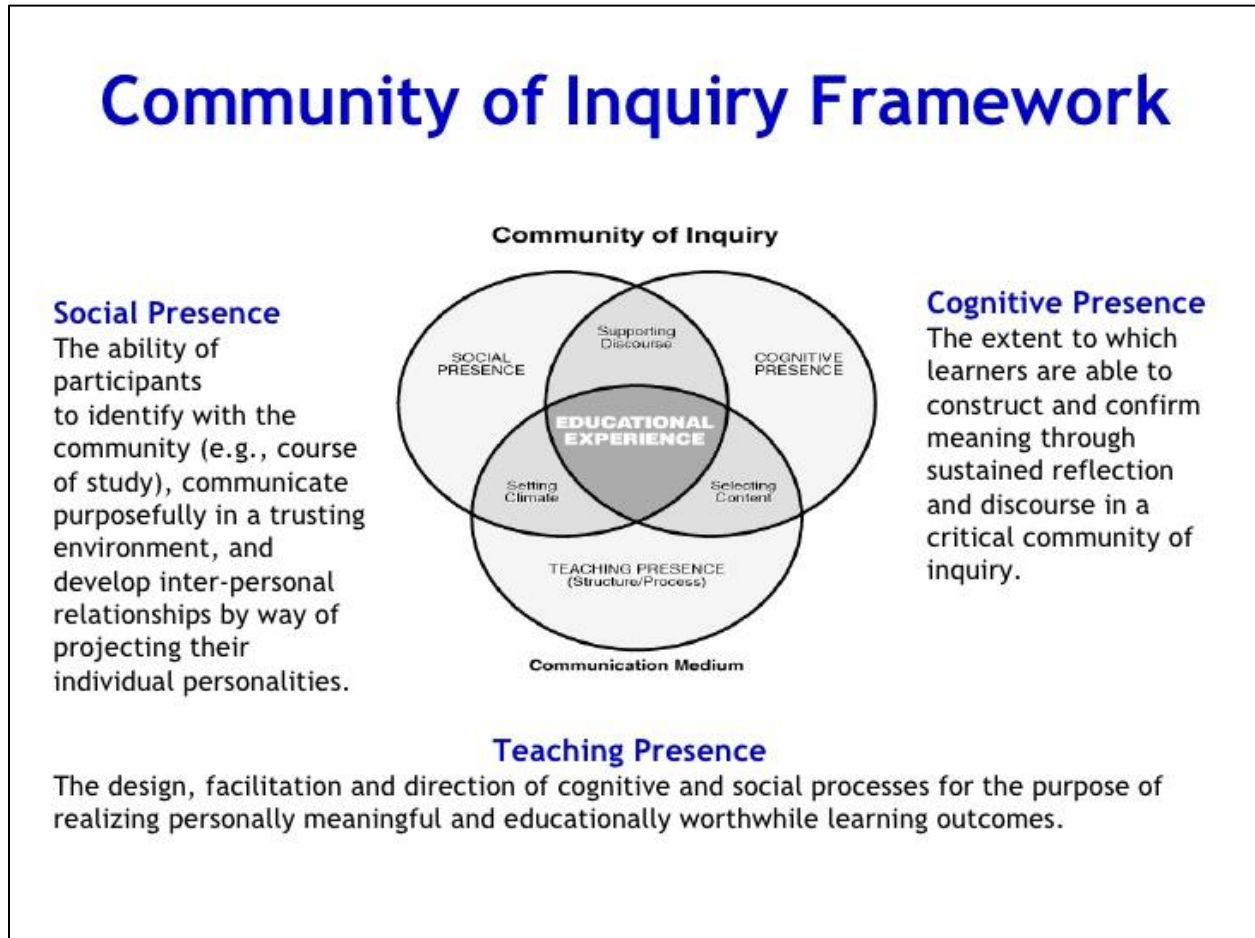


community of inquiry (Garrison, 2007, p. 65).” Cognitive presence is responsible for the exchange of information, connections and application to ideas.

The final presence in the framework is teaching. Garrison (2007) stated, “The consensus is that teaching presence is a significant determinate of student satisfaction, perceived learning, and sense of community (p. 67).” Facilitation and direct instruction are the two main categories of teaching presence (Garrison, 2007).

All three presences are individually important as well as their overlap see Figure 1). All three are needed to create a sense of community in online education. This framework has been cited over 4,000 times (as reported by Google Scholar, September 2017) since its original publication.

Figure 1:



(Ice, P., Community of Inquiry, 2008)

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore community building strategies among distance learning graduate students at a Midwestern university.

### Research Questions

RQ 1: How does building community occur in distance learning graduate students in the Midwest?

RQ 2: What strategies can be used to facilitate building community in graduate distance learning courses?

### **Definition of Terms**

Terms defined to allow for better comprehension and understanding for the reader.

**Building Community:** efforts leading toward creating a sense of community (see definition below).

**Community:** Gardner (1996) listed the “ingredients (p. 6)” for community, which include, diversity, shared values, mutual obligations, internal communication, participation, affirming, connections to the outside world, development of its citizens, thoughts of the future, and clear processes.

**Community of Inquiry (CoI):** reference to the framework developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer in 2000. The framework is comprised of social, cognitive, and teaching presence.

**Distance Learning:** interchangeable with online learning and is a space for students to learn with assistance from the Internet.

**Face-to-Face Learner:** students that are learning in a physical classroom with the instructor present. This can be interchanged with “traditional student.”

**Graduate Students:** students that are completing course requirements to obtain their master’s degree at the university in this study.

**Online Community:** a group of people with a shared interest or online course that do not share a physical presence.

**Online Learning (E-Learning):** within this study, it is interchangeable with distance learning. Regardless of time or geography, the communities can learn with the use of the internet (Garrison, 2017).

Sense of Community: feeling of belonging, feeling of making a difference, fulfillment of needs, and an emotional connection with the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Traditional Students: students taking courses in a physical classroom. This term can be interchangeable with Face-to-Face Learner.

### **Procedures**

Interviews were conducted with 14 graduate students that primarily learn through distance education. A focus group of faculty that teach distance learning graduate students was conducted. All data has been analyzed for statistical significance. The interview and focus group data is transcribed verbatim and coded. Results are reported in this research and discussed in future chapters.

### **Significance of Study**

The significance of this study provides this Midwestern university with specific feedback from current graduate students enrolled in distance learning courses. The data from the interviews and focus groups provides a deeper understanding of the social presence and the need for community among distance learning graduate students. Additionally, this will supplement the research of pedagogical practices for distance learning students.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations are the response rate and participation of students in the interviews, the response rate and participation of faculty in the focus group, and the honesty of participants.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

This study is confined to a mid-sized university located in the Midwest of the United States and focused on distance learning graduate students. Students must be taking courses in an

online environment, which may include online courses or virtual video conferencing attendance, similar to Skype.

### **Assumptions**

The assumptions made by the researcher are limited. Presumably, the research will gain feedback to enhance the body of research currently existing with a Community of Inquiry theoretical framework and distance education. The researcher also assumes that data will be dependent on course of study and faculty. Finally, the assumption is made that outcomes from this study will provide strategies to improve online courses and outcomes for distance learning graduate students.

### **Organization of the Study**

Chapter 2 contains the Literature Review and provides information about the problem. The review of literature will walk readers through the past 20 years of research and studies conducted on distance learning.

Chapter 3 is titled Research Methodology. This section focuses on the study at hand and provides an outline of the steps taken to achieve the results.

Chapter 4 reflects the results of the research. It provides qualitative data through the use of interviews, a focus group, and document review. The results are discussed.

Chapter 5 provides the recommendations for future research and implications on this study in education and leadership.

### **Summary**

This chapter has provided a brief overview of the study on distance learning graduate students. The study will examine social presence using the Community of Inquiry Framework.

The remainder of this paper provides detailed information on the existing literature, research methods, results of the study, discussion, and recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

This study explores community building among distance learning graduate students. The literature review is comprised of three primary sections and offers historical and current information that is relevant to this research. Section one is a historical perspective of distance learning. Section two provides an overview and historical perspective of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework. Part three covers building community and distance education.

### **Historical Perspective of Distance Learning**

Distance learning has been a part of higher education for a significant amount of time. Research was conducted on what makes distance learning successful and what hinders outcomes for students. Rovai (2000) identified eight factors that are key to a thriving online learning environment that emphasizes a sense of community: student-instructor ratio; transactional distance; social presence and instructor immediacy; the low occurrence of lurkers; social equality; collaborative learning; group facilitation, and; self-directed learning.

“Distance education is the most renowned descriptor used when referencing distance learning (Moore, Dickson-Deane, Galyen, 2011, p. 129).” The term “e-Learning” can be dated back to the 1980’s and defined in a variety of contexts such as learning that takes place over a web-based or technical platform. Online learning can be utilized to describe learning that takes place solely online. However, others use it to explain learning that has a technology component (Moore, Dickson-Deane, Galyen, 2011). This study will utilize distance education, e-learning, and online learning interchangeably.

Rovai (2003) summarized practices to enhance distance learning in higher education. His focus was to increase the skills of faculty through course design. The researcher started at the

beginning, with preplanning of the online course. He suggested backward design model and encouraged faculty to understand the course's learning goals. Successful online students tend to be motivated individuals, and many are adult learners who also have additional reasons for attending an online course. Rovai (2003) suggested that universities have a designated office for faculty that focuses on learning for online instructors. Online course design was the next focus of Rovai, and he stated that instructors should consider the following: "(a) presentation of content, (b) instructor-student and student-student interactions, (c) individual and group activities, and (d) assessment of student performance (Rovai, 2003, p. 84)." The focus should be on learning and not teaching when designing an online course (Rovai, 2003).

### **Community of Inquiry Framework**

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework was developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer in 2000 while trying to gain a better understanding of computer-mediated communication (CMC). The framework is now widely used to evaluate online education and assumes that "learning occurs within the Community through the interaction of three core elements (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, p. 88)." These three elements are known as "presences" and consist of cognitive, teaching, and social presence. There have been revisions to definitions throughout the years by the original researchers and will be presented throughout this section.

Cognitive presence is the most crucial as it reflects the learning and understanding of the students. Social presence "is defined as the ability of participants in the Community of Inquiry to project their characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as 'real people' (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, p. 89)." The final presence, teaching, consists of the design of the course as well as the facilitation.



Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2010) analyzed the progress made on their framework over the ten years since its inception. The framework began during computer conferencing in higher education and is reflective of the asynchronous nature of online education. The goal was to gain a better understanding of the effectiveness and possibilities of online learning (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010). The original model placed a great deal of importance on the cognitive presence when in reality, all three presences are critical to the success of learners. Social presence has become a priority for many students as they seek a “shared identity (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2010 p. 7).” Teaching presence has evolved as well, and there continues to be a growing need to determine the importance of all three dimensions of this element.

### **Social Presence**

“Social presence is described as the ability to project one’s self and establish personal and purposeful relationships (Garrison, 2007, p. 63).” There are three main aspects of this presence: effective communication, open communication, and group cohesion. This communication is created through “familiarity, skills, motivation, organizational commitment, activities, and length of time in using the media directly (Garrison, Anderson, Archer, 2000, p. 95).” Students that engage in conversations increase their learning potential (Joksimović, Gašević, Kovanović, Riecke, & Hatala, 2015). If collaborative assignments don’t exist in a course, social presence becomes less essential, and students benefit less from others.

Joksimović, Gašević, Kovanović, Riecke, & Hatala (2015) found specific indicators of social presence that significantly predicted academic performance (i.e., continuing a thread, complimenting, expressing appreciation). Students need to be able to communicate in a safe environment to achieve the goals of the course and have thoughtful focus and communication

(Garrison, 2007). This cohesion is tied to social presence and learning outcomes perceived by the student. “The purpose of social presence in an educational context is to create the conditions for inquiry and quality interaction (reflective and threaded discussions) in order to collaboratively achieve worthwhile educational goals (Garrison, 2007, p. 64).” As was corroborated by Richardson, Maeda, Lv, & Caskurlu (2017), social presence was crucial to “student outcomes, namely satisfaction and perceived learning (p. 412).” Wanstreet and Stein (2011) deemed social presence as an important concept that supports cognitive presence. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) put this emphasis on social presence: “Social presence marks a qualitative difference between a collaborative community of inquiry and a simple process of downloading information (p. 96).”

“Understanding the role of social presence is essential in creating a community of inquiry and in designing, facilitating, and directing higher-order learning (Garrison, 2007, p. 69).” Kim, Song, and Luo (2016) found that “social presence explains over 50% of variance of teacher-student relationship satisfaction, class satisfaction, and perceived knowledge gain (p. 676).” Joksimović et al. (2015) found teaching and social presence to assist in cognitive presence while teaching presence facilitates social presence. Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Shing Fung (2009) found social presence perceptions influence the cognitive presence and considered it the most important variable.

### **Cognitive Presence**

“Cognitive presence is defined as the exploration, construction resolution and confirmation of understanding through collaboration and reflection in a community of inquiry (Garrison, 2007, p. 65).” This presence reflects the inquiry process of students understanding, exploring, integrating and utilizing the lesson (Garrison, 2007). The design of an activity or

assignment can result in progression through the cognitive presence. Facilitation compared to direct instruction tends to increase this progress (Garrison, 2007).

While cognitive presence is essential to learning, it cannot stand alone. “Such an educational community is nurtured in the boarder social-emotional environment of the communicative transaction (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, p. 94).”

### **Teaching Presence**

Teaching presence consists of the design, facilitation and direct instruction of the course and defined initially as “to support and enhance social and cognitive presence for the purpose of realizing educational outcomes (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000, p. 90).” “The consensus is that teaching presence is a significant determinate of student satisfaction, perceived learning, and sense of community (Garrison, 2007, p. 67).” Students have a difficulty distinguishing between facilitation and direct instruction. However, the view from teachers is “the difference between dialogue and discourse (Garrison, 2007, p. 67).” The course design tends to be the most significant factor associated with students’ perception of the teaching presence.

Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Shing Fung (2009) explored and tested the CoI framework to determine its validity. All survey questions were determined to be valid at assessing the relationship of all three presences. Teaching presence was found to be at the core to maintain the other two presences (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Shing Fung, 2009,). However, all three remain interdependent and affect each other.

Arbaugh, Cleveland-Innes, Diaz, Garrison, Ice, Richardson & Swan (2008) confirm the dimensions of teaching. The researchers suggest loading activities before the course, and the facilitation/instruction takes place during the course. The test supports the CoI framework and

relays information that the teaching presence plays a critical role in students understanding and appropriate conduct.

### **Criticism of Community of Inquiry Framework**

There have been many criticisms of the CoI framework. Additionally, many studies have focused on the social presence which is the focus of this research. It is essential to review some of these recent critiques which are presented below in chronological order.

Lee's (2016) findings contradict the overall CoI framework and many previous studies. Lee discovered that increased participation might not increase thinking skills but stated teacher instruction might be more valuable while social presence may not be as valuable to learning as once was thought.

Armellini and De Stefani (2016) stated that their study did not corroborate the CoI framework and social presence belongs in the other two presences. Teaching presence cannot act alone and required social presence within the construct. They also stated that social presence "permeated most layers of cognitive presence (Armellini & De Stefani, p. 2016)" and is needed for the sharing of ideas. Social presence does not lead to increased cognition or additional visibility with peers was concluded.

Maddrell, Morrison, Watson (2017) found that there wasn't a relationship between the instructor measures and the cognitive, teaching, or social presences. However, they did see a significant correlation between the faculty project score and the cognitive subscale. It was suggested that "there is a lack of empirical evidence that social, teaching and cognitive presence in the learning environment are related to learning outcomes (Maddrell, Morrison, Watson, 2017, p. 253)." Additionally, student self-reports of perceived learning should not be held as an objective measure as there was a lack of correlation between students' perceptions and instructor

measures of achievement. The student-perceived learning was strongly correlated with satisfaction and each CoI presence, showing support for the association between perceived knowledge and satisfaction of success.

### **Distance Education and Building Communities**

Conrad's (2010) study found that many adult learners have a sense of fear and anxiety when starting a new online course. Additionally, many are eager and excited and mixed with apprehension. Situational difficulties can lead to the withdrawal of lack of engagement within the course. Early course access is preferred in the online environment and allows students to become comfortable and familiarize themselves with the class, check for comprehensiveness of the website, and understanding the rhythm of the course and how it will integrate into their lives. Adult learners also had expectations of the teacher, including an introductory message and personal conversations as well as instruction.

Online programs are valued by students as it increases their access to higher education. Flexibility is vital for learners who have outside commitments. Interaction in formal and informal activities helped develop a sense of community for students within the online course. A strong peer network is needed to decrease feelings of isolation (Rogo & Portillo, 2014). Web-based classes can take longer for teams to develop a collaborative learning environment (Du, Ge, Zhang, 2012).

Learning communities support the learning process and maintain and sustain the process. Bloomberg (2008) found that video conferencing could be beneficial to online learners by providing "face to face" contact. It allows for strong interactions and is similar to a traditional classroom. Even with video conferencing, the researchers found that students in the traditional classroom perceived those on-screen "not as real as those physically in the classroom

(Bloomberg, 2008 p.193).” Distance education can still be limiting for communication, collaboration, and ease of interactions.

Online courses can encourage connection and integrated learning, which in turn, can build a collaborative community. A student’s sense of community and satisfaction with online courses tends to be lower when an instructor posts notes or individual assignments. Classes need to promote interaction and collaborative learning to increase social presence (Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017). McMillan & Chavis (1986) proposed a definition for sense of community with four essential elements: membership or feeling of belonging; influence or feeling of making a difference; reinforcement of integration and fulfilling needs, and; emotional connection or “belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9).” McMillan updated his definition of sense of community to reflect a modern-day approach. He still included the main elements of the original definition. He stated, “Presently I view Sense of Community as a *spirit* of belonging together, a feeling that there is an authority structure that can be *trusted*, an awareness that *trade*, and mutual benefit come from being together, and a spirit that comes from shared experiences that are preserved as *art* (McMillan, 1996, p. 315).”

Gardner (2006) stresses the importance of continually building community in all aspects of human lives and identified key themes to building community. The first is incorporating diversity into a group, even if the group is relatively similar. “A community of diverse elements has greater capacity to adapt and renew itself in a swiftly changing world (Gardner, 2006, p. 7).” One must eliminate polarization and ensure collaboration. Leaders need to have “broader perspective, capable of joining with leaders of other segments (Gardner, 2006, p. 7).” The second factor is having shared values. Communities will not agree on everything, but they need to agree

on at least one key component. There must be a purpose and commitment to the group. The third component is mutual obligations. Individuals need to be giving and receiving of social interdependence. Individuals within the community are respectful, connected and value one another (Gardner, 2006). This aspect encourages belonging and companionship. Effective internal communication is the fourth attribute. Members of the community can communicate openly with each other, which requires a continual effort and listening. Participation is the fifth component of building community. Participation can come in a variety of forms, including disagreements. There must be participation across all sectors. Members need to feel like their voices will be heard. The sixth attribute is a reaffirmation of the community. It must build its morale, confirm its identity and values. The seventh component is linking the community beyond itself. It must remain open to “constructive and extensive relations with the world beyond its boundaries (Gardner, 2006, p. 8).” The eighth factor is the development of the younger people. These are the future leaders of the community and need to be taught values and commitment. Communities that look into its future is the ninth component. This allows it to plan and make changes that will lead to future success. The final attribute is maintenance (Gardner, 2006). This focuses on the leaders of the community, at every level, and the need for democratic leadership.

Rovai (2001b) conducted a study on two different distance learning models. One model was entirely online with a monthly meeting the second model was online with an annual residency. The monthly meeting cohort had a strong sense of community by the end of the first year. The sense of community was stronger in the group where there were diverse and more frequent offerings of opportunities to interact. Spirit and trust were identified as essential components of an increased sense of community as McMillan (1996) suggested. The interaction

was the least necessary element identified. Rovai concluded that having a monthly face-to-face meeting generates a better sense of community.

Rogo and Portillo (2014) found that a face-to-face experience was crucial to heightening the sense of community and social presence. “Positive interaction build the community through encouraging communication, providing emotional support, valuing different viewpoints, gaining mutual appreciation and respect for each other, and communicating openly and honestly (Rogo & Portillo, 2014, p. 225).” Learner interaction that includes thoughtful communication increases support for one another (Rogo & Portillo, 2014). “In a learner-centered online environment, learners’ actions, values and commitment are essential to the success and effectiveness of learning communities and knowledge construction (Rogo & Portillo, 2014, p. 227).”

Online learning has increased enrollment. However, feelings of isolation and dropout rates have remained. Social presence is key to eliminating these issues in online education. Sun & Rosson (2017) found that students who had previous experience in online classes had a higher sense of community. The researchers found that four main factors contributed to the sense of community: availability, personal details, profession, and learning background. Availability had the highest contribution. Students with less experience in online education rated personal information as most important to community building. They hypothesized, “pieces of personal information may then become less relevant after the online learners are more comfortable with self-presentation (and after they have started to feel more SOC themselves) (Sun & Rosson, 2017 p. 317).”

### **Learner to Learner Interactions**

Shackelford and Maxwell (2012a) studied types of learner to learner interactions that create a sense of community for distance learners. Previous research suggests student interaction



is critical positive student outcomes. The researchers conducted a review of the literature to identify learner to learner interactions that were supported by research. They found the following to be crucial to help learner to learner interactions: students sharing background information about each other; game-like activities that promote engagement; online discussion posts; small-group discussions; social growth through communication; group projects; students teaching their peers; sharing of resources; sharing of personal experiences; and in-person meetings.

Shackelford & Maxwell (2012a) found that the following were most important to create a sense of community, in order of most effective to least: “(a) introductions, (b) collaborative group projects, (c) contributing personal experiences, (d) entire class online discussions, and (e) exchanging resources. (p. 239).” The results support other research findings that stress the importance of building common ground throughout the semester. Contradictory to other studies, they did not find demographic characteristics too much of an indicator of whether the student would have a sense of community.

Reinhart (2010) examined the relationship between information sources and a graduate student’s sense of community. She found that there wasn’t a significant difference between online learners and classroom learners in the following variables: “sense of program community, social community, and learning community (p. 231).” She did find significant positive correlations between the perceived sense of social community and the following: “frequency of viewing the departmental website, frequency of communicating with students in the current course(s), frequency of communicating with faculty who are not teaching the course, and frequency of communicating with students not in the course (p. 232).”

## **Students and Teaching**

Research has concluded, “no single personality-based learning style was clearly superior to any other regarding the communicator styles related to effective teachers and to teacher immediacy (Rovai, 2003, p. 360).” Students within the learning community took on an instructor role throughout the course due to the “egalitarian participation” due to the lower amount of social cues in online learning. “ALN environments empower students to construct social meaning with each other (Rovai, 2003, p. 360).” Additionally, connectedness and learning, two key concepts of community in the classroom, are impacted by the personality-based learning style. “These findings suggest that online professors can structure an online course and build an online community and nurture relationships between learners regardless of their personality-based learning styles and those of their students (Rovai, 2003, p. 361).” The researchers still suggest that teachers should tailor their courses to a variety of learning styles.

Bloomberg (2008) also discovered that it is crucial for faculty to design the course to promote building relationships and an overall sense of community. The researcher did stress the importance of ensuring that the instructor not be considered the villain if there is a lack of community, as some of the responsibility to build relationships should be on the students within the learning community.

Shackelford and Maxwell (2012b) conducted a review of previous literature that reflected the fundamental interactions between the learner and instructors. The following are the seven most common interactions: “Providing information on goals, expectations, and ethics; participating in and guiding discussions; providing support and encouragement; providing timely feedback; using multiple modes of communication; instructor modeling, and; required participation (p. 250-251).”

Shackelford and Maxwell (2012b) also found the following interactions to be most important to developing a sense of community, “in decreasing order of contribution were: (1) instructor modeling; (2) support and encouragement; (3) facilitating discussions; (4) multiple communication modes; and (5) required participation (p.254).” Therefore, instructor modeling has the “highest payoff (p. 255)” according to the researchers. Students mimic how the instructor communicates and interacts with other students.

### **Summary**

There has been a significant amount of research conducted on distance learning, the Community of Inquiry framework, as well as building community in online education. While there are many conflicting arguments in each area discussed above, building community through the use of social presence is critical to students’ success. Chapter three discusses the research methods utilized in this study.

## **CHAPTER III: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to explore community building strategies among distance learning graduate students at a Midwestern university. Chapter Three covers the research methodology including research design, rationale setting, sample, and selection of participants. It also discusses the limitations and delimitations of the study, the role of the researcher, instrumentation, ethical considerations, institutional review board procedures, research procedures, data collection, and analysis.

### **Research Design**

This phenomenological study utilizes qualitative research methods to gather data and gain a better understanding of how graduate students build community in online courses at the selected mid-western university. This study is considered phenomenological and “describes the lived experiences of individuals (Creswell, 2014, p. 14).” Focus group, interviews, and document review are utilized as methods to gather data in this study.

### **Rationale for Research Design**

Qualitative research, as defined by Denzin and Lincoln (2008), “is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. These practices transform the world (p. 4).” Qualitative research helps to discover the overall view and meanings from data gathered from participant’s narrative and lived experience. Due to the social aspect of this study, a qualitative design is utilized to collect data from students who have directly participated in online graduate studies courses. Using qualitative research provides the needed information to answer the research questions posed in this study.

### **Research Questions**

This study will focus on the following research questions:

RQ 1: How does building community occur in distance learning graduate students in the Midwest?

RQ 2: What strategies can be used to facilitate building community in graduate distance learning courses?

### **Research Setting**

This study is conducted at a rural Midwestern university. There is a main university campus located in that rural community with a secondary location in a metropolitan statistical area (MSA) and online, available worldwide. Students access campus in a variety of methods including in-class, the secondary site using teleconferencing software, or individually online utilizing video conferencing or strictly online courses. The total student population is around 8,000 enrollees. The graduate student population is less than 6% of the enrolled population (ABC University, Fast Facts, 2016-2017). There are 19 master's degree programs at this university.

The rural community of the main campus has a population of just over 27,000. The city's residents have 33.5% rate of holding a bachelor's degree or higher. The median household income is \$41,053, and 20% of residents are considered living in poverty. The majority of the county is white (93.8%) and only 3.5% of the county population is foreign-born. The median-value of owner-occupied housing is \$137,300 (US Census Bureau, QuickFacts, ABC City, ABC County).

It is also essential to understand the city demographics for the secondary location located within an hour drive of the main campus. This community is considered an MSA and has a population over 114,000. Bachelor's degrees or higher are held by 43.3% of residents. The

median household income is over \$64,000, and 10.3% of residents are living in poverty. The county data shows that 85.3% of the population is white and 10.6% are foreign-born. The median value of owner-occupied housing is \$173,000. Additionally, the median cost of renting in this location is almost double of the primary campus location (US Census Bureau, QuickFacts, MSA City, MSA County). The major employer in this area is a world-renowned healthcare facility.

### **Sample**

The sample for this study consists of graduate students in the Leadership Education department that are taking courses online utilizing video conferencing software. A focus group was conducted with two department faculty that teach distance learning graduate students. Interviews were conducted with 14 graduate students. Students range in approximate age from 23 to 60. Most students are Caucasian, and 2% represent diverse ethnic backgrounds. All students live in the United States.

### **Selection of Participants**

Interview participants are selected based on their enrollment in a graduate-level course and the use of a distance learning platform to interact with the class. Interview participants are purposely selected based on their full-time method of online courses. Participants were selected if they have had at least two online courses using video conferencing or a strict online method. Faculty were asked to participate in a focus group, and two out of three contributed to this study.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations are the response rate to the request to participate and the honesty of those taking it. Furthermore, the sample size is determined by the number of graduate students currently enrolled in the university's online classes during this academic year and the number of respondents to an interview request. The faculty focus group was limited by the number of

faculty in the department as well as the number of faculty that responded to the request for participation.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

This study is confined to a mid-sized university located in the Midwest of the United States and is focused on distance learning graduate students. Students must be taking courses in an online environment, which may include online courses or virtual video attendance, similar to Skype. Interviews were provided to distance learning graduate students, and a focus group was conducted with faculty.

### **Role of Researcher**

The researcher in this qualitative study acts as an instrument to facilitate the interviews and questionnaires (Creswell, 2014). As Eide and Kahn (2008) stated, “conversation and dialog between people are among the expected processes in qualitative research, which has as the focus of study the actions, reactions, recollections, and meaning-making of human beings in response to their passage through life (p. 199).” The researcher limited any potential bias or hopes for the study.

The Role of the Qualitative Researcher (Capella University) explains that many novice researchers may feel that they have the required skills to conduct qualitative research but are often wrong. A researcher needs to ensure they are “explaining the study without biasing the potential participants; conducting interviews properly, according to design; making appropriate field observations; selecting appropriate artifacts, images, journal portions, and so on; handling data per design; analyzing and interpreting the data per design (The Role of the Qualitative Researcher, para. 14).” Furthermore, “credibility, dependability, and transferability rely on the person and performance of the researcher (The Role of the Qualitative Researcher, para7).”

The researcher reflected on the relationship with the participants. Some participants were former classmates of the researcher or have interacted with the researcher in social and educational context before this study. The researcher is mindful of limitations this may provide or preconceived notions of participants.

### **Instrumentation**

As stated previously, the researcher acts as the instrument in this qualitative study. Additionally, interviews and a focus group be utilized to gain feedback from participants. As Munhall (1988) detailed, “direct involvement and participation with people necessitates acknowledging the subjective nature and activity of the researcher as the main ‘tool’ of research (p. 150).”

A focus group was conducted with department faculty to gain their perceptions of community building within distance education. The department faculty were able to provide their perspectives and strategies used in prior courses. The focus group questions are in Appendix C.

Interviews may be one of the best ways to collect information in a qualitative study (Yin, 2014) due to their conversational nature and reflection of personal experiences. The interview questions utilized in this study are in Appendix A. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The researcher did the coding.

Document review “is likely to be relevant to every case study (Yin, 2014, p. 105).” These items will be utilized to validate data collected through the questionnaire and interviews. Additionally, Yin (2014) brought to light that documents may be used to find specific details, corroborate data, and developing further investigation questions.



### **Assumptions**

The assumptions made by the researcher are limited. Presumably, the research will enhance the body of research currently existing with a Community of Inquiry theoretical framework and distance learning. The researcher also assumes that data will be dependent on students and faculty participation. Finally, the assumption is made that outcomes from this study will provide strategies to improve online courses and outcomes for distance learning graduate students.

### **Informed Consent, Confidentiality, and Ethical Considerations**

Informed consent is required for participation in this study. Appendix B contains the Informed Consent Form that all participants were required to review and sign before a focus group or interview. Many of the participants signed the form digitally as they are online students. The informed consent covers information about the research and the purpose of the study. It also provided participants with the disclosure of what they will be asked to participate in, potential risks, and the right to terminate participation at any time.

Confidentiality was maintained through the use of coding and pseudo names were utilized for participants. All information will be stored on a locked computer only available to the researcher. The data will be destroyed after five years of the capstone approval. The only time when confidentiality will be broken is if any legal concerns arise. This information will be taken to the department of the researcher and the Institutional Review Board. It is then determined if the information will need to move beyond the university.

“Ethics pertains to doing good and avoiding harm” (Orb, Eisenhauer, Wynaden, 2001, p. 93). In qualitative research, the researcher must be ethical in how access is gained to participants, preparation of participants, and balance the well-being of said participants. It is imperative that

participants understand their role in the research and deception is prevented. It is a moral and legal concern to ensure the safety of participants. The three key ethical principles suggested by Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden (2001) are “autonomy, beneficence, and justice (p. 96). Ethical considerations are at the forefront of this research to protect the participants’ safety, and the information gathered in this study.

### **Institutional Review Board Process**

The university in this study requires Institutional Review Board (IRB; ABC State University) approval for any research that involves human subjects. The IRB review committee is comprised of faculty from a variety of disciplines. Support from the IRB committee must be obtained before the start of research.

The university utilizes IRBNet to ensure that researchers are seeking approval to complete all necessary steps. These steps include completing the following documents: Protocol Request, volunteer solicitation letters, consent forms, a copy of instruments, questionnaires, tests, and interview questions. Additionally, the researcher must also include links to documentation of an approved education program, signature of a faculty sponsor, and signature of Principal Investigator. After all documents have been submitted, it can take up to seven weeks to gain approval.

### **Procedures**

The first step was to gain IRB approval. Once approval was received, the researcher contacted the Leadership Education department to determine which students are considered online or distance education. The Leadership Education department provided email addresses for the online students. Students received an informational letter about participating in this study.

Participants had the opportunity to select if they want to participate in the interview. Once the participants self-selected to participate, the researcher scheduled a phone interview with the student. Interviews were conducted over a two-week time span.

A solicitation email was sent to department faculty to participate in a focus group for this study. Two faculty were able to participate in a face to face focus group.

Additionally, the researcher gathered university documents for review. These documents pertain to online learning at the university, graduate students, and any specific policies and procedures that relate to this study.

Interview and Focus Group participants were provided the Informed Consent Form before the interview for review. The researcher required a signature before the start of the interview. The form was completed virtually. The interview questions were developed by the researcher and can be found in Appendix C.

Documents were gathered through research on the university's website. The information was gathered, reviewed, and stored on the computer of the researcher. During the gathering of information, the researcher began to assess the data. A coding system was developed and employed during this process.

### **Data Collection**

As stated previously, participants were purposefully selected. They were chosen based on online and video conference attendance in select classes. The researcher selected 14 interview participants that have taken courses primarily through online methods. Two faculty members participated in a Focus Group. The researcher gathered all pertinent documents related to this study from the school. It took approximately four weeks to collect all the data.

All interviews and focus group were audio recorded. The interviewer read a pre-written statement (Appendix A) aloud to ensure all participants understood the study. The interviewer began by asking questions and allowing adequate time for answers. The researcher then transcribed all interviews and the focus group. Data was then coded into themes and broken into the major ideas within the theme. Focus group data was compared to the interview data. This interview protocol is in line with Creswell's (2014) recommendations for qualitative research.

As previously explained, the researcher also gathered documents that pertain to the study. The documents were reviewed and analyzed.

The interviews, focus group, and documents are utilized to support accuracy and validity of the study (Creswell, 2014; Yin 2014). These data collection methods will be triangulated. As Yin (2014) explains, "when you have really triangulated the data, the case study's findings will have been supported by more than single source of evidence (p.121)."

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis coincided with the collection. The researcher will "review all of the data, make sense of it, and organize it into categories or themes that cut across all of the data sources (Creswell, 2014, p. 186)." The following steps were utilized during data analysis: organize and transcribe data, preview the data, code data, create themes and descriptions, and interpret findings (Creswell, 2014).

Interviews were transcribed by the researcher. The researcher reviewed the transcription to ensure its accuracy. Data were coded by the researcher. This information is stored in a spreadsheet. The coding method was reviewed by the researcher's advisor to determine its accuracy and if changes are needed. Themes were developed around the interview and focus group data and findings are interpreted.

Creswell (2014) recommends using an inductive and deductive process for the data analysis. The researcher will take all the information gathered and put it into themes. From there, the researcher will work backward to ensure the themes represent all the pertinent information. Four primary themes were gathered with corresponding ideas within each theme.

The documents that were collected were reviewed. Once reviewed, these too, were coded, themes developed, and findings interpreted. All three data collection themes will be compared and contrasted to find commonalities. Finally, the researcher reflected on any bias or personal backgrounds that may influence the interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2014).

The researcher will then reflect on how the information gathered answers the researcher questions.

RQ 1: How does building community occur in distance learning graduate classes in the Midwest?

RQ 2: What strategies can be used to facilitate building community in graduate distance learning courses?

The themes and data collected support answers to the questions. The findings are compared for accuracy and reliability against previous studies.

### **Summary**

Chapter three provided an overview of the research design, methods used, selection of participants, the role of the researcher, ethical considerations, and the collection of data. Chapter four will discuss the results of the research.

## **CHAPTER IV: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Introduction**

Chapter Four presents the results of the interviews, focus group, and document review. Themes, ideas, and strategies are discussed to provide concrete examples of building community among distance learning graduate students.

### **Review of the Problem Statement**

The purpose of this study was to explore community building strategies among distance learning graduate students at a Midwestern university. Over the past two decades, technology has continued to expand leading to more opportunities for students and new pedagogical research. Development of online community is crucial for satisfaction and the overall learning experience (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012a). The following research questions were the primary focus:

RQ 1: How does building community occur in distance learning graduate students in the Midwest?

RQ 2: What strategies can be used to facilitate building community in graduate distance learning courses?

### **Review of the Research Design**

This phenomenological study utilized qualitative research methods to gather data and gain a better understanding of how graduate students build community in online courses at the selected mid-western university. This study is considered phenomenological and “describes the lived experiences of individuals (Creswell, 2014, p. 14).” Focus group, interviews, and document review are utilized as methods to gather data in this study. The data collection methods are triangulated. As Yin (2014) explains, “when you have really triangulated the data, the case study’s findings will have been supported by more than a single source of evidence (p.121).”

## Findings

The interviews provided insight into the perspectives of distance learners. Fourteen students participated in phone interviews with the researcher over two weeks in March 2018. All participants were distance learning graduate students from the leadership education department at the University of this study. The participants were equally divided by gender, with seven participants that were male, and seven participants were female. All participants lived in the United States, but many lived a considerable distance from the primary location of the university, including living in different time zones.

The focus group was conducted with faculty from the leadership education department. Two faculty members participated, and both were female. Both faculty members teach from the primary campus that involve distance learning graduate students.

The interview and focus group questions were broken down by the Research Questions in this study. Below are the results of each question.

RQ 1: How does building community occur in distance learning graduate students in the Midwest?

**Table 1**

**Question 1: What does building community in a class mean to you?**

Theme	Idea	Interview Frequency (n=14)	Focus Group Frequency (n=2)
Relationships	Instructor & students feel comfortable	3 (21.42%)	2 (100%)
	Creating and establishing relationships/trust	8 (57.14%)	2 (100%)
	Learn about personal interests and background	1 (7.14%)	0
Student Success & Support	Student Collaboration / Support Network	5 (35.71%)	0

	Communicate Professionally	2 (14.25%)	0
	Leveraging Resources	1 (7.14%)	0
	Future professional development and networking	1 (7.14%)	0
Group Work & Discussions Technology	Work in a group	2 (14.28%)	0
	Utilize & engage video conferencing students	1 (7.14%)	0
	Instructors and all students trained in the technology	0	1 (50%)

Question one reflected the unique perspective of student's view on what community building means to them. One student's definition encompasses many strategies on what building community means to them. "It is about being intentional and developing relationships that will last throughout your classes, during your classes, and perhaps, even beyond the degree program. I also think that building community means having a strong support network to assist with questions, give advice, peer review other people's papers, and things like that (I2)." A faculty member reflected, "I think building community is a two-way street. I think communication is a two-way street. I think many of our students are trained to come into a classroom, sit down, all eyes on the instructor, and expect the instructor to carry all of the heavy water in that class (F1)."

RQ 2: What strategies can be used to facilitate building community in graduate distance learning courses?

**Table 2**

**Question 2: What are some ways instructors have increased community in your classes?**

Theme	Idea	Interview Frequency (n=14)	Focus Group Frequency (n=2)
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Relationships	Learn about personal interests and background	5 (35.71%)	1 (50%)
	Creating and establishing relationships / Trust	5 (35.71%)	1 (50%)
	Instructor & students feel comfortable	1 (7.14%)	0
Group Work & Discussions	Work in a group	10 (71.42%)	2 (100%)
	Mix primary location, secondary location, and offsite students in groups	4 (28.57%)	2 (100%)
	Everyone participates in discussion / D2L discussions	3 (21.42%)	2 (100%)
	Sharing Papers / Peer Review	1 (7.14%)	0
Technology	Utilize & engage video conferencing students	1 (7.14%)	2 (100%)
	Utilizing D2L	1 (7.14%)	0
	Instructors and all students trained in the technology	1 (7.14%)	0

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In this interview question, students and faculty responded that group work was a significant factor. Students and faculty had comparable results, but students reflected on a few additional ideas. Many students also reflected on what was happening in their current classes. They discussed what activities and faculty attributes contributed to building community. I4 said the following about their instructors: “By getting to know me as a person. Our professors are really good at finding out who we are as people, which in turn, makes it easier to get to know other people in the class.” Shackelford and Maxwell (2012b) described instructor modeling as one of the most important ways to develop a sense of community. Student I4 provided a concrete example of instructor modeling that is happening in their current course.

**Table 3**  
**Question 3: What are some ways either you or your peers increased community in your classes?**

Theme	Idea	Interview Frequency (n=14)	Focus Group Frequency (n=2)
Relationships	Creating and establishing relationships / Trust	11 (78.57%)	2 (100%)
	Learn about personal interests and background	2 (14.28%)	2 (100%)
	Instructor & students feel comfortable	0	2 (100%)
Student Success & Support	Student Collaboration / Support Network	7 (50%)	1 (50%)
	Leveraging Resources	5 (35.71%)	1 (50%)
	Future professional development and networking	0	2 (100%)
	Communicate Professionally	1 (7.14%)	0
Group Work & Discussions	Work in a group	2 (14.28%)	2 (100%)
	Everyone participates in discussion / D2L discussions	1 (7.14%)	2 (100%)
	Sharing Papers / Peer Review	1 (7.14%)	2 (100%)
	Mix primary location, secondary location, and offsite students in groups	0	1 (50%)
Technology	Utilizing Social media, email, and discussions to communicate	4 (28.57%)	2 (100%)
	Instructors and all students trained in the technology	2 (14.28%)	0

This interview question reflected on what students can do to build community in their classes. The data shows a wide variety of results, with the number one being creating

relationships and building trust. The second highest idea is student collaboration and support network. Faculty stressed the importance of future professional development and networking, stating, “You need to set aside some time each week to go and put yourself in an uncomfortable situation, if you are not comfortable meeting new people, well you need to get used to it because that is what leadership is about, putting yourself out there (F2).”

**Table 4**

**Question 4: What are some ways that course activities positively impacted your ability to build community in your courses?**

Theme	Idea	Interview Frequency (n=14)	Focus Group Frequency (n=2)
Relationships	Creating and establishing relationships / Trust	2 (14.28%)	1 (50%)
Student Success & Support	Student Collaboration / Support Network	2 (14.28%)	0
	Leveraging Resources	0	1 (50%)
	Future professional development and networking	0	1 (50%)
Group Work & Discussions	Work in a group	11 (78.57%)	2 (100%)
	Everyone participates in discussion / D2L discussions	4 (28.57%)	0
	Sharing Papers / Peer Review	2 (14.28%)	0
	Mix primary location, secondary location, and offsite students in groups	2 (14.28%)	0
Technology	Utilize & engage video conferencing students	2 (14.28%)	0

The primary response was group work, both by students and faculty. Students did offer additional thoughts during their interviews that touched on the other themes. Faculty did not provide any responses within the Technology theme.

Additionally, course activities play a significant role in building community. I2 provided a great reflection on these activities. “Also, something new, I feel like in our graduate program there is a lot of focus on writing papers and that is probably indicative of graduate education across schools, but I think all of the focus on writing papers forced me to reach out to other students or help with peer review, whereas, if we were just taking independent tests, I wouldn’t have wanted to or had to reach out other students. But when you are writing papers, writing is more of a collaborative process.” As Lowenthal and Snelson, 2017 found, classes need to promote collaborative learning to increase social presence.

**Table 5**

**Question 5: What tactics would you like to see employed by faculty to assist in building community in future courses?**

Theme	Idea	Interview Frequency (n=14)	Focus Group Frequency (n=2)
Relationships	Creating and establishing relationships / Trust	6 (42.85%)	2 (100%)
	Learn about personal interests and background	0	2 (100%)
	Instructor & students feel comfortable	0	2 (100%)
Student Success & Support	Leveraging Resources	2 (14.28%)	2 (100%)
	Communicate Professionally	2 (14.28%)	1 (50%)
	Student Collaboration / Support Network	1 (7.14%)	1 (50%)
	Future professional development and networking	1 (7.14%)	2 (100%)

Group Work & Discussions	Work in a group	2 (14.28%)	2 (100%)
	Everyone participates in discussion / D2L discussions	1 (7.14%)	0
	Sharing Papers / Peer Review	1 (7.14%)	0
	Mix primary location, secondary location, and offsite students in groups	1 (7.14%)	0
Technology	Utilize & engage video conferencing students	7 (50%)	0
	Utilizing Social media, email, and discussions to communicate	3 (21.42%)	0
	Instructors and all students trained in the technology	3 (21.42%)	0

This interview question provided a lot of responses from students and faculty. It is interesting to note that the faculty focus group did not discuss the Technology Theme during this question. Their primary themes were Relationships and Student Success and Support. Students addressed every theme during this question and provided a wide array of ideas. Interviewee 6 provided an example of why everyone should take a class utilizing video conferencing. They stated, “like if everybody knew what that was like there would be a lot more, not empathy but a lot more consciousness toward banging your stuff around.”

**Table 6**  
**Question 6: What additional feedback do you have about building community from a distance learner perspective?**

Theme	Idea	Interview Frequency (n=14)	Focus Group Frequency (n=2)
Relationships	Creating and establishing relationships / Trust	7 (50%)	2 (100%)
	Learn about personal interests and background	1 (7.14%)	2 (100%)

	Instructor & students feel comfortable	1 (7.14%)	2 (100%)
Student Success & Support	Student Collaboration / Support Network	2 (14.28%)	2 (100%)
	Communicate Professionally	1 (7.14%)	1 (50%)
	Leveraging Resources	1 (7.14%)	0
	Future professional development and networking	1 (7.14%)	0
Group Work & Discussions Technology	Work in a group	1 (7.14%)	0
	Utilize & engage video conferencing students	6 (42.85%)	0
	Utilizing D2L	1 (7.14%)	0
	Instructors and all students trained in the technology	1 (7.14%)	0

This final question allowed students and faculty to brainstorm, offer student/faculty feedback, and reflect on the experience. Students stressed the Relationship and Technology themes while faculty focused primarily on the Relationship theme. Many of the strategies discussed in this question are provided below.

### **Strategies**

Students and faculty provided a variety of specific strategies to build community among distance learning graduate students. These strategies reflect the central Themes and Ideas that were presented above. Most of these strategies are for distance learning graduate students. There are some that directly relate to faculty.

**Table 7**

### Key strategies from interviews and focus groups

Theme	Strategy
Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attend the Department Social Event in August.</li> <li>• Increase the number of Social Events and include a location other than the primary location.</li> <li>• Take the initiative in building relationships with students and faculty. Invest time in these relationships.</li> <li>• Have out-of-class experiences with faculty.</li> <li>• Visit faculty in their offices, give them a call, or request a video conference meeting.</li> <li>• Faculty and distance learning students should schedule regular check-in meetings.</li> <li>• Create a social event for distance learning students who are unable to attend the department social event on the primary campus. Encourage students to share some personal information and form connections with other students with similar interests or located in the same geographical location.</li> <li>• Share personal and professional stories.</li> <li>• Get out of the comfort zone and build relationships with people that might be “different.”</li> </ul>
Student Success & Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write and publish papers with the possibility of presenting at a conference. Faculty may need to explicitly invite distance learning students to participate in these types of activities.</li> <li>• Build your network. Some of these relationships will last beyond graduate school.</li> <li>• Find your resources. This may include people or specific departments at the university.</li> <li>• Create an expectation of building community with peers to enhance your network.</li> <li>• Extend learning opportunities such as clubs and research to distance learning students.</li> <li>• Build a study group or peer review circle of classmates.</li> </ul>
Group Work & Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mix primary location, secondary location, and offsite students together when breaking into groups.</li> <li>• Encourage the sharing of papers and solicit peer review and feedback.</li> <li>• Encourage all students to participate in discussions including on the online learning platform.</li> <li>• Participate in group projects in and outside the class time.</li> </ul>
Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continual education for faculty and students on best practices when utilizing video conferencing software.</li> </ul>

- Engage with the class, even if you are not physically in the same location.
- Be vocal in class even if feels uncomfortable or it is disrupting the flow of conversation.
- Find a way for distance learning students to indicate that they want to speak on the video conferencing software.
- In-class students should attend via video conferencing at least once. This may provide an opportunity for onsite students to understand the experience of the distance learner.
- Utilize technology to connect: Facebook groups, email, text messages, etc.

### Discussion

The primary themes found throughout the focus groups and interviews were relationships, student success and support, group work and discussions, and technology. Overwhelmingly, data from the faculty focus group and the student interviews supported Relationships as being the top theme and Group Work and Discussions as being the secondary theme.

**Table 8**  
**Primary themes and ideas**

Theme	Idea
Relationships	Instructor and students feel comfortable Learn about personal interests and background Creating and establishing relationships and trust
Student Success and Support	Communicate professionally Student collaboration and support network Leveraging resources Future professional development and networking
Group Work and Discussions	Work in a group Everyone participates in discussions including online discussion boards Sharing papers and peer review Mix primary location, secondary location, and offsite students together in groups
Technology	Utilize and engage video conferencing (offsite) students Utilize the online platform for learning Utilize social media, email, and discussions to communicate



Data between the focus group and interviews were quite similar. All students and faculty mentioned relationships, while 93% of students specifically discussed creating and establishing relationships and trust, which was supported by 100% of faculty. Thirteen out of 14 students explained group work as being beneficial to building community as did 100% of the faculty focus group.

Technology was the least mentioned theme by both students and faculty. However, students did say it at a higher rate than the faculty focus group. Specifically, students discussed the following Ideas: utilize and engage video conferencing students, utilizing social media, email, and discussion to communicate, and instructors and all students trained in the technology at a higher rate than the faculty focus group.

The Student Success and Support and Group Work Themes were in the middle for both students and faculty. There was a difference in the ideas mentioned. Faculty had a more significant focus on networking with students and faculty, while the interviewees were primarily focused on the Student Collaboration and Support Network idea. Both students and faculty discussed the benefits of group work at length. Appendix F contains the coded data.

The students interviewed were primarily positive about their distance learning experience. They appreciated the flexibility of being able to live where they want and still attend the school and program they want. This finding is like the Rogo & Portillo (2014) study; online programs are valued by students because it increases their access to education. Even though all students had positive comments, they did provide a few strategies for improvement. The Strategies listed above are primarily for distance learning graduate students, but some reflect areas that faculty can assist. Many of these suggestions were echoed in the faculty focus group.

Group Projects was the number one way to build community that was mentioned by faculty and students. Shackelford and Maxwell (2012a) agreed that collaborative group projects were highly effective in creating a sense of community. Many students expressed displeasure in group projects but simultaneously said that is how they met students in the program. As student I6 reflected, “I think, I think they do positively impact the ability to build community because you have to interact with other people and get to know them outside of class and communicate virtually throughout the week or however long the project is.” Group projects need to be presented in a way that encourages students to use the time to build community.

Faculty provided insightful comments on building community, especially within the Relationship Theme. “You are going to need people because you cannot be in leadership by yourself and you cannot go through this life by yourself. You are going to need people. And as soon as we can get that message out, I think the better we will serve our students (F1).” The faculty quotes reflect the ideas presented by Garrison (2007) as he discussed social presence, “Social presence must move beyond simply establishing socio-emotional presence and personal relationships. Cohesion requires intellectual focus (i.e., open and purposeful communication) and respect.” A document review was conducted to triangulate the data. Documents about distance education, online education, and distance learning at the University in this study (Appendix G) were reviewed. The documents were web pages on the university website. All pages related to student support and success topics, such as student services, how to access the library remotely, what programs are available from a distance, and hardware and software specs to access the online learning portal. No information existed on building a community from the distance learning perspective of a student.

**Table 9**  
**Document review themes**

Web Page	Corresponding Themes
Summer Session Toolkit	Promotion of moving classes to online Quality Matters Faculty Support
Online Advising Toolkit	Faculty Support Technology
Library Distance Education	Student Support Technology
Distance Learning	Promotion of online classes or programs Quality Matters Student Support

The document review of the University's webpage that pertains to distance learning primarily focused on student recruitment and how-to technology. Information was not provided on distance learning etiquette for students. The University may need to enhance their student information and provide guidelines on how to build community.

### **Summary**

Chapter four presented the research findings, themes, and discussion. Chapter Five will discuss implication on education and leadership as well as future recommendations for research.

## **CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, and RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Introduction**

Chapter Five will begin with conclusions of this research study. It also discusses the implications of this study and outlines recommendations for future research within this field.

### **Conclusions**

Distance learning and online education continues to grow and appears to be the way of the future. The purpose of this study was to explore community building strategies for distance learning graduate students. Many factors contribute to a sense of community in the virtual world. Taking note of strategies to improve their education will be crucial if learners want to continue to develop their skills and enhance their leadership abilities.

This phenomenological study utilized qualitative research methods to gather data and gain a better understanding of how graduate students build community in online courses at the selected mid-western university. The following were the two research questions in this study:

RQ 1: How does building community occur in distance learning graduate students in the Midwest?

RQ 2: What strategies can be used to facilitate building community in graduate distance learning courses?

Student interviews, a faculty focus group, and document review was conducted to triangulate the data. Relationships, Student Success and Support, Group Work and Discussions, and Technology were the central themes that supported building community in distance education. Chapter Four also presented vital strategies that were identified by students and faculty as ways to enhance social presence and community for distance learners.

The following conclusions are made:

1. Building community in graduate distance learning courses occurs through fostering relationships and group work.
2. Relationships and Group Work and Discussions were the two most prominent themes throughout this research. The top four Ideas represent each Theme and presented in order of highest to lowest frequency: Creating and establishing relationships and trust; Work in a group; Student collaboration and support network; and finally, utilize and engage video conferencing students.

### **Leadership Implications**

Overall, this study corroborated the theory that social presence and building community is crucial in education.

**Conclusion 1:** Building community in graduate distance learning courses occurs through fostering relationships and group work.

**Implication:** Students and Faculty may find it beneficial to discuss building relationships and the importance of group work early in the semester. A stronger emphasis on *why* coursework that includes group work is crucial to leadership development needs an explanation. As Morrison (2014) stressed, “The other is the idea that students of today require a unique skill set to work, engage and collaborate as global (and digital) citizens (para. 6).”

**Conclusion 2:** Relationships and Group Work and Discussions were the two most prominent themes throughout this research. The top four ideas represent each Theme and presented in order of highest to lowest frequency: Creating and establishing relationships and trust; Work in a group; Student collaboration and support network; and finally, Utilize and engage video conferencing students.

**Implication:** This conclusion provides four main avenues to pursue during a course that can impact building community. Faculty and students can utilize these four ideas.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The researcher recommends two additional areas for future research. First, group work is frequently discussed in a negative light. Research is needed to determine how to change the perception. Scheuermann (2018) discusses the importance of group work and education but also provides some examples of how to structure and approach group work in a different light. There can be an increased focus on the distance education realm.

The second recommendation for additional research lies within distance learning and what the university can do to prepare potential students beyond technology needs and recruitment. The researcher believes that students need instruction on how to interact with classes from a distance. It doesn't come naturally to all students. Specific strategies can be researched to determine what is the most crucial for students to know when they start their educational career in the virtual world.

### **Summary**

Chapter five presented the conclusions and implications of this study. It also introduced possible topics and recommendations for future research.

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## **APPENDIX A: Interview Questions and Protocol**

### **The researcher will read the following before asking the remaining questions:**

“As you know, I am conducting this interview to gain your perspectives on building community in distance education. There are no right or wrong answers. Your experience and opinions are valuable to this study, and the hope is that the results will lead to improved strategies for distance learning students. I will be audio recording the interview and taking notes. I want to assure you that this is simply for my recording and transcribing process. Personal identifiers will not be utilized in this study, and it is my main concern to protect your identity. I want to thank you for your time and willingness to be involved in my research.”

### **RQ 1: How does building community occur in distance learning graduate students in the Midwest?**

- What does “building community” in a class mean to you?

### **RQ 2: What strategies can be used to facilitate building community in graduate distance learning courses?**

- What are some ways instructors have increased community in your classes?
- What are some ways either you or your peers increased community in your classes?
- What are some ways that course activities positively impacted your ability to build community in your courses?
- What tactics would you like to see employed by faculty to assist in building community in future courses?

- What additional feedback do you have about building community from a distance learner perspective?

## APPENDIX B: Informed Consent

### CONSENT FORM

#### Building community among distance learning graduate students

You are invited to participate in a research study designed to gain an understanding of community building strategies utilized by distance learning graduate students and faculty. We hope to learn strategies employed by students that effectively build community among peers. We anticipate approximately 15-25 individuals will participate in the study.

The study will begin March 12<sup>th</sup> and end April 15<sup>th</sup>. We estimate participating in the study will require a half hour of your time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in an interview to answer questions about tactics you have utilized throughout your distance learning experience.

There are no appreciable risks or benefits from participating in this study.

Data collected during the course of this study will be coded, stored on a locked computer where only the researcher has access, and data will be destroyed one year after the completion of the study. If the results of this study are published or presented, no names will be associated with the data cited. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will be disclosed only with your permission.

For questions about this research project, contact Erin Meyer at [emeyer16@winona.edu](mailto:emeyer16@winona.edu) or by calling 507-340-5513. You may also contact Dr. Theresa Waterbury at [twaterbury@winona.edu](mailto:twaterbury@winona.edu) or by calling 507-457-5607. For question about research subjects' rights or research-related injuries, contact the Human Protections Administrator Brett Ayers at 507-457-5519.



Participation in this study is voluntary. A decision not to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. A decision not to participate or a decision to withdraw from the study will not affect your current or future relationship with Winona State University. The orderly procedure for ending your participation requires contacting the researcher via email or phone to inform them of your withdrawal from the study.

You will be offered a copy of this form to keep.

#### AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE

You are making a decision whether or not to participate in the study described above. Participation is voluntary. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice after signing this form. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above, had an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and have decided to participate.

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Signature

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Date

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Signature of Principal Investigator

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Date

### **APPENDIX C: Focus Group Questions & Protocol**

“As you know, I am conducting this interview to gain your perspectives on building community in distance education. There are no right or wrong answers. Your experience and opinions are valuable to this study, and the hope is that the results will lead to improved strategies for distance learning students. I will be audio recording the interview and taking notes. I want to assure you that this is simply for my recording and transcribing process. Personal identifiers will not be utilized in this study, and it is my main concern to protect your identity. I want to thank you for your time and willingness to be involved in my research.”

1. What does "building community" in a class mean to you?
2. What are some ways you have increased community in your classes?
3. What are some ways students have increased community within your classes?
4. What are some ways course activities have positively impacted a student's ability to build community within the classes that you teach?
5. What tactics would you like to see employed by students to build community within future courses?
6. What additional feedback do you have about building community within a course from an instructor's perspective?

## APPENDIX D: Interview Transcription

### Interviewee 1 (I1):

Question 1: For me, building community in a classroom is just getting to know people, ya know, at least for me in my experience, a lot of times when I joined a class, I really didn't get to know people. I actually got to know the online students pretty well because we were grouped in the same, ya know, always grouped together as the online group. I got to know them decently well and we kind of bonded over the fact that ya know, we were, ya know, the outsiders. And I know the [secondary location] group kind of bonded and the [primary location] group kinda bonded but that to me is really what building a community is about. Ya know, getting to know people, having people to go to when you have a question on a class and your professor sucks. Ya know, just in general, if you have a question, it is much easier to go to a peer than it is to go to a professor sometimes. Just having those resources.

Question 2: I think they try as much as they can to include, well me speaking as an online student, some of them try to include, some of them just completely ignored us. I had several, I should say a couple professors, who just kind of forgot we were there half the time, to be honest. Ya know, just didn't pay any attention or understand the technology. But there were a couple really good professors that, ya know, would I guess, ya know, kind of go out of their way to kind of call on us, I guess you would say. Or go around the entire, the entire group, and I guess, if we were introducing our self, or talking about ourselves trying to get to know everybody, in the same respect whether they are there in person or not. Putting us in groups outside of, ya know, as much as I loved working with the online students, and I had a really good experience with my groups, I, there were some professors that put us in groups in people in [secondary location],

people in [primary location], and then online students. I got to know more people who weren't specifically online students then, it was a good way to get me involved with those who are actually there and, ya know, all over the place. [Personal story]

Question 3: I don't know that I did, I was pretty introverted and kind of liked to keep to myself, and really not too interested in ya know, making friends and developing community with these, the classes I was in. I was just, like kinda bonded with online people cause we had a enough in common. We were going through the same experience. I guess others, I watched others try and engage more with the students in [primary location] and [secondary location]. They would just try and speak up. We kind of have, kinda felt like we had to have a strong voice, really have a, ya know, there would be like points when they were waving down the professor, and the student would say 'she has something to say.' It is just like, we almost had to go overboard in making their presence known, so other people could identify, that's whoever, she's this person. So I don't know. I don't even know if there was a way to increase community from distance like that, like I said, it's just, having to be persistent like 'hey, I'm here, this is who I am, this is what I'm about, this is what I'm working on, this is my opinion' and then ya know, just trying to engage them that way, cause ya know, they don't, like when we are in a big classroom setting like that, they're not just going to speak up and like ya know, if you are in a classroom you can just look over at someone and ask them a question or talk to them or whatever, you can't really do that in the middle of class, like 'hey, online student, what's going on with you' or whatever. So, I don't have a good answer for that but that would be the best example I have.

Question 4: To be honest, most of the time it didn't. The activities sucked and like I said they would group us online students, [primary location] students, [secondary location] students, just easier for them. But, I did have one class [class name], he broke us up into groups, unfortunately again, separated us, online students, [secondary location] students, but he put us in groups and we kind of had to go off on our own and practice exercises. That was like one of my favorite, when I think back about the program, that was one of my favorite things that we did. And again, I don't really like working in groups, so for me to say that, ya know, it was a good, when they let us go and do our own thing it wasn't like we are in 3 separate places and now I'm going to lecture at all of you. Like when we kind of got to engage with the other students, I was only with the online students, I can't speak for, I wasn't with [secondary location] or [primary location], that was a good way to kind of engage us.

Question 5: Honestly, like, um, when I went through the program there was no orientation whatsoever, like no. It was one of those situations that was like okay, go, go figure it out. I didn't even understand, they gave me like a brief understanding of how to even get online and use that program, but even that was very brief. The system they have for online students just sucks. [Technology issues & examples of Jabber]. That was my experience and that system sucks so a better system for that. I don't know, see I don't know if there are programs out there, or if there is a better platform to communicate with the students in [secondary location] and [primary location]. If there is something out there they should find it. And, I guess, like I said, we were kind of just ignored. There was no orientation, there was no introduction to other online students. Even know, ya go to, go on to campus and you meet a bunch of people right away who are in your program. You don't really have that when you are a distance student, you don't have that.

So, introducing us to other online students, an orientation, even just including us more. Some professors were assholes and would just call us out but just include everybody. Some were great and some were not. I'm not going to go into staffing, because that is not a solution. But some of the staff they hire are just very behind on technology and maybe staff should be trained, take some specific training on how to manage online students like how to have in-person and online students together. I have no idea if they get any training for that but they should. I guess that would be my main suggestions.

Question 6: I guess I'll just say, I feel like once they find a fix, a better solution to something, it's already too late and a lot of times in the education world, I think it just needs to be continually ongoing, educating themselves, ongoing, learning what is out there, staying on top of that. Continuing education, even for professors. And, ah, I guess I have no additional feedback.

Interviewee 2:

Question 1: I would say that building community in a class means building relationships with your peers and professors but I think these relationships, when you're talking about building community, is more than acquaintances. It is about being intentional and developing relationships that will last throughout your classes, during your classes, and perhaps, even beyond the degree program. I also think that building community means having a strong support network to assist with questions, give advice, peer review other people's papers, and things like that.

Question 2: So thinking about this question, there is a few ways that I or instructors have increased community in my classes. First, and probably the most obvious, would be group projects. And in a sense, both types of group projects; where the professor assigns the groups and you don't get to choose your own groups and where you get to choose your group members. I think both types of group projects have increased community in my classes because they, the people that I have worked with are people that I may not have been able to talk to otherwise or been able to talk to in such an in-depth level. I also think that instructors have increased community in my classes by holding in-class sessions versus having just an online class. Or, I know, some instructors have used Adobe Connect, and I don't think that you really get that sense of community when you have just an online class or use Adobe connect. I think that building community comes in when instructors use technology like Acano or Jabber. Another way that instructors have increased community in my classes was introducing everyone at the start of class, it seems kinda cheesy, but going around and having every student state their name, degree program, what they are interested in, what they did for work, things like that. It really helps you put a face to a name and build community in the class. Lastly, just the instructors when they are intentional letting everyone speak and letting everyone opinions be heard. I think that a good way for instructors to build community.

Question 3: Being a distance learning student, I have used social media and email a lot to increase community in my classes. One of the first things I do when I start a class is find all of the other distance learning students, either on social media or email, so that we can be resources for each other throughout the class. Whether that just be to have someone to just ask questions to or to have someone there to peer review my paper or have someone there to talk about the class

in general and just ask how is your day going. So, that's one way I increase community in my classes. Also, just building study groups or peer review circles, just like passing our papers around and can bounce off assignments on each other. Also, I like to keep in touch with my classmates even after the classes are over because, ya know, I might eventually have a class with them somewhere down the line or they might need advice on a class so I can be there for them. And also, just periodically checking in on each other, even if I'm not in classes with someone that semester, just being like, 'Hey, how is Dr. so-and so- during this class or do you have any questions or anything that I can help with, that sort of thing.

Question 4: So I identify two different ways for this question. First of all, I've talked about this before, group activities in classes allowed me to get to know students that I wouldn't have gotten to know otherwise. Also, something new, I feel like in our graduate program there is a lot of focus on writing papers and that is probably indicative of graduate education across schools but I think all of the focus on writing papers forced me to reach out to other students or help with peer review whereas if we were just taking independent tests I wouldn't have wanted to or had to reach out to other students. But when you are writing papers, writing is more of a collaborative process, I think that positively impacted my ability to build community and it, maybe not my ability but it impacted my drive to build community in my classes.

Question 5: First of all, I would like to see more, social networking. I would like to see faculty be more intentional in social networking and this doesn't mean that it has to be over like Facebook or anything but just starting email chains or just discussion boards, which I know some faculty do but keeping that up throughout the semester, like just check in on everyone, help the students



get to know each other better, so, intentional social networking would be one. I think that a mentorship program might be beneficial, so, linking up new students with students who have been in the program a while. That could help build community because, ya know, it's hard for new students to get to know people in the program, some are shy than others, and then when you are a distance education student, it's extremely hard to get to know people because you're so far away. I think that having more socials or meet & greets throughout the year, I know that they just started doing one at the beginning of the year but maybe having more or in different locations. Maybe having one at the [secondary location] location might be useful and you might be able to reach more students that way. Lastly, just in general, faculty could do a better job of actively calling on virtual students rather than just letting them sit there because it can awkward to insert yourself into the conversation as a virtual student because your face gets really big on the screen, and uncomfortable, and everyone just kind of stares at you. So, just finding ways to actively include the virtual students would help.

Question 6: Not at this time, I think I said everything that I needed to.

Interviewee 3:

Question 1: Building community in a class means a lot to me because it makes the class go easier when you know everyone and everyone feels comfortable to be around each other.

Question 2: By making us share each other's papers and getting feedback from everyone in the class.

Question 3: By reaching out and talking more about assignments.

Question 4: Just making me have to stay on top of my task and if I didn't go to class or something, instead of reaching out to the professor I could reach out to one of my classmates and they could explain it to me a little bit easier than going to the professor.

Question 5: That's a good one. Ah, I'm not sure on that one. I mean [ mumbling]. I think ah, the first part of my degree, I didn't have to log into Acano and all that, I honestly think that was easier, it was more convenient in a sense, ya know, that I didn't have to log in and have to participate in class. And so, ah, I had two professors that I didn't need to log in, they didn't want you to really have to log in so much, they were like take 2 or 3 weeks off and then meet again and have a couple more weeks off and then have a group. I think that was awesome. I find it kind of difficult, the people that aren't near by the campus, to have to always log in to participate. You never know, sometimes things happen, like this semester. [Personal story about accident]

Question 6: For me, it is just to get to be comfortable. To just actually, just log in and interact with strangers who you don't know who they are. It is really just to be comfortable and actually reach out and get to know other people.

Interviewee 4 (I4):

Question 1: Being able to just communicate and just get a hold of my professors. Be able to collaborate with my classmates whether it's through email or I use Acano or Jabber last year to

connect with the class. So utilizing the technologies around me to be present and engage with everyone.

Question 2: By getting to know me as a person. Our professors are really good at finding out who we are as people, which in turn, makes it easier to get to know other people in class. So even the class I am taking now. [personal story] They really work to drive participation and ask questions to everyone who is online.

Question 3: I would say just through collaboration, I've had classmates add me on Facebook and so that helps me feel part of the community when I'm able to learn more about their personal lives. Then through class assignments, where we have to do group work that forces us to get to know each other a bit better in that regard too.

Question 4: Assignments just forces you to get to know one another it is just the big thing behind it. It gets you to learn one another better you know a lot of assignments prompt discussion where you have to collaborate, come to a consensus and ultimately achieve a task. So just being able to work and rely on the other person to do their part.

Question 5: That's a tough one. I would say it is just continuing to remember that everybody is online that is always a big one, like how they are able to make feel like I am part of the class is huge. Technology is ever evolving. Stay current and up to speed on any technology things that could make the learning environment that much easier to participate in. I'm thinking of a class

where we had to all join by Acano and it was kind of a disaster. That love hate relationship with technology.

Question 6: For me, it's been easier for me too because I try to be a person who engages with class so I feel like it has been easier for me but an individual that isn't quite as outgoing I could see it being more difficult. I think the university does a good job through the group work we have to do and how the professors engage. And then, I know every year there is the [primary location] boat trip so there is definitely a number of ways and things put in place already so I do feel like I am a [University] student even though I am in [city].

Well one thing that would be interesting is to find out where other students are calling in from, I know like some times at the start of class there is an introduction where they are like 'oh, where are you joining from?' And I really appreciate that because it is fun for me to know if somebody else is right down the road or on the other side of the [city]. Just so that way if I needed help or a group project there is the potential to meet in person still.

Interviewee 5 (I5):

Question 1: Building community in a class to me is that making people feel safe, it needs to be held safe space, where people can grow together, ask questions, people can rely on one another for input and resources. And of course, people are respectful of one another. Resources, safe are the main things.

Question 2: My first example, Dr. [professor name] is really good at using D2L, like the discussion course through D2L or group projects and that is really beneficial to the distance learner because otherwise I don't talk to people. I think the main points are D2L discussions and group projects are really phenomenal. That is just the best communication piece otherwise I don't communicate with other people and I work two jobs and I'm not going to go out of my way to call or email or find other ways to interact with my classmates unless I have to. And, I hate group projects to be honest, I completely do but they work.

Question 3: I think just by sharing personal and professional stories and opportunities, I think is really important. And take the time to personalize the class. I think a lot of people find that in undergraduate it is not very personalized by any means, you are there to hear the lesson and leave class. But in graduate school, I feel as though you can use more of who you are to increase the knowledge across the board between all of your classmates.

Question 4: I think specifically by having to Skype or Acano or any other video conferencing was really helpful for me and again I guess group projects kind of fall under that category as well. Being able to see people's faces, see their jesters , and kind of have that experience versus just calling in and hearing the class verbally or interacting with people just verbally will enhance community.

Question 5: I think for me the hardest part of being distance from the community is the relationship with professors because it is hard for me to be an hour away and match my time zone to their office hours or things like that. Maybe it could be easier, if like, there were set aside

time for distance learners to interact with professors. [example story] I don't have that relationship to have that conversation and I don't know where to start. I can't just walk into an office and it's not really appropriate to have that conversation via email either. I would say it is mostly just that support from professors to make it feel good.

Q6: There are a lot of opportunities in graduate school for participating like on campus clubs or organizations don't necessarily apply when you are distance [in audible]. [call dropped] I just think that we don't have the opportunity to participate in clubs or organizations, additional research. So any extended learner opportunities, we don't get to be a part of really. Like there aren't many opportunities to really do that. Also, it can be really hard to connect with your professors and things like that. I believe if there were more opportunities that were not specifically on site on the campus that it would be more fulfilling because it does create that sense of community when you are part of a group and you feel as though you can contribute to something. As of right now, distance learners have very limited opportunities to do that.

I guess the distance part is having the complication of communicating like communicating through email or through Acano is inconvenient. So you know, students have to anticipate to ask a lot of questions and reach out and step into this realm of uncomfortable and ask questions you probably have never had to ask before but yeah. It is great though. You can live your life where you enjoy living it and continue with your job. And your family, if you have kids and everything else in between. So it is a great option despite the communication barrier.

Interviewee 6 (I6):

Question 1: I think it really means, like building trust of your classmates, especially being online, you don't get to build relationships in a normal way cause I've never met any of my classmates before. I build community, like I want to be reliable for my classmates and trust that they will do what they say they will do, work together well, and just get our stuff done and ask questions when we need to. It's a lot like trusting a stranger, I think, even though I've had class with these people for two years, I still don't know them very much.

Question 2: I like when the instructor, when there is group projects or group assignments when they integrate online students and the on campus students into groups together so I get to know more people. And, other than that, in our program, I think, so often they say just use the time before class to chat with each other but that is really hard to do when your online. But they do, most of the faculty members are conscious of that, I just feel like there isn't a good way to do it.

Question 3: I, well we have the student research club which has been good for some of my peers and I to like bounce ideas off each other or just have a set time to get together. Otherwise, honestly, I don't make that, a very strong effort to build community myself outside of, like I do try to ask my classmates a little about their lives or what they are up to, or how they are feeling about things, and I try to, and I have a classmate that is usually a little bit quieter with her input in group discussions so when we are doing a group discussion I try to make sure and include her. And make sure that her voice gets heard a little bit so that everybody is on the same page and taking a little bit more ownership of group discussions, I suppose.

Question 4: I think, I think they do positively impact the ability to build community because you have to interact with other people and get to know them outside of class and communicate virtually throughout the week or however long the project is. You get to just know a little bit more about them, as people, and how they work as leaders as well. Like I was talking about earlier, I like when it is not just online people versus on campus people even though it is a little bit harder for the on campus people to have to learn the technology. I think they are not always super excited about it. I like that and I've had classes where the groups, you have a standard group throughout and you really get to know them and then you have smaller groups for different activities. It is kinda nice because you build a long term class family or community for that semester. And then going forward, you can rely on them a little bit more.

Question 5: Oh, good question. I don't know if this is a tactic but I do think all of the faculty should have to do a class online. Like they should tune in to the class as an online student one time and see what it is like from our end and I had a faculty member that had no idea what our view was like from our side or what we could see or couldn't see. Ya know, there is just a lot that goes into it and a lot of background noise that you have to put up with and I think if everybody knew what it was like to come into class in Acano, like if everybody knew what that was like there would be a lot more, not empathy but a lot more consciousness towards banging your stuff around or including those people. So, I don't know if that is really a tactic but a walk in the other person's shoes.

I think, I don't know if they already do, at least the program I'm in, there are some faculty members that do online/blended classes really well and then are some that don't do it very well. I



think they need to get together and do a best practices and learn from each other a little bit on what works and doesn't work and take the classmates into account and standardize it a little bit more.

Question 6: Honestly, it has been better than I anticipated it to be, so I got to class from [number of hours] away and I wasn't super, like I was excited about the program, but I wasn't excited about doing it all online if not all my other classmates were doing it online. But I have learned a lot and I think for the most part my faculty members have gotten to know me as a person and like gone the extra mile for that. But I think there is still a gap in class community. Like there are a lot of times where I will sit through a whole class and hardly said anything because there isn't a flow of natural conversation on the computer than there is, like you can't just butt in, it feels rude. So, I don't know how to fix that but it is hard to butt in when there are two sites full of people and then people, or when you are the only one it's even worse online.

Interviewee 7:

Question 1: Well building community in a class would mean I would be able to know other people in the class, get along with other people, work together, and feel like I'm part of the group in the class.

Question 2: I think one of the ways would be that usually if we split up into groups in a class they will put a distance learning person, a person from another site, and a couple people from the main classroom in [primary location] and I think that helps, you get to know those people instead

of just the distance people meeting together. I think they have actively tried to mix us together with the rest of the group.

Question 3: Good question. I would say, maybe by just communicating with each other on our own even if it's not part of class, probably, I've gotten to know a few people especially the distance learning part just by first being in class with them then just communicating with them on the outside about other things, our degree programs, when it doesn't involve class. So, I think just independently getting together with each other.

Question 4: I would that especially in the last few classes I've had, all of the instructors have made us do projects that involve getting together with a group, and so that, ya know, instead of just sitting and listening and doing in assignments independently you had to get together with people in your group. And they gave us breakout rooms on this Acano program that we could get together in, you were basically forced to get to know people in the group. Otherwise, it would have been easy to just sit on the outside listen in on class, do you your own assignments, and not really have any contact with people in the class. One other thing that Dr. [name] has us do is get together in groups and have us fill out this Qualtrics survey, so you have to know the names of the people that you are meeting with cause you have to rate them afterwards, did they participate or not. So it forced you to actually ask people their names and put a face with a name and that contributed to being more of a community also.

Question 5: I don't know how they would do it, sometimes it is easy to, if you are coming in remotely it is easy to feel like you're not part of the class and that you, it is tough to break into

the discussions in the class because you are not right there. So if there was some way that you could indicate that you wanted to talk, sometimes you just have to blurt it out and then they are like 'oh, [name] has something from the remote world,' so if there is some way to indicate, ya know, you wanted to speak or have a point to make. It is hard to raise your hand on the remote thing to cause they can't really even see you do that. So that would be the only thing I would say, otherwise I think the instructors have a done a pretty great job to include everybody in the class.

Question 6: I'm trying to think of something else. Yeah, I guess, just to re-emphasize, it is important that the instructor is well aware that they got this other group out there distance wise and that they, and the one's that I've had, have been in tune with it but they have to continue to be in tune with that and make sure they include them and make sure they use tactics in the class to do that, otherwise it would be easy for someone to feel not part of the group if the instructor didn't do that so like I said I think they are doing a good job of it right now but future professors that take over need to keep that in mind as they continue the program.

I've had a decent experience, I did all of my stuff remotely. [Personal story] Going into it I didn't know how the core courses for leadership education were going to go and as soon as I started taking them online like that I realized this is going to work great. So I've done my entire program from [city] and it worked out great.

Interviewee 8 (I8):

Question 1: Building community is like, making good friends, you're talking about a class right?

Building a community for me is participating in classes virtually rather than in person. Building community would be making repair and good relationship with classmates and the professor.

Trying to think if I'm in a class in person, I feel like those are the main things. Being able to reach out to everybody when you need help or people reach out to you when they need help and same thing with the professor.

Question 2: There are some of the professors that are really successful at making people communicate together, even virtually, like they would assign you groups of 3s or 4s during the classes and those are the ones that would really get to know your classmates versus some other classes that are just, ya know, a lecture, they ask you to participate but you don't have that building community that you are talking about. You finish the class, 15 weeks course, and you barely talk to your classmates because, ya know, as a virtual student, I'm not there physically versus people there in the class get to see one another, get to talk before or after class.

Question 3: I would say like, just like, reaching out to one another outside class, but it comes from that, building that relationship in the class limits. There were some, or a few classes that I get to know my peers in the class and because of those group discussions we get to know one another and after class we reach out together or ask questions that kind of stuff. But, as I said, there were some classes that we were not able to, building that relationship or building that community. So, I feel like I wasn't able to find any way, ya know what I mean.

Question 4: Group discussions in class were really good. There were sometimes that we split into groups of 3 or 4 or 5 people and sometimes it's a mix between people in [secondary location], people in [primary location] and virtual people. Sometimes it's only virtual, depends on the class but this was a very interacting way. Then another way was, for group assignments that you get to work with people that could be from [primary location] group, [secondary location], or virtually. And then we get together to work on a specific presentation or research or something like that. But those were the two ways that professors use, I guess.

Question 5: I think I would like to see more of that kind of interaction like, there are some classes that are just focused on lecture and reading, that kind of stuff, which are not the right kind of for building that community. The classes that are more on discussions and groups and that kind of stuff, those are the classes that are targeting and building that community. I feel like, as I said, I don't want to say names or classes, there are some classes that are literally built on those discussions. Like I took one class that was completely, there was a [primary location] group, a [secondary location] group, and a virtual group, and we split into our groups and discussed questions, those were perfect for me as a virtual student because I get to see a different group every time, I get to know my classmates, I get to reach out after class to get things done, to get help cause our professors help all the time but sometimes I don't need to get all the help from the professors. Because sometimes I miss class and I need help for somebody to give me notes.

Question 6: I think, I have not seen any kind of movement or invitation from the faculty members for the virtual students to attend. I mean I cannot assume that they think the virtual people would not come but at least if they invite them they would come to class towards the end

or the middle of the course. I think that would be important to make people meet in person, who they take class with. I know there are some people out of state that and that can be hard but most of the classes [students] are around here, within the 2 hours and they come one time and that would really help in building that relationship. I can't think of anything else honestly.

Interviewee 9 (I9):

Question 1: Building a community in my class, well ah, I guess a good thing to know your classmates, a bit more than, ya just getting to know them.

Question 2: Like the current class I'm taking, doing group work, meeting with our groups in times with the class is just helpful.

Question 3: I guess, getting in touch at least with emails and ya. Some of them are a little bit shy and some of them you get to know throughout the classes and you get to know more and more about them I guess. Some of them want to exchange phone numbers and I think email is enough.

Question 4: We have a presentation and we are online we are able to see the students in [primary location] and [secondary location] when they are presenting and I guess that gives us a sense of one community since we are all discussing the same topics.

Q5: There are some instructors that pay attention more to students in the class and we are kinda more like in the background of it. Not all of them. It gives us a sense that we are missing out kind of. The one instructor that I wasn't missing out, she wants to know all of our names whether

online or in the class, and says all of our names and she gives us equal time. The other instructors say like the people online need to come to my class in person, which defeats the whole distance online kind of point.

Question 6: I think with technology it is really helping a lot. Each semester feels like it is getting better and the internet is getting faster. So, I really feel like I get to know the people in the class. So I don't know, specifically, that just it employs technology and the system that we are using now, Acano is working fine.

Interviewee 10 (I10):

Question 1: I guess what that means to me is feeling like you are part of the class, that you have this group feeling, and there is a little bit of persona that you are in a group or in a class with that you conversation doesn't have to be class specific. That you can talk about other things or get to know them.

Question 2: As much as I don't like group projects, I think group projects have done some of that. For me personally, being in these classes where I'm not in the classroom that is really the only way I've gotten to know any of the group members. Otherwise you are on a call and you listen or maybe there is some interaction with the teacher talking with the students but I don't get to know any of the students at all, unless I'm put on a group project where you have to spend time with them outside of the class and then, we have those phone calls and video chats and you actually start to talk about things before you get into your assignment and I think that helps when you are not on campus.

Question 3: I guess I've tried to reach out via email outside of the scheduled class time to ask questions, it seems like a couple emails before you get to a feeling that you can talk to them about other things just besides class. When you start to feel like you have that relationship than just a stranger you're emailing about something.

Question 4: Well I think, what I said, the course activity of being on the project and having to meet outside the class time helped. Like I know there's opportunities for, if you're in [primary location] or [secondary location], and you can go to one of those campuses, and I think being at least in a smaller group helps with that. I think it's hard if the instructor isn't forcing the students to do anything else outside of just the attend the class in order to meet and get to know the other students. I don't know that other students are really taking that one and getting to ones around. I think they are just getting through their class and being done with it.

Question 5: I don't want to necessarily say that I want more group projects, cause I don't really want that but I don't know, maybe there is time where they aren't talking during the online class but they are having the students discuss something altogether. Or maybe, they have them break up and email each other about a topic and come back and discuss it. Something where it has to be some sort of interaction otherwise it just doesn't occur. As much as being online and seeing other people in class, I still felt like when I was [personal story] felt like I didn't know who I was going with. You don't get to know anyone that way. Or maybe if it was part of the beginning of the class, you have to reach out to someone in the class, or pair people up or something, just starting



to get to know people before the class even starts or right as the class starts, as a way for people to know about other people.

Question 6: I just, I think that it is really hard to be a distance learner. In one aspect it is great, you can just do your assignments and turn them in and have ya know, certain class time, you don't have to meet and go in everyday, so its really flexible so its really nice. But at the same, you kind of lose that feeling of the group your working with as you're going through class together if you don't get to know any of those people, you kind of feel like you're going through by yourself. I guess maybe if we would have started the class last semester, he would have said you two reach out to each other outside of class and talk a little bit about this, or get to know each other about this, and then come back and tell the class. If we did some of that where we had to mix interaction with people, like you do in a physical class, would help. But then sometimes, I think they take the online class because they don't want that. It is hard to determine how much is too much or not enough. I can honestly say I didn't get to know anyone last semester. We didn't have to interact at all. I know the professor but that was about it.

Interviewee 11 (I11):

Question 1: Building in a class, I think it is really about, creating or establishing relationships with your peers as well as your educators your professors. And just really kind of creating a repoir or ask questions when you need help or feel that you can lean on one another to really help guide yourself through your educational program. And really just know that there are so many different resources out there and know how to access those resources and leverage them to better yourself as a student.

Question 2: I think it's about their demeanor and well as how they use their communicate and their communication style, whether its via email or just in person, I think, if a professor is really approaching able, and uses language that humanizes them and doesn't seem like they are so up the academic ladder so that you can't even relate to the things they are sharing with you is really kind of hard in that sense. They are still really approachable and have a lot of relatable knowledge to share.

Question 3: Community within class, I think it's always about staying in constant communication, at least for us remote students. It is a little bit harder and a little bit of a challenge because we have that communication barrier of that physical location, we are not there in class with everyone else, so it kind of, for most of us, pushes some of us out of our comfort zone so we are staying on top of keeping in contact with one another, and always being in touch and know that at the touch of a button you can have a resource to help you or answer your questions because maybe, you know, you can't necessarily be in class with everyone else to get that same interaction. So that I feel, that builds a repoir and your own sense of a little community.

Question 4: So I've attended a couple of workshops, on campus, I've been to [secondary location] a couple of times for my undergraduate program and some of the activities that they did, was kind of like a 360 conversation. [undergrad story/student story]. Through those activities I was able to create those bonds.

In my most recent activity, even the one that I participated with [student name] we took time outside of the class hours to really work on this group project and I think it really gave us each the chance to get to know each other's style a little bit better. Because in class it seems so scripted and this way we were, we didn't have the teacher guiding us, we didn't have the rules or what was expected during the conversation, so it allowed us to be ourselves and feely speak or be creative or thoughtful and I thought it was a nice way to build community that way as well.

Question 5: I think, depending of course on the topic, I think it's really important to bring people and representatives from the community into the classroom, depending on the content. So, with one of my classes we had a couple representatives come from other school districts to talk about what they are doing and the challenges they have, and also representatives from the hospital and clinic system. I would really like to see more of that kind of third party outreach. So we have these different ideas and examples of what community might be in other areas.

Question 6: Maybe if they, the professors or educators could schedule regular 1 on 1s or at least having that option. For the remote students they can log in and they will be sitting in a room and can ask questions. Or, hey partner up, with another student. Not necessarily do the work together but say here is your buddy and if you find challenges throughout the course and you're feeling like you are disconnected because you cannot come here on site and you really want, for me I'm a people person, so I would not mind at all having a classmate that was like my class partner that I could bounce ideas off of or ask clarifying questions, especially if I have a professor that doesn't ever answer their email. It is not always easy to get a hold of some teachers.

Interviewee 12 (I12):

Question 1: Well I think it is like any other class, at the undergrad level, I don't know if there really was much community. Part of, I'm actually a unique student [personal story]. At the graduate level I think there is more community, but it is more tight knit with age specific, more age specific than anything else. I am a 5th wheel.. [personal story].

At the graduate level, again, everyone is typically living off campus, they've got homes, they've got families, they've got jobs, and they are going to school too. So there really isn't a sense of community because they are individuals, at least from what I've experienced. Most are individuals. There may be some that rely on the class for themselves, are solitary, unless they are coming to the campus and part of that core group on campus, if you are distance or an outlier, I think it is harder to create that community.

Question 2: This particular class that I'm taking right now, I'm in the [Masters Program], and one of the things I really like right now that she is using, is that she will take and ask everyone's opinion and ask in reference to everyone in the class. She'll say is there anyone in the class that stands out as a leader, or what is your feeling on this. So everyone gets to share at a very intellectual level. That is one thing I really like and I think it creates community. We are getting to know each other aside from academics. The other thing that she did, we have case studies, a social science, leadership is a social science, and we have these case studies that we meet as groups, that were formed at the beginning, and you create community with these four individuals that you do a group case study and present to the class. And this is every week. And each group has a specific case study and has to answer questions. You are kind of forced to build community.

That is what this course is looking at more than anything else. They are building relationship among leaders.

Question 3: Well I know that again, that people that are in this particular course, some of them are counselors, some of them are coaches, some of them are travel study people, some of them are, there is just a plethora of different backgrounds that come together. So some of the people, I'm going to school with, create community outside of the classroom, so one of the gals is a counselors, there is a program out there [student story]... so that is the community that she is building. I think I'm uniquely placed because the courses I'm in focus on building community.

Question 4: Again, I think this goes back, to this particular program that I'm doing right now, the discussions that we engage in, I think we engage others perspective. One of two things, either going to turn people on with what you are saying or you're going to turn people off or have no effect on them at all. So with this course, with Dr. [professor name] is being conducted at least 3 or 4 times in the hour and half that we meet she will do a round robin to gather opinions or discuss on a topic. Again, I think that builds community, I think helps you find commonalities.

Question 5: Well again, I think, just the way, she is doing this uniquely than any class I've been in. Dr. [professors name] would have papers, and present papers, and three different things, and you got a chance to write, a chance to present, an opportunity to share. With this particular course though, we share every night, multiple times throughout the night, and we share about each other, and she asks "what do you do you see" so she actually forces us to look at each other and be as truthful as possible. It is part of being an authentic leader. Speaking your truth. And

being comfortable enough and they are comfortable enough with you to be straight up and honest.

Question 6: I think the distance, even though we meet in cyber space, I think the distance just precludes there being a really tight knit community. When you are in a classroom setting you actually have to see everyone every day, there is a musical misery, if you will, of being in a classroom. That builds community that you really can't build from a distance. Because when it is easy for you, and you got your own space, and you don't have to travel to go to school, and the rest of it, you don't share that same commitment, that the people that actually go to the classroom and experience it together as a group. I think it is just a little bit harder.

Interviewee 13 (I13):

Question 1: To me community means, having people in the class to bounce ideas off of, and collaborate with and have a network for your future professional development with.

Question 2: We've done some group work where there would be people in the classroom, in Rochester, online that mix together, so using Adobe Connect or jabber or whatever to do group work. Also been, in some of the classes, they had us reach out to other people for classes or to have them proofread or ask questions about the class to build community that way.

Question 3: For distance learners we've had Facebook groups, emails, text message threads, staying together and kind of help each other out since we are all off campus and not able to see

people on a weekly basis. But also kept in touch with a lot of people in the classes through either text or email to stay together and try to help each other that way.

Question 4: Group projects again are the biggest part of that. I think that is the main way that classes, I think there are other threads and asking people questions but by course design that is just something that happened by some people taking initiative.

Question 5: The biggest thing with that that they could do with that is the mixer that they do, is tough for distance people to get to, so if they could do something where there was a list or a giant group that you could send out to with all the people in the major so you could communicate and introduce yourself, not just the few that you have in class, but other people maybe are doing the same stuff but just taking the same classes at different times. So you are able to meet more people that are going through the program.

Question 6: I think the biggest thing, it kind of ends up on each personality of each person because some people maybe take distance and want to do stuff on their own and aren't really looking for the community. So, if there are some people that aren't involved it might be by choice and not that they are being left out. So if you provide opportunities for people who want it, they are going to end up taking advantage of it. Like it kind of has been done already, without set things in place. Some of the people who were looking for more community kind of reached out to others, and found people who kind of want to set things up. So having it available but also not pushing it on people who may not want it.

Interviewee 14 (I14):

Question 1: Building community in a class, means that the instructor and the students feel comfortable enough to get to know each other, learn about each other, in a manner that they can communicate professionally and also be able to talk about personal interests and backgrounds that can give meaning and quality and enhance the class.

Question 2: Instructors have tried to learn more about me as a student in some classes. So the fact that they are trying to get to know you, get to learn about your interests and incorporate those in class.

Question 3: Well group work would definitely increase community. Getting a chance to collaborate and work together to figure out the solutions to a problem. Anytime that you are working as a group with your instructor, whether it be on a paper or assignment, anytime you aren't working alone, I think that would kind of be the key.

Question 4: I think anytime a class activity promotes discussion between classmates, whether it be about the assignment or something related I think that can cause that to happen. Just based on that conversation, you're bound to have some dialogue that could lead to that.

Question 5: I think making sure Acano or Jabber or any way to be in class without being there in person will promote that just because I think you open yourself up to A. better attendance because everyone will be able to attend class B. you will get more students in general, ones that



might not have taken the class because they can't be there. Anytime you can add to that pool of students will increase community, I think.

Question 6: I think that, from my experience, distance learning is great but there needs to be a lot of work on the front end to make sure it works properly. Like if a teacher and the students that want to do distance learning haven't communicated well enough and the barriers haven't been taken down, which need to be, to have that distance learning, can make it a horrible awful process. But as soon as those have been taken care of, and the communication has taken place, everything is figured out, it is an awesome tool to have.

## APPENDIX E: Focus Group Transcription

Question 1:

F1: Well for me, it means inclusiveness because since I have been here I have been a part of WeTeach experience for faculty where I have had to learn online. And what I liked about that was that I knew the instructor and the instructor would call me by name. And I felt like the instructor knew me while I was in the class and I think the instructor went out of her way to make me feel a part of that learning experience and I really like that.

F2: So to me, building community means, you know, like you said, inclusiveness but it really tries to bring students, whether they are in the classroom or outside the classroom or we are all together we are truly a community. I think back to [University's] vision to try to building a community of learners and how do you do that. And getting folks to know that they are not out there alone on a isolated island that they really need to be building relationships, not only with students but also with the faculty, especially when they are in [City 6 hours away], not physically here where they can meet for coffee after class.

Question 2:

F1: A couple of things we have done, I've had students who on some days would join the class via Acano or Jabber and then on other days would physically appear in [Building Name]. And I would literally ask them, what is the difference between these two experiences, when do you feel the most apart of the class. Most of the time they will say the face to face experience really connects me with the other students in the class, connects me with the instructor and I feel more a part of the class. Well, what can we do when you are on Acano? Alright, to give you some of

those same feelings. And one of those is to recognize them. Some students say, well I will be raising my hand on Acano and you don't see me, and that is true. So, I've asked my in class students, when you see a student on Acano or Jabber raising their hand, trying to speak, I need you to alert me as the instructor that [student name] is trying to say something. So we make a conscious effort to recognize that student who's in that virtual space.

F2: One of the things I do, I do a couple different things. So when we have students who are offsite, I always request 4 or 5 different Acano links, and we do a lot of group work and discussions in the classes, and I don't want the students who are offsite to be isolated, although sometimes, like this time, it is like that in [Class name] because there are so many students in [secondary location] and they struggle breaking up into two groups because they have built a real sense of community in [secondary location] but what I try to do is number off in [first location] and offsite and the people who are in [Rochester], we number off and the 1's go in room 1, the 2's go in room 2, and so on and I do different schemes every time so we are rotating who they are working with in groups. Another thing I do, when I ask any questions in class, and ask it to everyone, I start with, and I rotate this around too, [secondary location] what are your thoughts on this? Those of you offsite, what are your thoughts? So I intentionally ask and if no one says anything then I'll say, Okay [student name] what are your thoughts on this, to try to bring them in and in Winona. Because I think being very intentional about all of the sites, ya know, [primary location,] [secondary location,] and off site helps to build community and helps for them to have a voice because, like you said, if they are raising their hand it is really very difficult for the instructor to be looking at your class here, looking at your [secondary location] class, and then

looking at six different sites. It is extremely difficult, so that is why I kind of intentionally go round-robin to make sure everyone has that opportunity.

F2: Right, I intentionally build my groups so that there is a virtual student in every group in the class. And if you notice that, they like that and then I ask them, how are you all getting together? How are you all communicating? Is it email, is it text, are you all meeting somewhere, or whatever the case might be. So then, the group themselves become very intentional about including the virtual student and consequently the virtual students feel very much a part of the group experience, and very much a part of the in class discussions. I also let them know that that is of concern to me. That not, and I will ask that question, how are you doing in Acano? How are you doing face to face? And based on that student feedback we have to make some adjustments on how we do the instruction.

Question 3:

F1: Well I don't know whether you are talking about virtual or face to face but I was surprised the other day when my [class name] group, they actually meet in a restaurant every Sunday. I was like, really? And they said yes, that we wanted to get to know each other, they did not want any one student to have the responsibility of preparing their case presentation and they said that when they sit as part of that group in the restaurant then everybody gets the chance to manipulate and mold that class presentation. And so, the whole group owns it. That is absolutely fantastic. And I said, well if you were not in a group, would you do that anyway or do you do that in your other classes? And they said, nope, we don't do that in our other classes. They said we just do it in this class because the assignment lends itself to that kind of group configuration. And I

thought that was awesome, and so, because it is a [class name] the students are taking responsibility for leading transformative learning. This is how we learn best in doing this particular assignment and they do it every week because they have a presentation every Tuesday in that class. And they said every Sunday afternoon they're meeting in one of these local restaurants around here and somebody drives an hour and meets with them. And I think that is absolutely phenomenal. And I think, you know, I don't instruct them to do, this is something they came up with all by themselves. Awesome.

F2: So to build community, I'm going to answer that in two different ways, we have the social in August.

F1: And I tell all of them, come to the social.

F2: And new students and everybody. And we start telling them Spring Semester, to start watching for the emails, because we really want to get to know you a little bit better and give you an opportunity to meet other students. So that is one avenue and that is, they can start building relationships, especially for those students who are offsite, because if they know there is a three hour event, and they know that three months in advance, then they can take off work at Noon or whatever to drive here and a chance to meet and connect, so that is one of the things. In my classes though, I always have a couple of group projects, and the students get together in multiple ways, some of them use the link that I give them, if they are local they meet, but I don't think any of them meet on a regular basis because a lot of students in [program name] they not only work full-time and have families, getting away, like on Sunday's would be harmful, I don't

want to say harmful, but put another challenge in for what they have to do. So I usually have the two group projects and one of the group projects I let them select their own team members and another group project they usually have they are random, and get with whoever, however the balls roll and they get together that way. And again, it is so important that we don't have groups that are just groups that become cliques, I want them somehow to build relationships with everyone in the class.

F2: And the other thing, we do, and I think you've alluded to this, is the nature of the assignment. I've spent a lot of time thinking about what kind of assignment would force students to work together because the 21st Century leadership skills talk about collaboration, creativity, and communication. You have got to hone those skills. And there are students in the class that prefer to work alone and not be bothered by other people and have had bad experiences with group work in the past. They just don't like it. And so I have a couple of assignments that, particularly in the [class name] where your grade is dependent upon a group project, for example [class name] newsletter. It is not possible to get that newsletter done, unless there is a headshot of every student in class in that newsletter, that there is a bio of every student in that class in that newsletter, and there is some kind of essay from each student in the class. They identify an editor, so they literally have to work together in order for that newsletter to get to final production. Which means that, if you are going to get an A on the newsletter you've got to make sure that all 13 people in this class do their part. So somebody has to email people, remind people, talk to people, go meet with people, and this year, we had one student [student name] who works in the [University office] who's good at taking pictures. So he said, if you all just come by the office, he's already set up with the camera and all of that, he said I'll take your

headshot so you don't have to worry about doing the headshot. And literally students went up to [University office] and took their picture, and done deal. And so, his stock in the class kind of increased because people knew that he had that expertise. We have another project this semester, the presentation of the e-book. Our students have to develop an e-book. They select their own author, they select their own topic for the e-book, they develop their own production schedule for the e-book, and then they have to work with [librarian] over in the library in order to get the e-book done. In order to get the ISBN number assigned, the printer, and things like that. So it is a big deal. So these are students who have to develop a team, develop a private management structure, develop some reminder systems, develop some editorial expertise, and then they feel comfortable with each other. So everybody sends their paper to [student name], for [student name] to edit the paper. And so, receiving [student name] feedback is never personal because everybody knows that it is for the betterment of the group project. So I'm at the point now, where I'm always going to do the e-book. I'm always going to do the e-book because implicit in that they write better, implicit in that they get used to receiving feedback on their writing, and implicit in that they learn how to mutually work together for the benefit of all. And that is really what leadership and team building is all about. And so I told them, you all are the people I want to come to my class next semester to tell students it ain't that hard. It ain't that hard. If you will just go with the flow and learn your fellow classmates, and build your network you can get through this program so much easier and I think all the students would agree with that at this point.

F2: No, so she was thinking about peer feedback so I do have group projects students do provide feedback when they work with their peers in the group and everyone knows that and that has

really anchored that accountability piece in them where they know that you are going to provide peer feedback on you know, did I show up? Did I contribute? Etc. Etc. And that has made a big difference, I don't know if that is building community but I think it, ya know, as Dr. [professor name] was saying, 21st century skills, requires that as leaders, we take feedback but also know respectively give feedback. So, you know, that is built in there. Does that add to community? It might add to respect because what I've seen since I've started that two years ago was I don't get the complaints that I had before, ya know, Miss Susie is not participating and she's missed every meeting. Now everybody really shows up to contribute and be part of that.

F1: The other thing that we have not talked about, both Dr. W and I have had out of class experiences with students. Dr. [professor name] in the study travel to [location] and we are getting ready to make a trip to my 4th international conference with students in our program. I get to know the students so much better outside of class in terms of their ability to meet with international conferences, their ability to put presentations together, handing off which student is going to speak, who's turn it is, changing their brand or their leadership behavior. All of that, if we are talking about shared values and building community, I think all of that builds community because those students then come back to the classes, share that experience and encourage other students to participate in going to international conferences, and writing papers, and getting published. So we have students in our program who are now published authors, I mean they are part of your research base, because they now believe that working together collaboratively benefits us all. It is an awesome experience.



F2: [Travel study story] The way community was built in that class is something I've never seen in my life nor do I expect to see it again. This group came together and they were immediate lifelong friends. It was just amazing. The laughter and the reflection and even, what I heard when I wasn't around, there was still discussion about their strengths and their learning, and they were really engaged and in the present and not thinking about home or whatever else you think about. If you could capture that and figure that out.

F1: [Travel study question] That sounds like a building community activity to me that you are going to share that experience to help other students understand just how valuable that is. And that is what building community is all about. The other thing that I don't think we talk about often, is that community is indicating across cultures. [Personal story] And now students feel far more comfortable being around those that are different. Now we search for similarities rather than differences I think and that is a totally different path for those students who we initially had in our program.

F2: I agree. At [University] especially they receive their undergrad degree at [University], the number of faculty that we have that are different ethnic backgrounds is less than 10%.

F1: Right, so we had to learn that. So now students come to my office to see me, come in visit, tell me their family problems or personal problems or whatever, I have the [program] guys that come in and say, they tell me if I really want to get an A in this class, I need to spend some time with you. [Personal Story] Now they know, I need to build a relationship outside of the classroom if there is something I don't know or I need help with. And if you are in leadership

training, if you don't do that then you are remised, if you don't use your resources and ask good questions, alright, and form a network to help you be successful, you don't need to be in a leadership program. You need to go do something else. So that message is loud and clear and on the yard, that building community and building your network is part of your success, in any endeavor. In any endeavor. Students now tell each other that so I don't have to say that anymore in class, they already know, she got an open door policy. Dr. [professor name] can tell you, students be in there all the time. And I've had students where, I thought I was their personal counselor, I was like I'm seeing you again this week, okay then. It, it's been kind of fun, adapting to this environment and watching the student adapt to me. Ya know so now, I think I do have a sense of belonging in my classroom as well as among the faculty. Ya know you have this, I need to show you being a person of color, you know, we don't have that anymore. They respect my expertise, the students in the classroom have figured out this ain't my first rodeo so I don't get those challenges at all, so building community is definitely done here.

Question 4:

F1: Well I use the e-book and I use the newsletter and I use groups, particularly in the [class name]. And I also, in the [class name], I have students that have been successful at having students from the previous semester, come in and hare with students their path and the fact that while they might have started out slow they finished on a high note. I just feel that that goes a long way, because as instructors they expect me to say certain things, but when they hear it from a student it makes more of a difference for them.

F2: And I'm going to add, when I have those group projects, so let's talk about [travel study]. You were able to self-select a presentation that you were going to give in [location], and you had to prepare for it here before you went. And so I know with [student name] group, she had people that had never met before because [students name] was from [offsite location], and from [offsite location] we had [students name], so she said that on Sunday's they planned to meet for an hour and they would spend the first hour working on the presentation and the second hour would be chit-chat and about whatever and just start to build that connection. So when they finally saw each other at the airport, never met in person, they knew each other already, because they had that time before. So, ya know, I do the group projects, is what I do to build that community, that's the activities.

Question 5:

F1: Building their network. I specifically asked the students who meet every Sunday, I said, do you do this in your other classes. They said no. I said why not? They said that they don't have an assignment that kind of lends itself to that, so I think that all of our classes, because we are a leadership program, we need to encourage our students to build supportive networks that we are a learning community. You can learn so much from the person sitting next to you. You can learn so much from the library. In the first class that I had here, I had students in the class that said, I have never been to the library. That just stopped me in my tracks. What do you mean? Hey, how are you in a graduate program and you've never gone to the library. I specifically relocated the class over to the library, introduced them to [librarian], to the databases over there, and have her give a live session on library. Now you shouldn't have to get to the graduate level to figure out the library is central to my learning and I need to know the reference librarian. And so I think

that should occur prior to graduate study. I think in the undergraduate program, somewhere, part of their orientation, let's go to the library, let's meet the librarian, let's learn the reference room, the rare books room, etc. That just stunned me. And so I think there are some basic activities that we need to do to teach students what their resources are and how to use them.

F2: I think that, as Dr. [professor name] said, that students take the initiative themselves to build that community. So, when they, when they have certain things here offered, so let me go back to, the first time ever, student graduate, where the student's that went to the library and presented their research, there was only a handful of students that were there when I was there. So if other students would come, especially those who are located here, ya know, if you aren't working, it's one thing if you are working full time and can't get away, that we would have more students participate in that. Ya know, for the social, we only have about 20 students, it would be great, because students know about it a long time in advance, students say it's really important for me, building community. I don't think they understand it that, that network is so important, that community is so important because in their mind they are like, oh my gosh, how am I going to fit my studies in this because I'm so busy now. So to help that mindset, and say, even if you allocate an hour a week to build community, that is going to serve you extremely well not only while you are going through the program but after you are out of the program and you are in those leadership positions. Because making that investment in relationships, well, we heard that in [travel study location] that is how decisions get made. Based on relationships. The relationships has to come first. So from the student perspective, I would love to see them figure that out and take the initiative. I'm not sure how to make that happen. You see pockets. You see pockets of that assignment every week, ya know, is every week too much? Assignments, if every student

had an assignment that was group work every week, that would start to, in my opinion, start to wear on their free time that they would have with their families or other responsibilities that they have. But how can the students, how can they set up something where they are in communication at least with people that have common, [interviewer story] because that is where you aspire to be. So how do you build those pockets, I don't know what we as faculty can do, we can kind of set the stage for things but in the end the students have to decide that's important to come together, so I think the question is, how do we assist the students that figuring out the relationships, really do matter.

F1: Well I think we've got to start incorporating that in our orientation. We can't assume that grown people, adults, students, know that building a relationship is your bridge to your future into success. We just can't assume that anymore. We have to encourage students to reach out and make friends. I'm talking, you have faculty on this campus, don't know their name or what department they work in, nobody comes by and says hi, hello my name is... We just don't do that. And so it's almost back to the neighborhood welcome wagon. Ya know, we need to welcome each other, send an email out, before class, because I have students now that will say, well I've had three classes with [students name]. Well what do you know about [student's name]? Nothing. Something is wrong with that picture, you should have had a conversation about something. So I think you need to be intentional in helping students understand just how important the network is to you. You are going to need people because you cannot be in leadership by yourself. And you cannot go through this life by yourself. You are going to need people. And as soon as we can get that message out I think the better we will serve our students.

F1: I sent a new email to my new doctors this morning, and I've given them several topics and one of them, one of the topics is building relationships among adjunct faculty. We hired some adjunct faculty, and we just assume some things. We just assume that because they are great teachers in K-12, that they can come to an institution in the Midwest and they are familiar with [online system] and build those modules. That is just a fallacious assumption. So we've got to do a better job of building a supportive relationships so become the bridge for success in that classroom. And it's not because they are not academically challenging, it's not because they don't have a PhD, but it's because they simply don't know what this culture expects of them in relating to students in the classroom. And I think we do need more papers on building community.

Question 6:

F1: I think building community is a two-way street. I think communication is a two-way street. I think many of our students are trained to come into a classroom, sit down, all eyes on the instructor, and expect the instructor to carry all the heavy water in that class. And ya know, I have to disabuse people of that notion. Ya know, if you are coming to my Thanksgiving dinner, you are going to have to bring something. You are going to have to share. So we need to decide, what are you going to share with me to make meet a more informed person. I never heard of bluffs before I came to [City]. What is a bluff? To me it is a trick when you are playing cards and I got the hat trump and I'm going to bluff you and pull your card. Ya'll talking about, do you see the bluff? You can't assume that I have the cultural knowledge expertise familiarity that you have in this culture. Now I'm willing to learn it but you can't assume that I know it. So I think that we have to do a better job at building community across cultures, getting to know people, and understand that you have as much responsibility to do that as a graduate student in this program

as I have as an instructor in this program. And so, I'm telling the [department] what did you do to build community? Who did you invite? What office did you stop by and say hey, good to see you? You all don't do that here. All this cause I'm having issues with [department]. I said I can walk around this campus all day long and none of you would say hey, [name] how you doing. You treat me as I'm some invisible [mumble] and that is not okay. So, what we are going to have to do, is you have to acknowledge me, you have to say hello that is what we do in the [USA location]. Here there is this isolation, this operate in silos kind of thing that you all call [state] nice, I can't buy it. So I get in people's faces, say hey how ya doing, blah blah blah. So build community down the hall. [Personal story] So I think we have got, all of us, accept responsibility for being gracious enough to reach out to other people.

F2: One of the practices I used to have in my classes, when the class size was smaller, and we didn't have people coming from 18 different locations, is we would do potlucks ya know since we teach night classes. So everybody would bring something or you know if not, just snacks. And that really worked well. We even had a couple of years where [location] drove to [secondary location] and people would open their homes for the last night of presentations. And that seemed to be really special. When class sizes are 25 and you have people from all over, and you have 8 people coming in from Acano, then they are left out. When you are building that community. So I really liked that, it really brought people together. Food and conversation. So that helped. The other thing, I think, is students knowing the expectations in a leadership, graduate student means, clearly it means building those relationships, building that network. And I think that all of us can be more intentional, not only in the introductions in our classes, but when we put things together like the social and helping new students, ya know helping our advisee's know that when they

come in. And I always have a conversation with them, because I want to know who they are before I even meet them and I want to make sure they are right for the [program] or [program]. So having that conversation in advance is really important. So I think those are a couple of things that with faculty with our advisees we can continue to build that strong relationship but then also from a different view that here is the expectation as a graduate student. You need to set aside some time each week to go and put yourself in an uncomfortable situation, if you are not comfortable meeting new people, well you need to get used to it, because that is what leadership is about, putting yourself out there. So, those are a few things that I think we could.

F1: [personal story] So, in building community, it's the little gestures, it's the little things that we do to acknowledge that there are good people in the world cause we know there are. We know about all the bad people in the world because they shoot them up, or slap people, or hurt kids or whatever the case may be. But good people in the world, we need to reward that behavior that we want repeated. So, give somebody a lollipop today and say hi, I was just thinking of you. It's such a simple thing.



**APPENDIX F: DATA CODING TABLE**

Theme	Idea	Question	Interview Participants															Total for each row	Total for each Idea	Sum for each Theme	Focus Group Participants		Total for each row	Total for each Idea	Sum for each theme	
			I1	I2	I3	I4	I5	I6	I7	I8	I9	I10	I11	I12	I13	I14	I15				F1	F2				
Relationships	Instructor and students feel comfortable	1			1		1										1	3	5	53	1	1	2	8	25	
		2															1	1								
		3																0				1	1	2		
		4																0								
		5																0				1	1	2		
		6			1													1				1	1	2		
	Learn about personal interests and background	1																1	1	9					7	
		2		1		1		1		1								1	5			1		1		
		3					1											2				1	1	2		
		4																0								
		5																0				1	1	2		
		6									1							1				1	1	2		
	Creating and establishing relationships / Trust	1	1	1				1	1	1	1	1	1					8	39			1	1	2	10	
		2		1		1		1					1			1		5					1	1		
		3	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1		11				1	1	2		
		4						1	1									2					1	1		
		5	1	1			1				1	1				1		6				1	1	2		
		6			1	1		1		1		1			1	1		7				1	1	2		
		1				1								1		2	6	35					2	15		



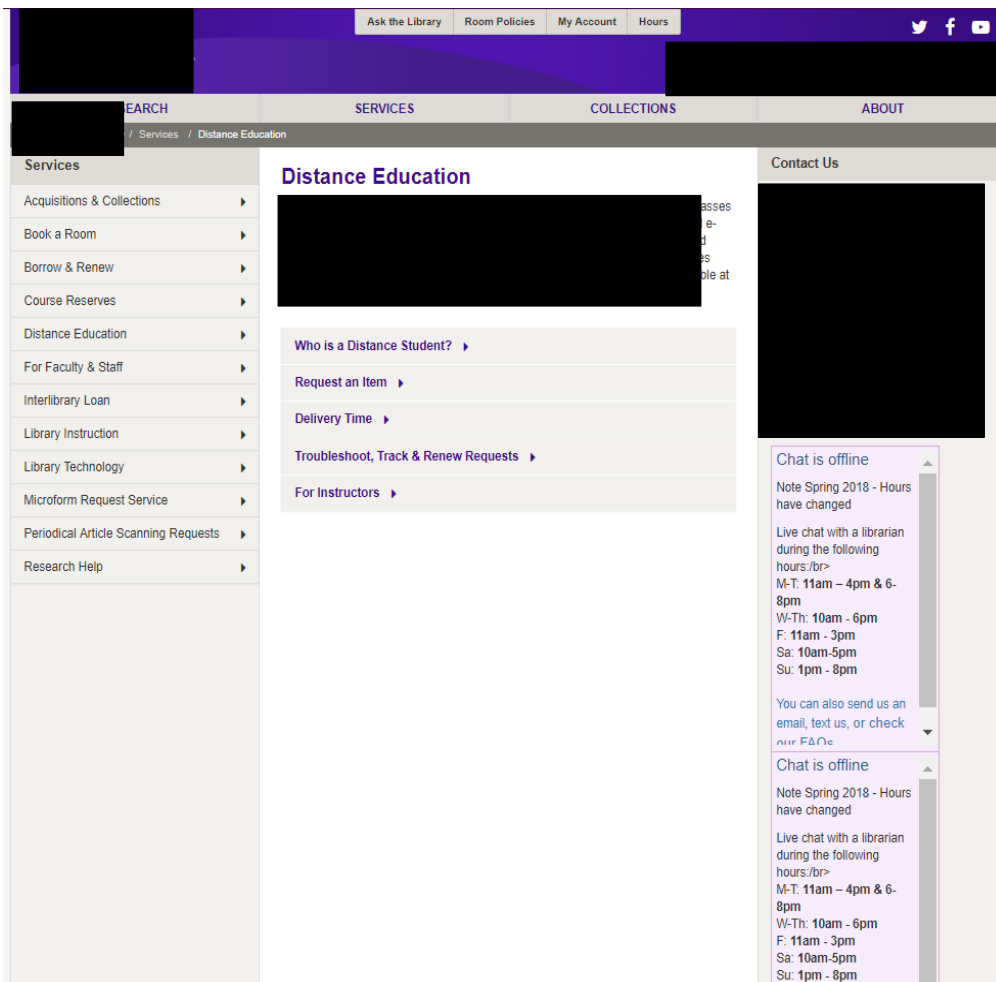
	Everyone participates in discussion / D2L discussions	1								<u>0</u>	9						4	
		2	1		1				1	<u>3</u>			1	1	2			
		3						1		<u>1</u>			1	1	2			
		4			1				1	<u>4</u>								
		5						1		<u>1</u>								
		6								0								
	Sharing papers / Peer Review	1								<u>0</u>	5							2
		2			1					<u>1</u>								
		3	1							<u>1</u>			1	1	2			
		4	1						1	<u>2</u>								
		5							1	<u>1</u>								
		6								0								
	Mix primary location, secondary location, and offsite students in groups	1								<u>0</u>	7							3
		2	1	1			1	1		<u>4</u>			1	1	2			
		3								<u>0</u>				1	1			
		4					1	1		<u>2</u>								
		5						1		<u>1</u>								
		6								0								
Technology	Utilize & engage video conferencing students	1			1					<u>1</u>	17	33					2	3
		2							1	<u>1</u>			1	1	2			
		3								<u>0</u>								
		4				1	1			<u>2</u>								
		5	1	1		1	1	1		<u>7</u>								
		6	1			1	1	1	1	<u>6</u>								
	Utilizing D2L	1								<u>0</u>	2							0
		2				1				<u>1</u>								
		3								<u>0</u>								
		4								<u>0</u>								
		5								0								

	6						1	1		
Utilizing social media, email, and discussions to communicate	1						0	7		0
	2						0			
	3	1			1	1	1			
	4						0			
	5	1				1	1			
	6						0			
Instructors and all students trained in the technology	1						0	7	1	1 1
	2	1					1			
	3		1			1	2			
	4						0			
	5	1		1		1	3			
	6	1					1			

## APPENDIX G: DOCUMENT REVIEW

Library Distance Education Website.

All university identifiers have been removed.





## Online Advising Toolkit

All university identifiers have been removed.

The screenshot displays a university website page for the 'Online Advising Toolkit'. At the top, there is a search bar and social media icons. A purple navigation bar contains 'ACADEMICS', 'ADMISSIONS', and 'ARTS & ATHLETICS'. Below this, a breadcrumb trail reads 'Home / Advising Services / Faculty Advisors / Online Advising Toolkit'. The main content area is titled 'Online Advising Toolkit' and contains the following text:

Through online advising, faculty advisors are able to support students wherever they are. Adobe Connect is the recommended tool for online advising because it is a free, feature-rich program available to all faculty and staff.

This toolkit focuses on best practices for using Adobe Connect to provide online advising to students. It is not a replacement for existing Adobe Connect training resources.

Additionally, advisors should have a firm grasp of advising pedagogy before they begin using Adobe Connect.

A list of steps for getting started with online advising is provided:

- Get Started with Online Advising
- Set Up Online Appointments
- Begin Your Meeting
- Troubleshoot During Your Meeting
- Close Your Meeting & Clear the Chat

The sidebar on the left includes 'Advising Services' with links for New Students, Current Students, Faculty Advisors, Parents & Families, and Meet Our Staff. The sidebar on the right, 'Adobe Connect Resources', includes links for Adobe Connect Sign-In, Get Started with Adobe Connect, Quick Start Guide for Hosts/Advisors (PDF), Adobe Connect Training Videos, and Test Your System. Below this is a 'Contact Us' section with academic and summer hours listed.

The footer contains three columns: 'Future Students' with an 'APPLY' button and links for scheduling visits, financial aid, and transfers; 'Community Members' with links for attending events, reserving facilities, taking non-credit classes, and employment opportunities; and 'Ask a Question' and 'Make a Gift' buttons.

# Distance Learning

All university identifiers have been removed.

