

## Beyond Logging In: Examining Strategies in Building An Online Learning Community In Graduate Education

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This paper addresses the rapid increase in online program delivery of college courses, particularly in graduate education, and examines the lag in faculty development and training in how to implement effective strategies to build an online learning community. In particular, this paper examines the importance of a sense of community and interaction in online courses and offers practical strategies for the online practitioner. This study examines a group of 18 graduate students in a school of education who represent the first cohort of students to graduate from a fully online program at a traditional on-ground university. The study uses survey research that includes both open-ended and closed-ended questions to observe whether online learning communities foster deeper critical thinking and learning and leads to course and program completion.

This study is part of a larger study that embodies an action research approach to improving faculty pedagogy in online teaching and learning. Findings from the study reveal that similar to on-ground classroom interactions and simulations, online learning can replicate comparable dynamics and interactions. Graduate students are motivated and engaged in course material when faculty regularly engage with them online in community discussion board forums and one-on-one. Further, students feel supported and empowered to overcome difficult course material when they are connected with their online peers through regular online community discussions. Lastly, the findings from this study show that though students highly value the online learning community, the onus of creating this “virtual space” for students to build community with their online peers falls on the faculty instructor. The study continues to support the theoretical framework that student to instructor interactions and student-to-student interactions serve as the foundation to increasing community and learning in virtual environments.