THE **NATIONAL** SOCIETY OF
LEADERSHIP AND SUCCESS

ULTIMATE GUIDE TO

IMPROVING VIRTUAL STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

WHY COMMUNITY COLLEGES TURN TO LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS TO CREATE ENGAGING VIRTUAL EVENTS

Created by

HANNAH STONEBURNER, Regional Director of Program Development

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THE CHALLENGES OF
VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT

As community colleges across the country have been forced to transition to virtual learning and events, higher education professionals struggle to find ways to connect students to the school. While this is a familiar challenge, it has become even more pronounced with fewer opportunities for students to build relationships with faculty, administrators, and peers.

To offset this, student services professionals are racing to engage students with virtual events. However, due to a lack of promotion, resources, and interactivity, these events often fall short of student expectations.

This directly affects students' sense of belonging and connection to the school. And, though this impacts the retention and graduation rates of all students, the ramifications are even greater for minority and first-generation students.

CONTINUE READING →

Discover how to create engaging virtual events that your students actually want to attend, and why it's so important that you get it right.

THE NEW
VIRTUAL
ENVIRONMENT

MOST COMMUNITY COLLEGES OFFERED SOME VIRTUAL COURSES BEFORE COVID CHANGED OUR WORLD.

When colleges transitioned to entirely online courses, faculty members at least had some experience with the various tools and best practices for engaging students.

On the other hand, most student services professionals did not have much experience creating virtual events. It was hard enough hosting in-person functions that generated a high turnout and kept students engaged. Creating an engaging virtual event is even more difficult because students are home, facing numerous other distractions and responsibilities.

To win their attention and to keep students engaged, you must provide a format that teaches them something new, connects them with other students, and allows them to interact with others. This is especially important for minority and first-generation students, who typically have a lower sense of belonging than other students.

COMPETING DISTRACTIONS WHEN ATTENDING VIRTUAL EVENTS

When delivering virtual events, you're competing for attention with your students' home life, where they face many other distractions, such as:

FAMILY MEMBERS · **ROOM MATES** · **HOME WORK** · **SOCIAL MEDIA** · **VIDEO GAMES** · **HOUSE CHORES** · **RUNNING ERRANDS** · **STREAMING SERVICES**

OPPORTUNITIES
FOR MINORITY &
1ST GENERATION
COLLEGE STUDENTS

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), the 6.8 million community college students in 2020 are:

29% FIRST GENERATION TO ATTEND COLLEGE

26% HISPANIC

20% STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

15% SINGLE PARENTS

13% BLACK

Community colleges continue to be an important opportunity for minority and first-generation students. However, even before the hardships caused by COVID, these cohorts were the least likely to persist and earn their degree.

Additionally, these students face a lower sense of belonging, which is an early indicator of retention and success. Increasing their connection to the school is even more difficult (and more important) in a virtual environment.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE RETENTION RATES

23.5%

Lower retention rate at two-year institutions compared to four-year institutions.

62% RETENTION RATE
at Two-Year Colleges versus

81% RETENTION RATE
at Four-Year Institutions.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 2018.

VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT
& A STUDENT'S SENSE OF BELONGING

Studies have revealed that minority and first-generation students have a lower sense of belonging than continuing-generation or white students. Those same studies revealed that a higher sense of belonging can lead to more positive outcomes related to:

ACADEMICS

HEALTH

ENGAGEMENT

As courses, events, and organizations have moved to virtual environments, creating engaging events has become essential to providing students with a sense of belonging that increases the likelihood of retaining them.

While this will impact first-generation and minority students the most, creating new opportunities to connect and engage with the school community, their peers, and faculty will benefit all students and impact their retention and graduation rates.

However, while many student services professionals were always challenged with creating engaging events, the unique challenges they are being presented with in 2020 have made it so much harder.

"CREATING ENGAGING EVENTS HAS BECOME ESSENTIAL"

⊘ PRO TIP: BUILD A SENSE OF BELONGING

Now that many students are virtual, developing that sense of belonging, especially at 2-year institutions, has become even more difficult. To connect students to the school, administrators need to do more than simply say, "you belong here." You need to provide students with:

✔ Support as they face challenges and setbacks.

✔ Trustworthy mentors who can relate to a diverse student population.

✔ Access to faculty and staff for guidance and support, not just academics.

5 REASONS WHY

HIGHER ED PROFESSIONALS STRUGGLE WITH VIRTUAL STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Let's face the truth: as a higher education professional you excel in certain areas of your job. You're great at organization and communication. You're great at balancing multiple responsibilities, multiple projects, and connecting with multiple people on a wide range of subjects on a daily basis.

However, there are areas that prove to be more challenging. Unfortunately, some of these are directly related to the struggles schools are facing as they try to engage students virtually. This impacts how students connect to your college, their retention, and their overall academic performance.

HERE ARE 5 REASONS WHY STUDENT SERVICES PROFESSIONALS AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES STRUGGLE TO CREATE ENGAGING EVENTS

1

PROMOTING THE EVENT

Student Services administrators are not marketing professionals. Many struggled getting the word out about in-person events.

Now, it's even harder with limited access to students. To get students to attend, you must create excitement before the event.

2

LACK OF ATTENDANCE

Getting students to attend is the first, essential step in creating engaging events. If students don't engage outside of the classroom, you risk losing their connection to the school or their sense of belonging, increasing the likelihood that they won't retain.

3

NO FACILITATOR

Unfortunately, more often than not, you're the only person running an event. That means you're trying to balance the main talking points, answer questions, and respond to messages in the chat. As you try to juggle all these responsibilities, the overall student experience suffers.

> **"IF STUDENTS DON'T ENJOY THE EXPERIENCE BECAUSE OF AN INCONSISTENT FLOW, THEY'RE LESS LIKELY TO RETURN FOR THE NEXT EVENT."**

4

SHORT ON RESOURCES

Budgets were tight before COVID. Now, at many schools, they're even tighter. This lack of resources makes it difficult to create engaging events that provide value to students.

5

STEEP TECHNOLOGY LEARNING CURVE

An engaging virtual event includes a number of different elements, such as open discussions, an active chat, interactive polls and a greater need for breakout rooms to facilitate smaller discussions. Yet many student services professionals don't have experience using this technology. If students don't enjoy the experience because of an inconsistent flow, they're less likely to return for the next event.

VIRTUAL EVENTS
WERE NECESSARY BEFORE COVID

As with many industries, higher education was moving in the direction of more distance learning and virtual events before COVID. As you gain experience keeping students engaged virtually, consider ways to continue leveraging these techniques when we finally return to campus across the country.

ONLINE ENROLLMENT FIGURES (FALL 2018)

16.6%

Students were enrolled in exclusively distance education courses.

35.3%

Students were enrolled in at least one distance education course.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 2018.

⚠ PRO TIP: VIRTUAL EVENTS ARE HERE TO STAY

There's no denying it. Our definition of "normal" has changed. Even long after a vaccine is readily available, virtual engagement will be an integral part of the fabric of student engagement, especially non-traditional students, minority students, and first-generation college students.

How do you provide these at-risk students with more opportunities to build a supportive network of peers and mentors?

You must create virtual experiences that are just as meaningful as their in-person counterparts. This allows students an opportunity to participate, build a community, and connect with faculty, increasing their connection to the school.

5 ELEMENTS
OF AN ENGAGING VIRTUAL EVENT

Engaging virtual events need to combine many different elements to keep your students from all the distractions they face at home. You're competing with their family members, Netflix, YouTube, and the social media rabbit hole.

Your event doesn't need to provide the same production quality, but it does need to deliver an experience the student enjoys and a valuable outcome (such as learning something new, challenging their viewpoints, and meeting like-minded peers) to increase the likelihood they'll return for future events.

1

ADD A FACILITATOR

Hosting a virtual event is difficult enough without having to create breakout rooms, keep students engaged through the chat, answer questions, and cue any videos or multimedia. Add a Facilitator to handle those details so you can focus on engaging students.

2

TRACK STUDENT ATTENDANCE

Similarly, you have enough to do during an event without trying to take attendance. Even if you add a Facilitator, they are juggling multiple responsibilities as well. Instead, find a platform that automatically tracks attendance so you can easily distribute credit properly.

❗ PRO TIP:
DON'T BE TOO STRICT

Don't forget, now you're on students' time and in their home. Just like all of us, they're juggling more now as they try to balance all of their responsibilities. They are choosing to attend, so if you're too strict, they may not return to future events.

3

GET YOUR STUDENTS INVOLVED

Students do not attend events to simply listen to someone speak. Unfortunately, they probably get that more often than they should during their classes. Instead, keep them engaged by asking open-ended questions and follow-up questions to start a conversation.

❗ PRO TIP:
INCLUDE SURVEYS

This is a great opportunity to use survey tools such as Kahoot or Slido to see how students feel about a certain topic. It also let's them see the group results once they've voted. And adding in surveys breaks up the monotony of a single presenter.

4

PEER-TO-PEER INTERACTION

Students want to engage with other students and meet new people when they attend an event, which is difficult to do virtually. Use breakout rooms so that smaller groups can discuss a specific topic and get to know each other for 5-10 minutes during the event.

5

MIX UP THE DELIVERY

With all the distractions students face, your event needs a variety of formats. If you (or anyone) speaks for too long, you risk losing their interest. Consider ways to change the pace by adding videos, graphics, mixing up speakers or varying formats, such as a panel interview, breakout rooms, or an open discussion.

⊘ PRO TIP:
CREATE A SERIES

Another way to mix it up is to create a series and promote the next session during the current one. TV shows do this all the time (tune in next week for…), so you should be doing this with your events.

This sets expectations that there's more content to come. And, more importantly, if the first event goes well, you'll have automatic attendance for the second. After all, it's not enough to engage students once, you need to keep engaging them throughout the semester and their time at school.

3 MORE WAYS TO
CREATE ENGAGING VIRTUAL EVENTS

If you create an event that includes those five elements, your students will be engaged and excited to return. But, to make it truly stand out, there are three additional elements that you can include.

These are not essential, but if you have the time and resources to include them, your event will be exceptional.

1

ADD SOME GAMIFICATION

Reward students for completing various activities, such as participating, attending, or sharing a video. Come up with rewards for the top student(s) that will appeal to them, such as an Amazon gift card, a school sweatshirt, or some essential tech, such as a portable charger or noise-canceling headphones.
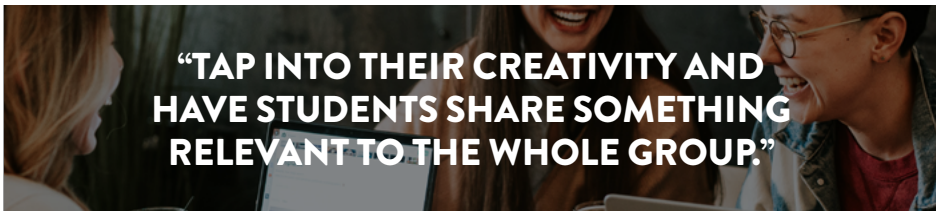
2

USER-GENERATED CONTENT

Students are already creating short videos on TikTok or awesome images on Instagram. Tap into that creativity and have students share something relevant to the group. For instance, have them submit videos of their experiences in your group. Or, during the event, have a breakout group activity be creating a video or series of images.

3

ASK FOR FEEDBACK

How do you know if your event was engaging if you don't ask those who attended? Use Survey Monkey or other tools to easily create a survey and send it out after the event. Or use one of the tools mentioned earlier to create a poll before the end of the session. This allows for continuous improvement, provides you with data to share with your college leadership, and material to help you market your next event.

> "TAP INTO THEIR CREATIVITY AND HAVE STUDENTS SHARE SOMETHING RELEVANT TO THE WHOLE GROUP."

WHY DO COMMUNITY COLLEGES NEED
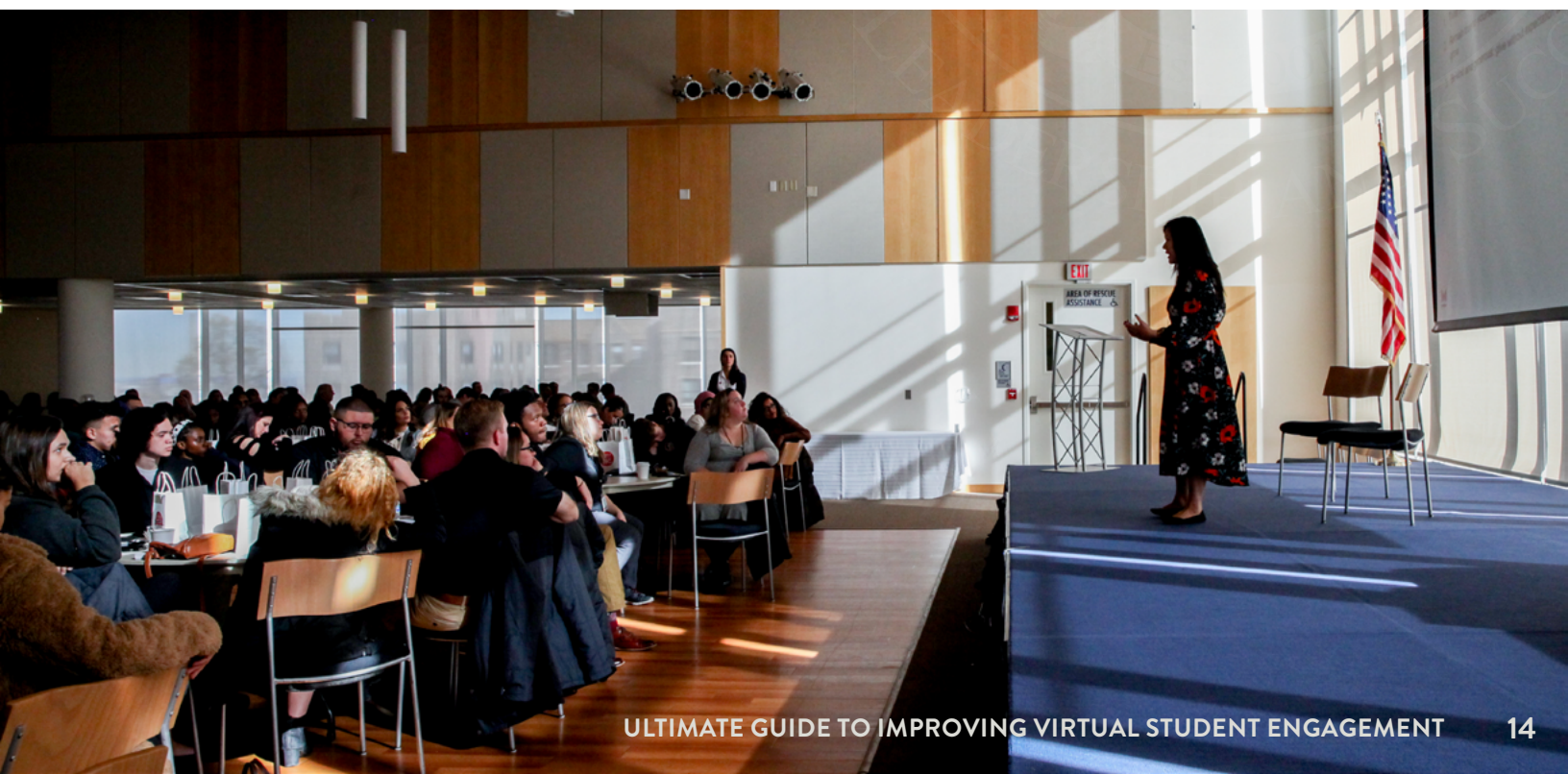# LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS?

Even with all the right ideas and tools, an engaging virtual event is still hard to execute.

And, you're probably overworked as it is.

Leadership programs, such as The National Society of Leadership and Success, provide pre-built programs to minimize the amount of work that student services professionals at community colleges need to perform.

AN ENGAGING LEADERSHIP PROGRAM SHOULD INCLUDE:

✔ **PRE-BUILT EVENTS**
  so administrators don't have additional work.

✔ **ENGAGING EVENTS**
  with celebrities, entrepreneurs, and leaders.

✔ **VIRTUAL PLATFORM**
  that automatically tracks attendance.

✔ **EASY-TO-USE BREAKOUT ROOMS**
  for smaller group discussions.

✔ **SCALED CONTENT**
  to keep students engaged and returning for future events.

DO YOU HAVE A LEADERSHIP PROGRAM AT YOUR SCHOOL THAT HELPS YOU INCREASE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT?

CONTACT US TODAY TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE NSLS AT YOUR SCHOOL

LEARN MORE

NOT READY TO SCHEDULE A CALL? WE UNDERSTAND.

Read our recent report on the immediate impact
a pilot program had on retention at St. Petersburg College.

READ THE REPORT →

"Student response to our new chapter of The National Society of Leadership and Success has been tremendous! The NSLS offers excellent resources and opportunities to help students strengthen leadership skills and increase self-confidence as well as make a positive difference in the lives of others."

MELODY RAWLINGS

Lead Faculty

PhD in Organizational Leadership

Northcentral University

NSLS Chapter since Spring 2020

"The flexibility and accessibility of their online modality makes NSLS the perfect partner for our diverse, rural student population. Our students absolutely LOVE the opportunities and programming afforded to them through their involvement in the NSLS."

JASON ZELESKY

Dean of Students

Mount Wachusett Community College

NSLS Chapter since Spring 2014

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