



Bridging the Engagement Gap in Online Education

A guide to fostering connections for student success and improved outcomes.

LET'S TALK ABOUT BUILDING SUPPORTIVE ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Online education has redefined how students access academic and career opportunities. It's flexible, accessible, and often the best option for non-traditional students balancing work, family, and finances. But it's not without challenges—especially when it comes to connection and collaboration.

Unlike traditional campuses where casual chats in the library or student union are common, online learners often feel isolated. For underserved students—facing barriers like lack of guidance or unfamiliarity with the education system—it's even harder. Time zones, language differences, and cultural nuances add complexity to building community. Without these connections, many students struggle with isolation and impostor syndrome, which can hinder their chances of success.

The good news? Technology, when intentionally paired and designed with a human-first focus, can bridge these gaps. By fostering a sense of belonging, building social capital, and promoting help-seeking behavior, online education can be reimaged to make connection and collaboration equitable and effective. Digital communities are the key to this transformation—let's explore how.



WHAT MAKES ONLINE LEARNING CHALLENGING?

Imagine balancing a full-time job, raising a family, and studying—all from your kitchen table. That's the reality for many online learners. These students come from diverse backgrounds and are often spread across the globe, which is both a strength and a challenge.

Most online classes rely on tools like discussion boards, but let's face it: the classic "post once, comment twice" approach rarely sparks meaningful engagement. For students in underserved or rural areas, unreliable internet and outdated devices make connecting even harder. Unlike on-campus students, there's no library or coffee shop to naturally meet peers and form relationships.

These barriers affect students' sense of belonging, their ability to build social capital, and their confidence in seeking help. Without intentional strategies, students miss out on the trust, networks, and relationships they need to succeed in school, their careers, and beyond.

75% of U.S. post-secondary enrollments are non-traditional learners

65% do not complete their degree

88% of students felt less socially connected online than in person



WHY SOCIAL CAPITAL MATTERS

SOCIAL CAPITAL



Participation



Network



Trust



Belonging



Reciprocity



Engagement



Value &
Norm

Social capital might sound like a buzzword, but it's crucial. It's the trust, networks, and relationships that help students thrive in school, their careers, and beyond. For online learners, digital communities foster this by creating spaces where they can collaborate with peers, connect with mentors, and access resources—bridging the gaps of isolation and building the connections essential for success.



Here's what the data shows: students with strong peer and faculty connections are more likely to succeed academically and stay in school. For underserved students, these connections can make the difference between dropping out and earning a degree. Schools like Rio Salado College and Western Governors University have seen the impact—students in digital communities report feeling more connected and are more likely to stick with their programs. Access the research: inscribeapp.com/partner-success-stories



RESEARCH

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN ONLINE EDUCATION

Social capital has a clear impact on student outcomes in online education. High levels of social capital foster collaboration, connection, and academic success, while low levels contribute to disengagement, isolation, and poor performance. This chart highlights the distinct effects of high and low social capital. By addressing these factors, institutions can create equitable learning environments where all students thrive.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

HIGH

- Students shift from passive to active learners when engagement is flexible and purpose-driven.
- Collaboration connects diverse experiences, enhances critical thinking, and improves outcomes.
- Peer networks and tailored support systems build a sense of belonging, increasing persistence despite external responsibilities.
- Consistent, meaningful interaction fosters trust and strengthens connections across diverse life experiences.
- Mentorship and teamwork develop soft skills and expand career opportunities.
- A collaborative culture attracts students and builds alumni commitment.

VS

LOW

- Lack of collaboration results in passive engagement and limited connection to peers with shared experiences.
- Isolation deprives learners of critical peer support, making it harder to balance responsibilities and problem-solve.
- Disconnection increases stress, especially for those juggling work, family, and education, leading to higher dropout rates.
- Minimal interaction fosters alienation and weak commitment.
- Missed teamwork opportunities hinder skill development and career readiness.
- Negative experiences harm reputation and reduce student referrals.

CREATING VIBRANT DIGITAL COMMUNITIES

Building a thriving digital community is one of the best ways to strengthen social capital in online education. Think of it as creating a space where connection, collaboration, and inclusivity can flourish—despite the challenges of distance and technology. So how do you make a digital community work? It all starts with thoughtful planning and intentional design. Let's break it down.

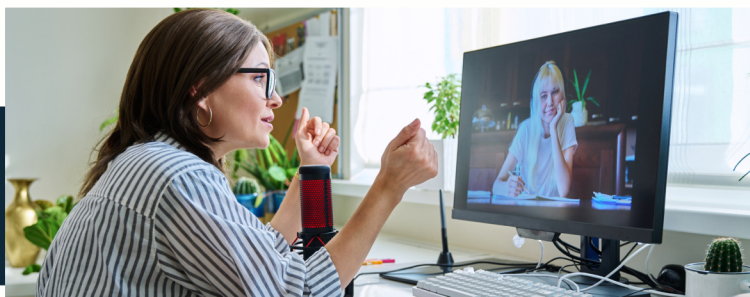
PURPOSE



Start with a Clear Purpose. Every great community needs a purpose. What's yours? Are you trying to foster peer-to-peer interaction, provide academic support, share information, or build a space for student success? Don't try to do everything—focus on one or two goals.

Tailor the approach:

- **Peer-to-Peer:** Let students lead and avoid flooding with moderator posts.
- **Academic Support:** Encourage peer help and highlight great answers.
- **Information Sharing:** Focus on updates and announcements.
- **Student Success:** Keep advisors involved but let students drive interactions.



PLACEMENT



Make It Accessible. Integrate the community where students can easily find it, like portals, LMS dashboards, a mobile app, or emails. Enable notifications to keep them engaged.

- **Peer-to-Peer & Student Success:** Include links outside of courses for frequent access.
- **Academic Support:** Direct students to the community for questions instead of other tools.
- **Information Sharing:** Use emails and announcements to highlight key updates.

PEOPLE



Involve the Right People. Define roles and expectations for members and moderators.

- **Peer-to-Peer:** Let students lead with light moderation.
- **Academic Support:** Encourage TAs and peers to respond first.
- **Information Sharing:** Include key stakeholders like financial aid or career services.
- **Student Success:** Use advisors to build authentic connections and host live sessions.

PLAN



Plan for Success. Communities thrive with intentional nurturing.

- Share the purpose and guidelines upfront.
- Use creative prompts to encourage engagement.

With a clear purpose, accessibility, the right people, and a solid plan, your digital community can become a powerful hub for connection and success.

THE RESULTS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES

Western Governors University students were **twice as likely to stay enrolled.**

WGU 

Rio Salado College students reported **40% higher levels of belonging** and **14% increase in peer connectedness** in just 6 weeks.

Rio Salado College 


UMGC

University of Maryland Global Campus saw increases of **13% in course success** and **2% in persistence.**


UNT


Arizona State University

University of North Texas reported a **13% increase in persistence rates.**

Arizona State University reported a **10% improvement in the number of students receiving A grades.**





CHOOSING THE RIGHT DIGITAL COMMUNITY PARTNER

Choosing the right digital community partner is key to creating meaningful connections and improving student outcomes. Focus on these key factors:

Think Human-First, Technology-Enabled

- Prioritize platforms that foster belonging and scale to diverse needs without losing the personal touch.
- Choose tools powered by AI that organically connect students to peers, mentors, and alumni seamlessly.

Know Your Needs

- Seek feedback from faculty, staff, and students to understand and identify engagement gaps.

Partner with Moderator Support in Mind

- Look for a partner that guarantees uptime, provides 24/7 support, consulting, and adoption strategies.

Leverage Data

- Choose platforms with strong analytics and impact reporting to track success.

Ensure Compatibility

- Select platforms that seamlessly integrate with your LMS, are intuitive for all generations, and offer strong partner success resources.

Look for Proven Results

- Review testimonials and case studies to ensure measurable outcomes.

MEASURING SUCCESS

Creating an online education experience goes beyond flexibility and technology—it’s about creating inclusive spaces where students feel accepted, supported, and empowered. By fostering belonging, expanding social capital, and promoting help-seeking behavior, institutions can transform online education into a powerful tool for student success.

To demonstrate the impact, track key metrics such as engagement rates, retention, and student satisfaction. Highlight success through visuals like charts showing reduced failure rates or testimonials from students who feel more connected and supported. For example, students in thriving digital communities often report a stronger sense of belonging, which directly translates to higher engagement and academic achievement.

By focusing on these outcomes, we can reimagine online education to ensure every learner has the opportunity to succeed.

“ TRANSFORMING ONLINE EDUCATION TOGETHER

Building social capital in online education isn’t just a nice-to-have; it’s essential. By fostering a sense of belonging, expanding social capital, and promoting help-seeking behavior—key principles of the InScribe Theory of Change—we can empower students to succeed academically, professionally, and personally.

Inclusive, engaging online communities are at the heart of this transformation. When students feel connected, supported, and valued, they are more likely to thrive. Together, we can reimagine online education to ensure it works for every learner, breaking down barriers and creating opportunities for success.

Katy Kappler, CEO & Co-founder of InScribe



WHAT ADMINISTRATORS ARE SAYING

“

Connection and community are vital to student success, and the InScribe pilot confirmed this. Expanding the platform at UMGC ensures all students, wherever they are, can access the support they need to thrive.”



Matthew Belanger

VP Student Engagement & Achievement and Senior Advisor to the University President at UMGC

“

InScribe communities not only bridge the physical gap between our online students and the campus but also strengthens our commitment to every student's success and well-being, irrespective of their mode of learning.”



Samanta Nikolai

Director of DSI Enterprise at the University of North Texas

“

Fostering belonging means listening to students and creating spaces where they feel seen, connected, and supported. Through our InScribe virtual community, with over 27,500 monthly active members, students find affinity groups tied to both their studies and their personal lives—showing them they're not alone in the digital world.”



Janelle Elias

Vice President, Strategy & Advancement and Academic Affairs at Rio Salado College

Next Steps

Let's Talk: Schedule a conversation to explore how a community building partner can help your institution.

Connect with us on LinkedIn:
[linkedin.com/company/inscribeapp](https://www.linkedin.com/company/inscribeapp)



LET'S CHAT

ABOUT **INSCRIBE**

InScribe is a digital community platform grounded in our Theory of Change principles: fostering belonging, building social capital, and promoting help-seeking behavior. By combining the power of community and AI, InScribe connects students with the answers, resources, and relationships they need to thrive.

InScribe breaks down traditional support silos by creating a single, accessible space for on-demand collaboration. Through meaningful interactions with peers, mentors, and experts, students feel a stronger sense of belonging, expand their social capital, and gain the confidence to seek help when needed. These connections enhance engagement, satisfaction, and retention—paving the way for long-term academic, professional, and personal success. Learn more at inscribeapp.com or contact us at hello@inscribeapp.com.

Human-First, Technology Enabled

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