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Building Belonging with InScribe at Rio Salado College

College Innovation Network Evaluation and Impact Report

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Executive Summary

Modern higher education is becoming increasingly dispersed and asynchronous: students can now complete their education from anywhere in the world, on their own schedule, with little interaction with peers. Students, however, still want genuine connections to their peers and a sense of belonging within their institution.

Given that online, dispersed learning in higher education is here to stay, institutions face a growing problem: **How can modern higher education institutions create opportunities for students to foster belonging and connectedness with their peers?**

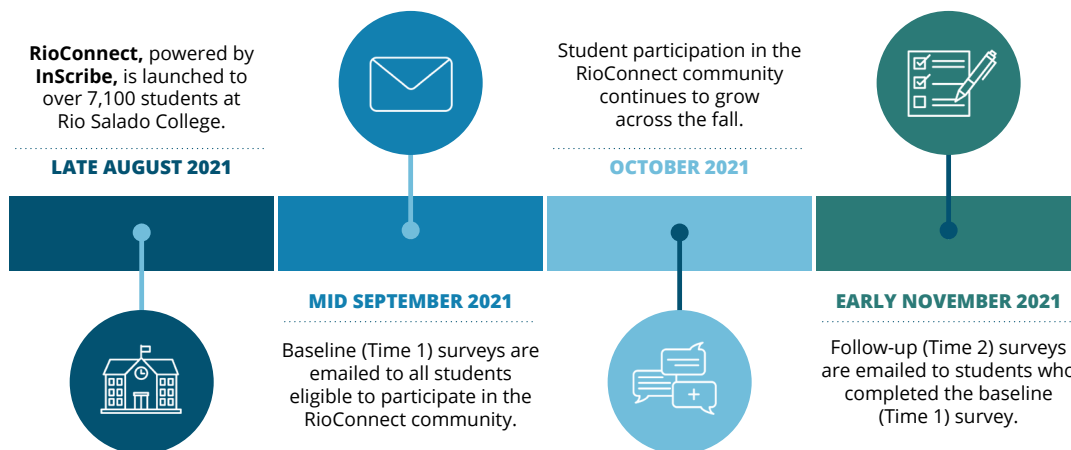
Rio Salado College addressed this challenge by partnering with InScribe to create RioConnect in Summer 2021 – a custom designed virtual community to provide online students a space to engage in qualitatively rich discussion around resources and tips to succeed in a self-paced, high-flex online learning environment. The RioConnect community was built with

the exclusive intention to provide online students at Rio Salado College a space to connect, share resources, and learn from one another – on their schedule.

The College Innovation Network (CIN) at WGU Labs collaborated with Rio Salado College and InScribe to evaluate the impact of RioConnect on student belonging and peer connectedness over a six-week study period using a pre-post, quasi-experimental survey design.

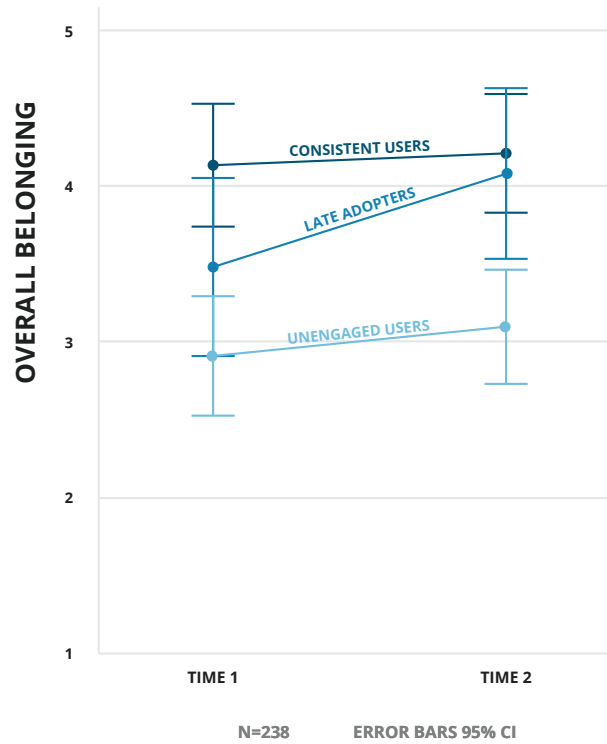
Our analyses show that students who engaged with the RioConnect community reported greater belonging and greater peer connectedness over the course of the six-week study period than students who had not engaged with RioConnect. We measured students' self-reported belongingness and peer connectedness *over time* (comparing Time 1 responses to Time 2 responses within user groups); and *between user groups* (comparing responses across user groups at Time 1 and across user groups at Time 2) to evaluate the impact of RioConnect participation.

TIMELINE OF RESEARCH EVENTS: AUGUST - NOVEMBER 2021

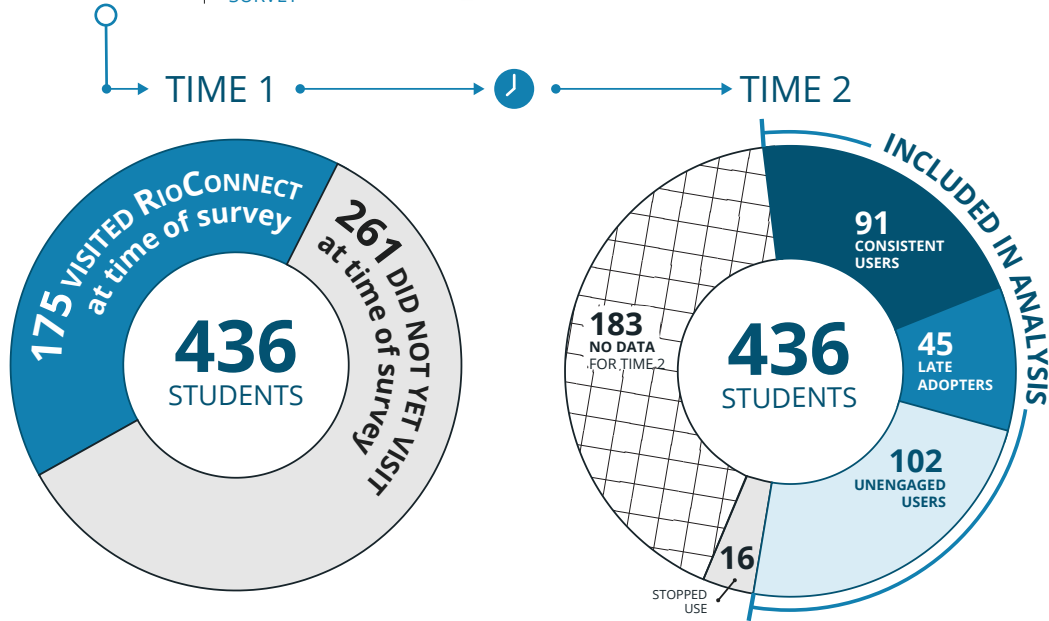
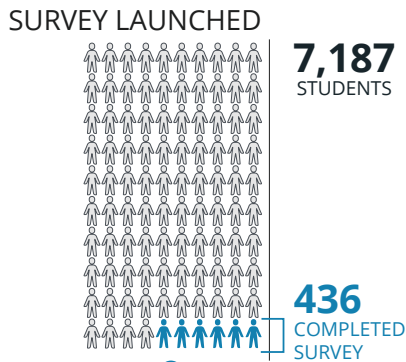


The findings of this research suggest that virtual communities can provide students with opportunities to have meaningful experiences with their peers. Creating spaces for students to connect is an actionable strategy for higher education institutions motivated to foster belonging and connectedness among students, and may have impactful long-term outcomes as well. The overall pattern of results suggests that **student participation in the RioConnect community, powered by InScribe, is associated with positive changes in overall sense of belonging and peer connectedness for students** at Rio Salado College.

CHANGES IN STUDENT BELONGING ACROSS RIOCONNECT USER GROUPS



FINAL SAMPLE SIZE COUNTS OF RIOCONNECT USER GROUPS.



Consistent Users = Students that reported participating in RioConnect at both Time 1 and Time 2; Late Adopters = Students that did not report participating in RioConnect at Time 1 but did at Time 2; Unengaged Users = Students that did not report participating in RioConnect at either Time 1 or Time 2

KEY TAKE-AWAYS:

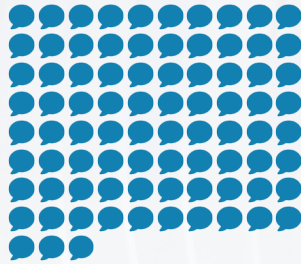
- Rio Salado College faced the challenge of connecting their online students who learn asynchronously and dispersed across the country.
- Rio Salado College collaborated with InScribe to build RioConnect: A virtual community “for students, by students” that provided a space for students to connect, offer support, ask questions, and share resources.
- CIN implemented a pre-post, quasi-experimental survey design to observe changes in student belonging for Rio Salado College students over the course of the six-week study period.
- RioConnect users reported significantly higher belonging and peer connectedness than students that never engaged with RioConnect.
- Virtual communities appear effective at promoting belonging in online learning environments. ■



RIOCONNECT HIGHLIGHTS

83

conversations started by students on RioConnect



56

requests by students for help on RioConnect



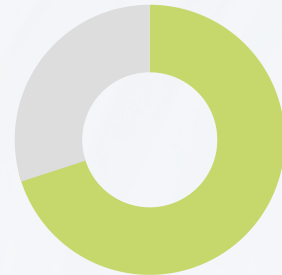
64%

of students would recommend RioConnect to other students looking to connect with peers



70%

of students said the InScribe platform was easy to use



College
Innovation
Network

THE COLLEGE INNOVATION NETWORK (CIN) at WGU Labs is a network of higher education institutions committed to addressing the core challenge of promoting belonging and engagement in the modern higher education environment. We're leveraging technology to build highly engaged learning communities from enrollment through graduation – and beyond. CIN supports educational institutions by identifying areas of need, implementing effective education technology for students, and demonstrating impact through research.

JOIN US AS WE BUILD LEARNING COMMUNITIES WHERE ALL STUDENTS BELONG.

Belonging is Central to the Student Experience in Higher Education

THE PROBLEM OF BELONGING IN ONLINE EDUCATION

Modern higher education is becoming increasingly dispersed and asynchronous: students can now complete their education from anywhere in the world, on their own schedule, with little interaction with peers. This trend is unlikely to change. But humans also have a fundamental need to belong within social groups. Historically, institutions of learning were designed around this fundamental need, from creating campuses to holding synchronous class meetings.

The pandemic elevated the importance of belonging and peer connections in virtual education environments. In American Campus' 2020 survey,¹ conducted at the height of online learning, 84% of students report missing socializing with peers. A 2021 survey by Inside Higher Ed² shows that 71% of students report that the lack of connection with peers and faculty is a significant challenge posed by online learning. Finally, a 2021 survey of students³ by the College Innovation Network (CIN) similarly shows that 69% of students feel less connected to their peers in online learning environments, and 56% feel that social activities are an important aspect of their college experience.

Given that online, dispersed learning in higher education is here to stay, institutions face a growing problem: **How can modern higher education institutions create opportunities for students to foster belonging and connectedness with their peers?**

This report shares the research results of the CIN partnership between Rio Salado College and InScribe to build a customized virtual community for online Rio Salado College students, called RioConnect, on the

InScribe platform. Rio Salado College and InScribe designed this platform to provide students with a virtual place to ask questions, share resources, and provide support. We found that participation in the RioConnect virtual community was associated with a greater sense of belonging and greater peer connectedness for students across the study period.

A 2021 survey of students by the College Innovation Network (CIN) shows that

69% OF STUDENTS

feel less connected to their peers in online learning environments

THE HUMAN NEED TO BELONG IN SOCIAL GROUPS

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for rapid, near universal transition to online education, causing the emergence of new priorities for college leaders. In 2021, CIN brought together dozens of higher education leaders across the country to identify the most pressing areas of focus for the upcoming year. Student belonging and engagement came out as the top strategic priorities⁴ in the years ahead for both online and campus-based institutions alike.

As online and hybrid learning options become more common and the college campus expands into virtual spaces, institutions must be more intentional in finding and adopting solutions that focus on fostering student belonging.

CONCEPTUAL DIAGRAM OF CORE COMPONENTS OF BELONGING.

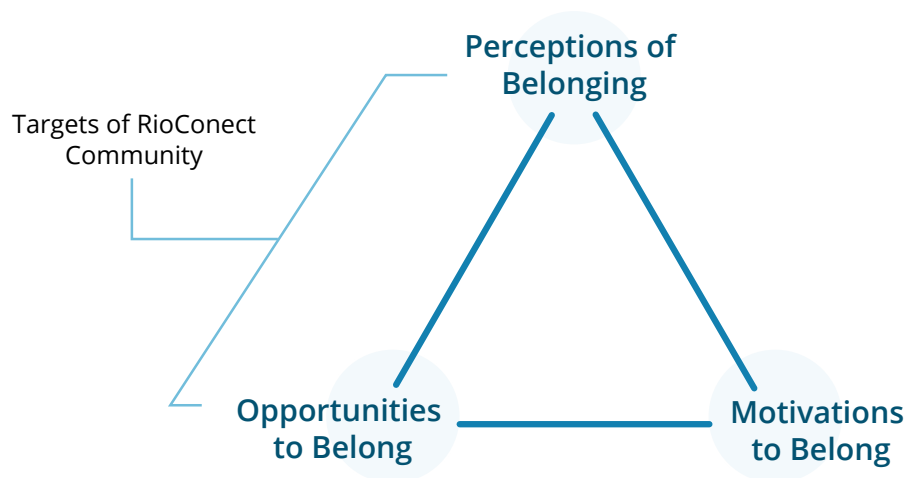


Figure 1

Social scientists often use the term *belonging* to refer to the fundamental human motivation to form meaningful connections with people.⁵ There are three core components⁶ to belonging (see **Figure 1**). *Motivations to belong* refers to how important and to what extent social connections matter to an individual. *Opportunities to belong* refers to the spaces available for belonging and connections to be fostered. And *perceptions of belonging* refers to an individual's thoughts and feelings about their belonging experiences.

Research consistently shows benefits of improving students' sense of belonging. For example, one broad-access university⁷ found that underrepresented and underserved students who took part in a belonging intervention had greater academic persistence over two years as a result of increased belonging. Other studies⁸ also show the potential for long-term positive effects up to a decade later.

Fostering belonging is particularly important for students at community colleges, who report lower belonging than students at 4-year colleges; and for students at 4-year institutions who are first-generation or from underrepresented groups, as these student populations are more likely to report lower belonging⁹ in addition to experiencing other barriers to graduating. Overall, research from nationally representative student

samples show that greater belonging is positively linked with persistence and engagement in college.⁹

RIO SALADO COLLEGE USES INSCRIBE TO GIVE STUDENTS QUICK ACCESS TO RESOURCES AND PEER SUPPORT

Rio Salado College, located in Tempe, Arizona, is a leader in online education, supporting diverse learners across a variety of credential and degree programs. With weekly start dates and flexible scheduling, students are empowered to accomplish their educational goals in the way that fits into their lives.

Although students choose online education because of the personalization and flexibility, it can be a struggle for students socially. Getting quick access to resources when needed, which could be late at night or on weekends when working students are studying, and feeling like they are not alone in their education journey are important to students' overall college experience.

Rio Salado College addressed these problems by partnering with InScribe to create RioConnect in Summer 2021 – a custom designed virtual community to provide students a space to engage in qualitatively rich discussion around resources and tips to succeed in a self-paced, high-flex online learning environment. The RioConnect community was built with the exclusive



intention to provide online students at Rio Salado College a space to connect, share resources, and learn from one another – on their schedule.

InScribe provides a highly-customizable virtual community platform that can be designed to meet the engagement and connection needs of its users. Rio Salado College and InScribe worked collaboratively to customize the RioConnect community to best serve students.

First, the Rio Salado College project team involved students in the design process to get a clear understanding of the resources they needed to succeed, and what topics the community should initially focus on.

Second, the project team was committed to making RioConnect a true student space, and allowed student leaders to take the reins in the early weeks of the community formation, with little oversight from staff.

Third, the project team created a coordinated awareness campaign that included pre-registering students to ensure quick and easy access to RioConnect.

RioConnect was intentionally built to be “for students, by students.” By keeping the student community experience as central, Rio Salado College and InScribe were able to successfully implement technology to increase the sense of belonging felt by students who engaged with their peers on the RioConnect platform. ■

Evaluating the Impact of RioConnect on Student Belonging

STUDY DESIGN TO EVALUATE CHANGE OVER TIME

Rio Salado College rolled out RioConnect to all online students in late August of 2021 after weeks of intensive community design with student leaders at the college. Because RioConnect was made available to all online students we could not randomize participation. We therefore implemented a quasi-experimental, pre-post research design to evaluate changes in students' sense of belonging and connectedness over a six-week period in the fall of 2021. A timeline of research events is shown in **Figure 2**.

Our research design takes advantage of natural variation in student uptake of RioConnect: Some students are highly motivated to participate in new opportunities and began participating in RioConnect within the first weeks



of the community's launch. Other students were late adopters, joining in on RioConnect several weeks after launch. Other students were not particularly motivated to engage and never joined RioConnect during the study period. We leveraged these differences and sent out baseline surveys to all eligible RioConnect students, whether they were using RioConnect or not, and then followed up with those students six weeks later. This allowed us to observe changes in belonging and peer connectedness over time as a result of participation in the RioConnect community.

TIMELINE OF RESEARCH EVENTS: AUGUST - NOVEMBER 2021

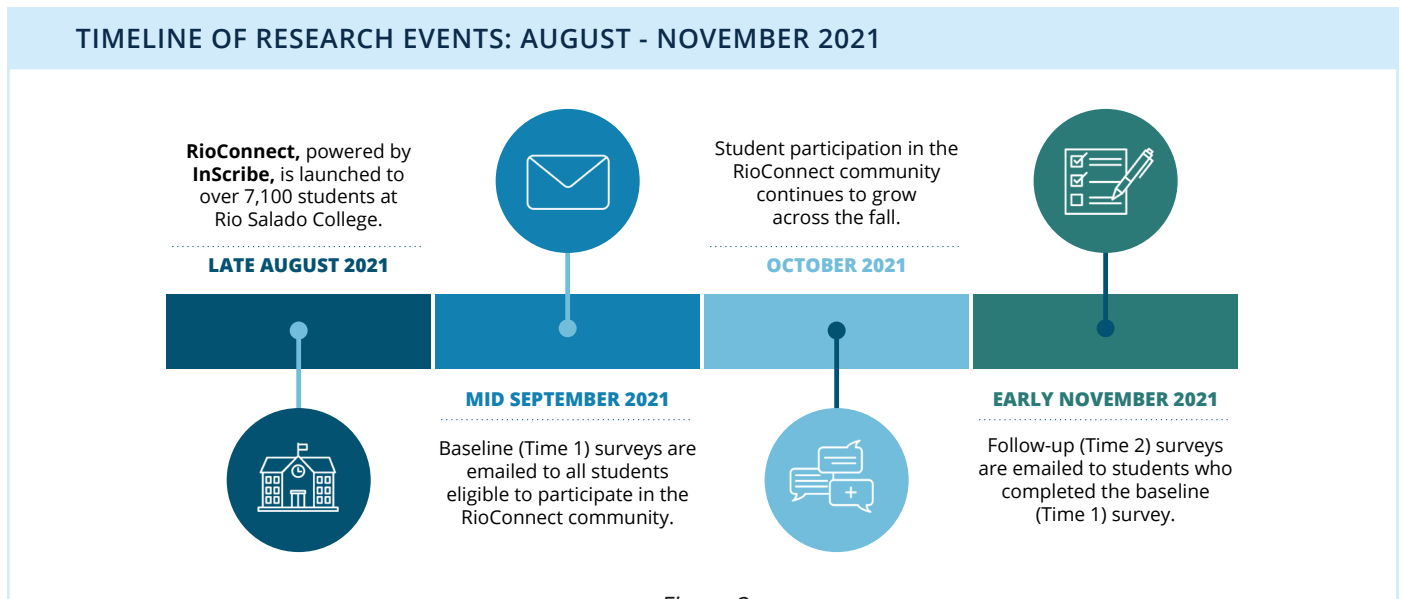


Figure 2

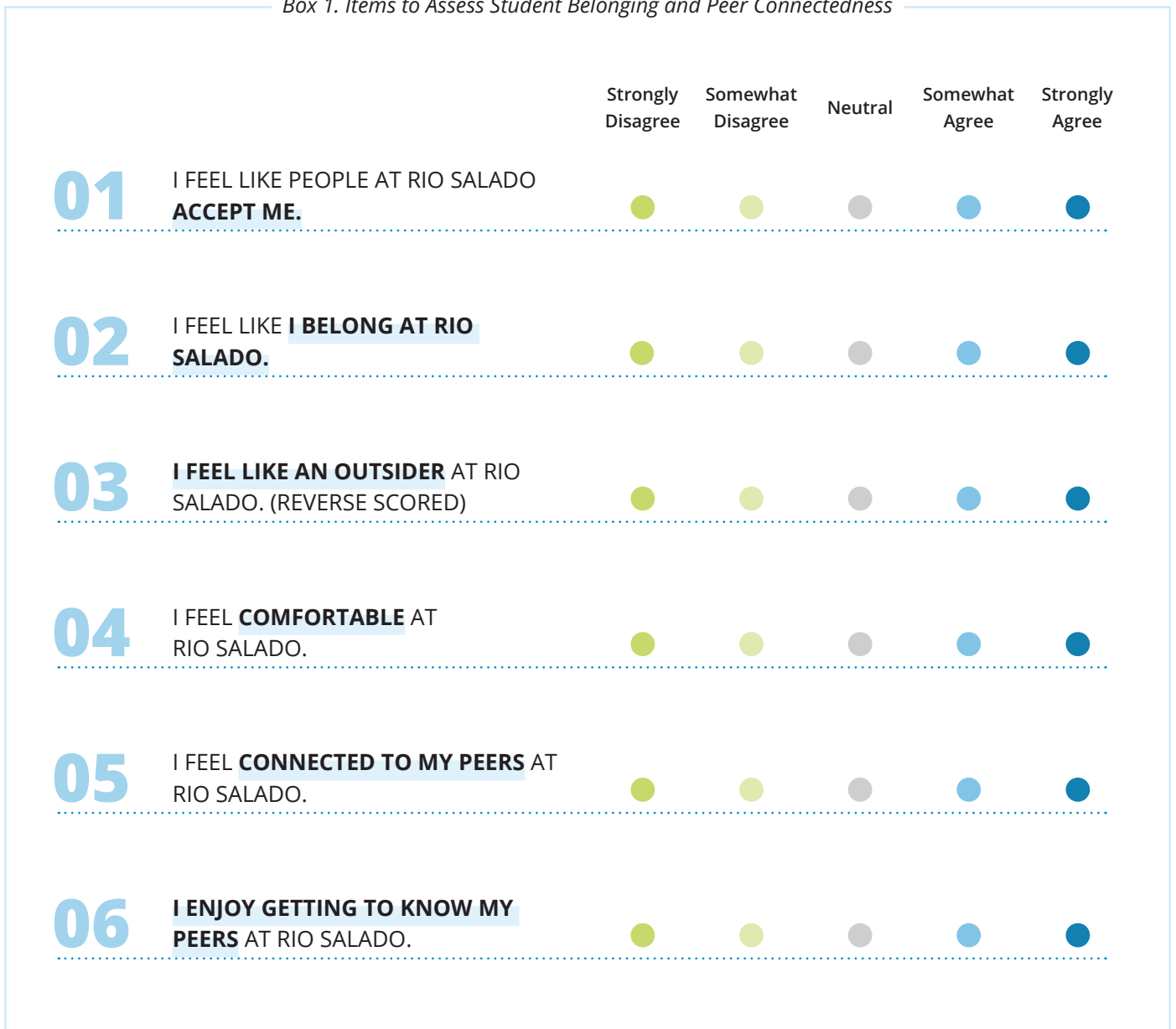
We sent baseline surveys to 7,100+ online students at Rio Salado College that were eligible to participate in the RioConnect community. A total of 436 students completed at least one question on the baseline survey, in which students responded to six items about belonging and peer connectedness (see **Box 1**), and seven items about college support and satisfaction (see **Appendix**).

Students were then asked to indicate whether they were familiar with the RioConnect community and whether they had visited the RioConnect community at least once. Forty-two percent of respondents at Time 1 reported visiting the RioConnect community at

least once and then proceeded to respond to 17 items that assessed their engagement and satisfaction with RioConnect, and their user experience with the InScribe platform. The 58% of students that did not report visiting RioConnect did not complete the 17 community specific questions, and were exited from the survey.

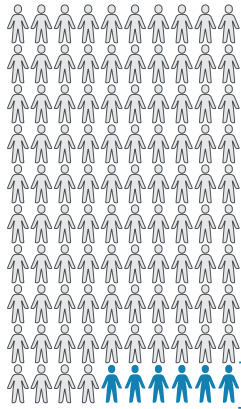
We sent follow-up surveys to the 436 baseline survey respondents six weeks later. Two hundred fifty-four students completed at least one question on the follow-up survey. The follow-up survey was identical to the baseline survey. Because some students began participating in RioConnect after the baseline survey (the target “late adopters” user group), some stopped

Box 1. Items to Assess Student Belonging and Peer Connectedness



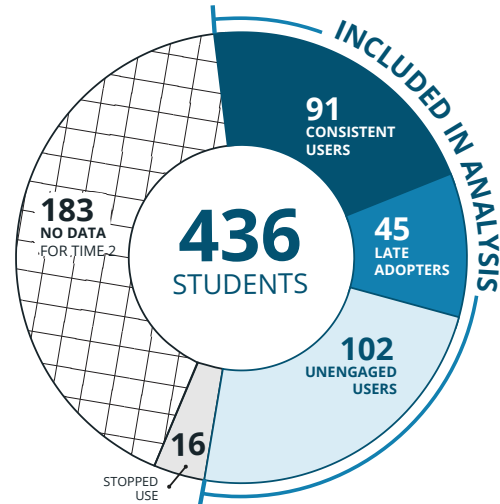
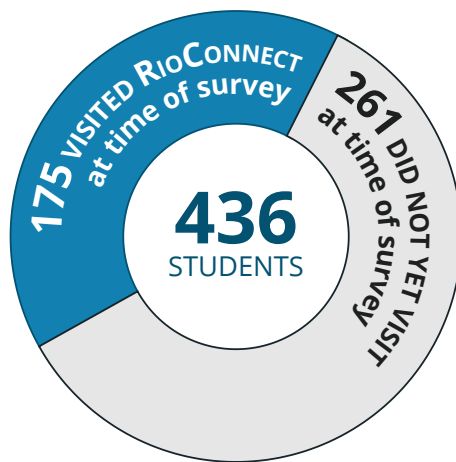
FINAL SAMPLE SIZE COUNTS OF RIOCONNECT USER GROUPS.

SURVEY LAUNCHED



7,187
STUDENTS

436
COMPLETED
SURVEY



Flow of students through the study (left) with final sample size counts of RioConnect user groups (right); Stopped Use group was too small to make accurate comparisons and were dropped from analyses reported below.

Figure 3

participating in RioConnect after the baseline survey, and some students did not complete the follow up survey, students were sorted into five user groups (see [Figure 3](#)):

- Students that reported participating in RioConnect at both Time 1 and Time 2 → **Consistent Users**
- Students that did not report participating in RioConnect at Time 1 but did at Time 2 → **Late Adopters**
- Students that did not report participating in RioConnect at either Time 1 or Time 2 → **Unengaged Users**
- Students that reported participating in RioConnect at Time 1 but not at Time 2 → stopped use
- Students that did not complete the follow up survey → no Time 2 data

PARTICIPATING RIOCONNECT STUDENTS REPORT HIGHER BELONGING AND GREATER PEER CONNECTEDNESS ACROSS SIX-WEEK STUDY

Our analyses show that students who engaged with RioConnect reported greater belonging than unengaged users, and greater peer connectedness over the course of the six-week study period. We measured students' self-reported belongingness and peer connectedness *over time* (comparing Time 1 responses to Time 2 responses within user groups); and *between user groups* (comparing responses across user groups at Time 1 and across user groups at Time 2) to evaluate the impact of RioConnect participation.

The results for overall belonging (a mean composite of the six belonging items; see [Box 1](#)) are displayed in [Figure 4](#) with significance testing for the corresponding comparisons summarized in [Table 1](#).

At Time 1, shortly after the RioConnect community launched, there is a significant difference in reported belonging for the consistent users compared to the unengaged users. This baseline difference between students who opted-in to RioConnect suggests that highly engaged students may be more likely to participate in RioConnect. The late adopters had belonging scores that fell between the consistent users and unengaged users, and were not significantly different from either group.

The reported changes in belonging from Time 1 to Time 2 within the user groups best show how RioConnect is associated with student belonging during the six-week study period. Late adopter students had significant increases in overall belonging from Time 1 to Time 2 when they began participating in the RioConnect community. Although the consistent users also experienced a mean average increase in reported belonging from Time 1 to Time 2, the effect was not statistically significant. The unengaged users did not experience a significant change in reported belonging from Time 1 to Time 2.

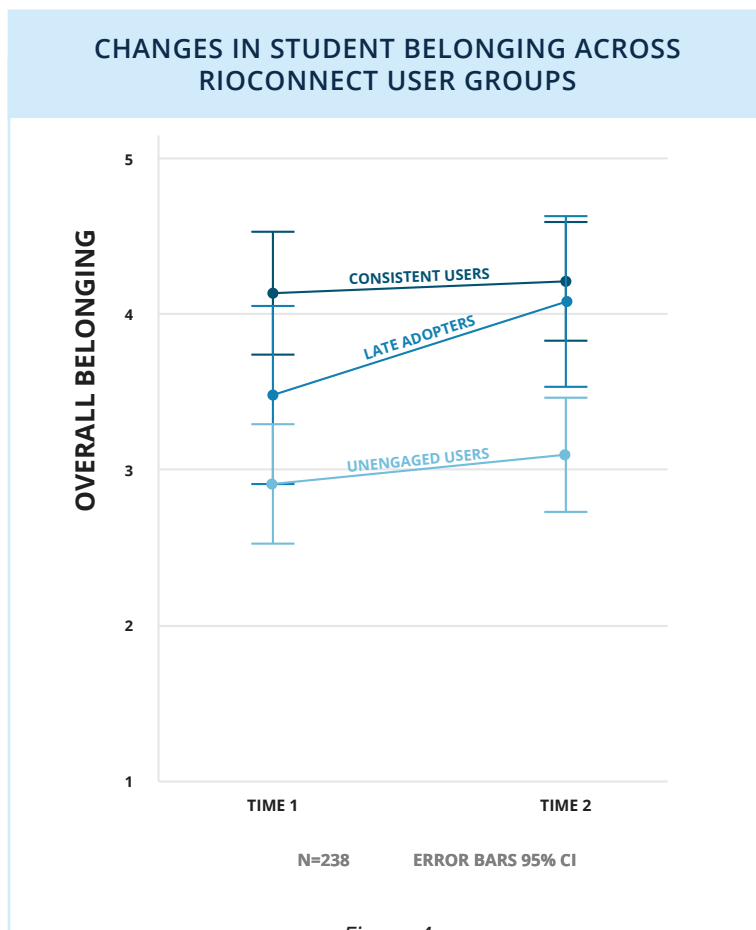


Figure 4

Table 1. Within and between group comparisons for belonging and peer connectedness

OVERALL BELONGING COMPARISONS					
Differences in Time 1 and Time 2 Measures of Belonging Within User Groups		Differences in Belonging Across User Groups at Time 1 and at Time 2			
USER GROUP	SIGNIFICANT CHANGE	THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN...	... AND	T1 SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE	T2 SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE
Consistent Users	No	Consistent Users	Late Adopters	No	No
			Unengaged	Yes (consistent users higher)	Yes (consistent users higher)
Late Adopters	Yes (increased over time)	Late Adopters	Consistent	No	No
Unengaged	No		Unengaged	No	Yes (late adopters higher)

Table 1 (cont). Within and between group comparisons for belonging and peer connectedness

PEER CONNECTEDNESS COMPARISONS					
Differences in Time 1 and Time 2 Measures of Peer Connectedness Within User Groups		Differences in Peer Connectedness Across User Groups at Time 1 and at Time 2			
USER GROUP	SIGNIFICANT CHANGE	THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN...	... AND	T1 SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE	T2 SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE
Consistent Users	Yes (increased over time)	Consistent Users	Late Adopters	No	No
			Unengaged	Yes (consistent users higher)	Yes (consistent users higher)
Late Adopters	Yes (increased over time)	Late Adopters	Consistent	No	No
Unengaged	No		Unengaged	No	Yes (late adopters higher)

By Time 2, the late adopters’ sense of belonging had significantly increased to be equal to that of the consistent users, with both groups reporting significantly greater sense of belonging than the unengaged users.

Students’ reported peer connectedness (a mean average of items 5 and 6 in **Box 1**) shows the same pattern of results, which are displayed in **Figure 5** with significance testing for the corresponding comparisons summarized in **Table 1**.

Consistent RioConnect users reported significantly greater peer connectedness from Time 1 to Time 2. Late adopters also show a significant increase in peer connectedness from Time 1 to Time 2. By the end of the study period at Time 2, consistent users and late adopters both reported significantly higher peer connectedness than the unengaged users group.

Our data do show that there are initial differences in student belonging for those who chose to opt-in to RioConnect early versus those

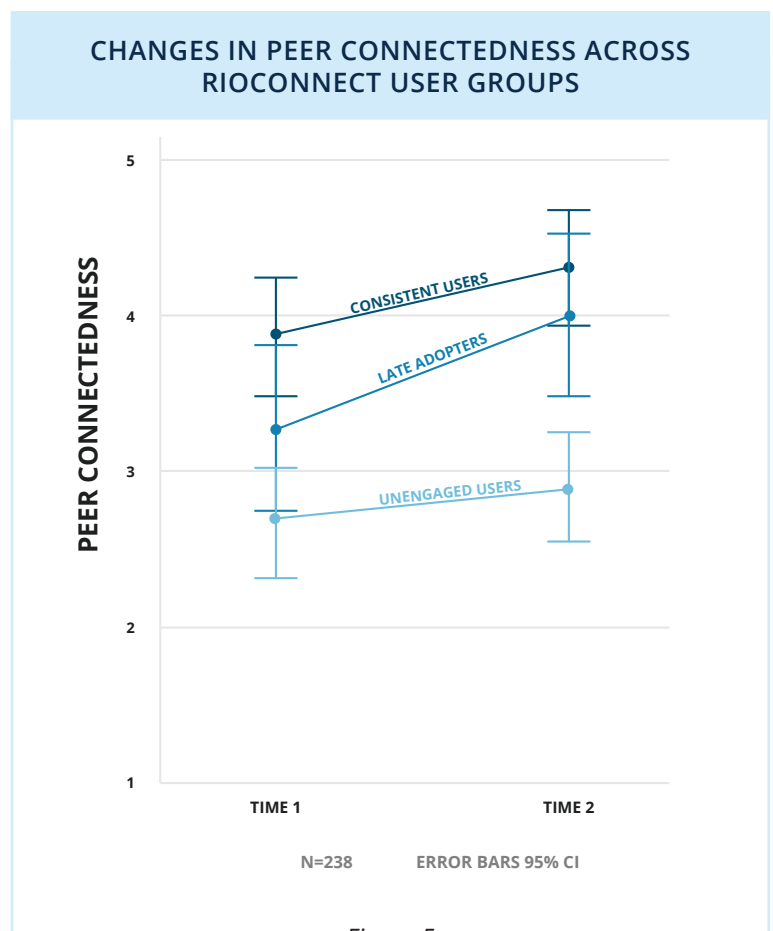


Figure 5

that chose to never participate. The students most likely to participate in RioConnect were those that already had a relatively stronger sense of belonging. Students with a lower sense of belonging were less likely to participate and these students continued to show the lowest sense of belonging and connectedness throughout the study period.

A challenge facing higher education leaders, then, is how to attract the students that could most benefit from supportive peer communities—students with the lowest baseline sense of belonging. University leaders need to build the platforms for connections to flourish but also be intentional about bringing those students who are least likely to engage into the platform.

We did not collect data about why students had not engaged with the platform. Students may not participate because they are not aware of the opportunity to do so. Converting early adopters into champions and

promoters of the community could be an effective method to attract the students that could be most positively impacted by greater peer connection and support.

But, because students with the lowest belonging were less likely to participate in RioConnect it may be that students are not engaging due to lack of motivation or ability to do so. Students may also not see the benefit of engaging. Clear communication of how tools can benefit students may increase motivations to participate.

Student reports of what they liked most about RioConnect provides insight about the perceived benefits of the virtual community (see [Figure 6](#)). When student users were asked what they liked most about the RioConnect community, 42% of students mentioned the benefit of getting to know their peers. Students particularly enjoyed being able to connect with students in different programs.

THEMES OF USERS' OPEN ENDED RESPONSES WHEN ASKED WHAT THEY LIKED MOST ABOUT RIOCONNECT; TIME 1 N = 142, TIME 2 N = 116

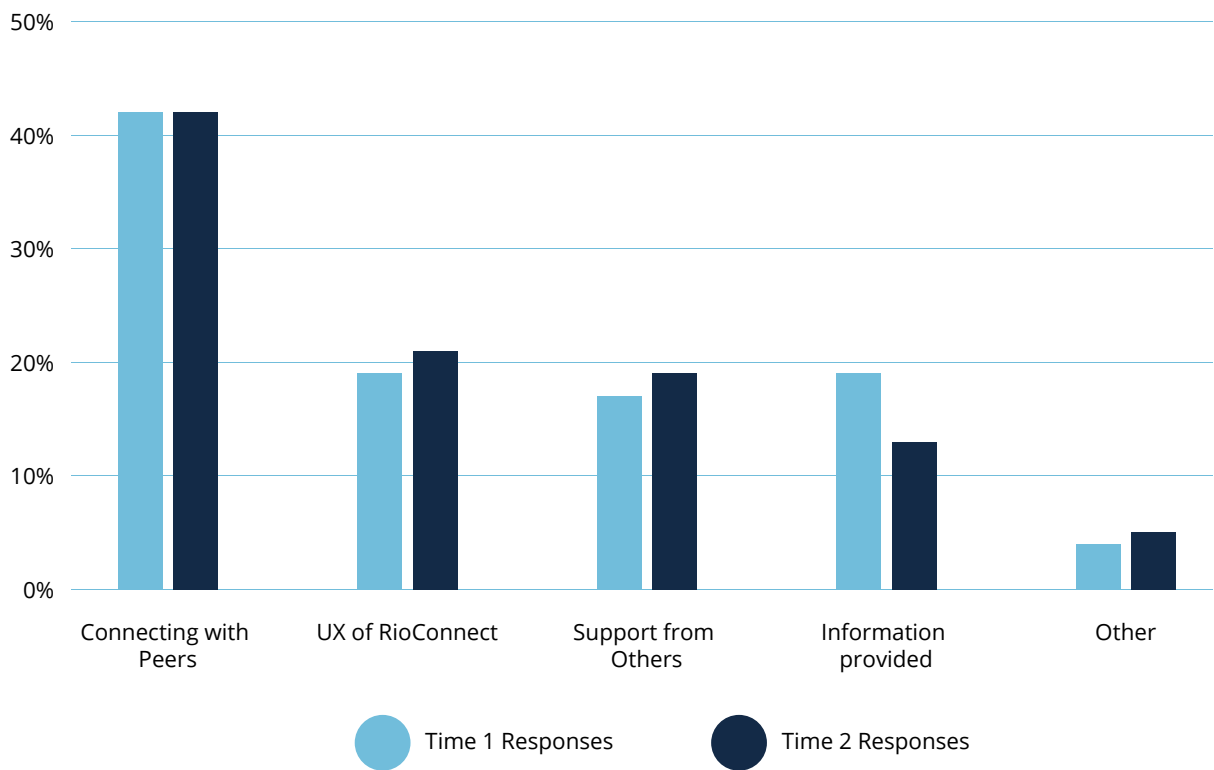


Figure 6

About 20% of students noted that the support they received from other students was a positive feature of the RioConnect Community. “Hearing about other students’ struggles with going to school and sharing that experience, knowing I’m not alone,” one student shared. The open access of RioConnect for all Rio Salado students was particularly valuable to students and provided the opportunity to share experiences with one another and form genuine connections with others like them.

“Hearing about other students’ struggles with going to school and sharing that experience, knowing

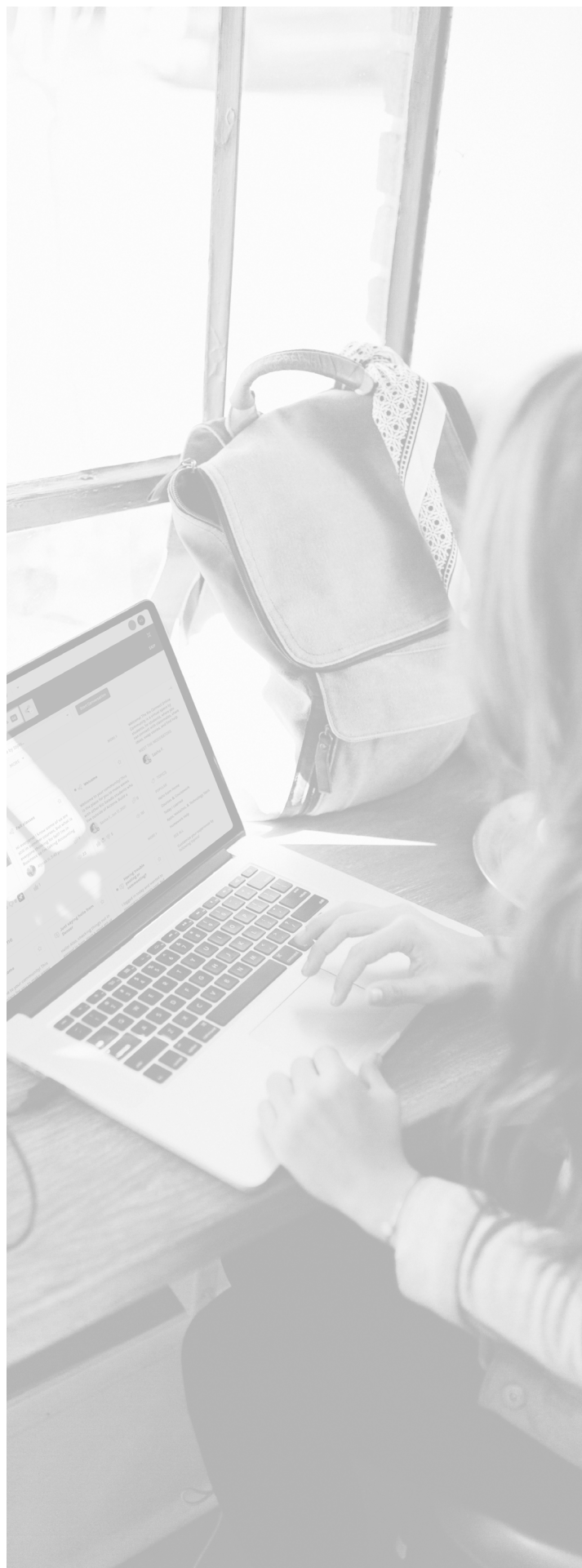
I’M NOT ALONE.”

- Rio Salado Student

The peer-to-peer information sharing among students is particularly beneficial. Not only do students make connections, but they learn from each other. “[RioConnect] helps me connect to students like me who I would not connect with otherwise. Sometimes I have questions or experiences that I need assistance or guidance with and it is nice to have a forum to reach out to,” one student shared. Students are experts of their experience. By providing a well-designed forum for rich, qualitative discussion, students form connections, get support, and share information.

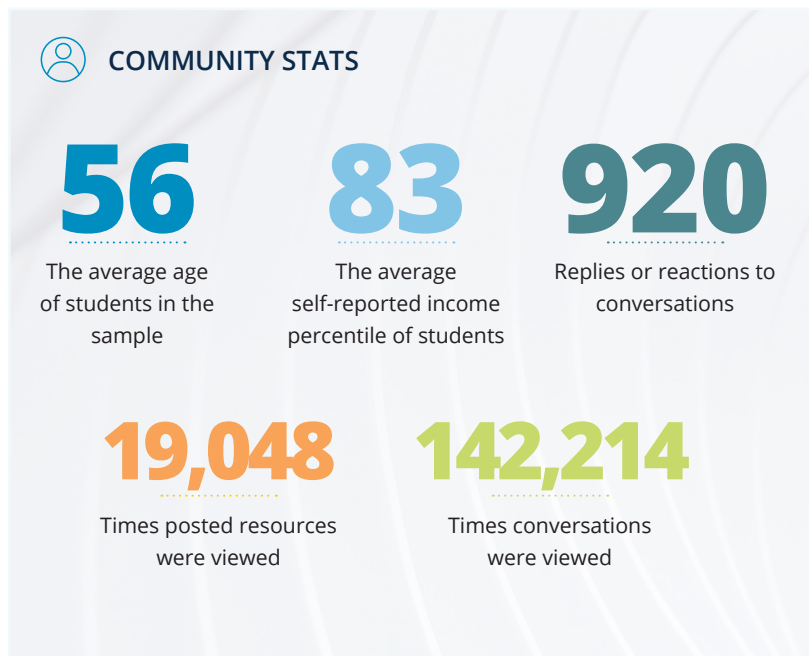
The findings of this research suggest that virtual communities can provide students with opportunities to have meaningful experiences with their peers. Creating spaces for students to connect is an actionable strategy for higher education institutions motivated to foster belonging and connectedness among students, and may have impactful long-term outcomes as well. Previous research⁹ shows positive long term benefits of belonging interventions on student persistence and college engagement, demonstrating the value of peer connections for students.

The overall pattern of results suggests that **student participation in the RioConnect community, powered by InScribe, is associated with positive changes in overall sense of belonging and peer connectedness for students** at Rio Salado College. ■

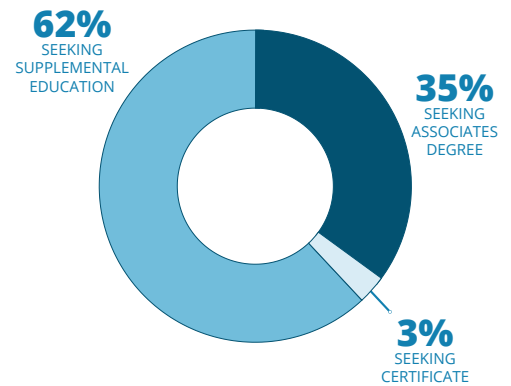


THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE ON RIOCONNECT

RioConnect at Rio Salado College is a rich, dynamic, and diverse community. Here’s what the RioConnect community looks like, by the numbers.

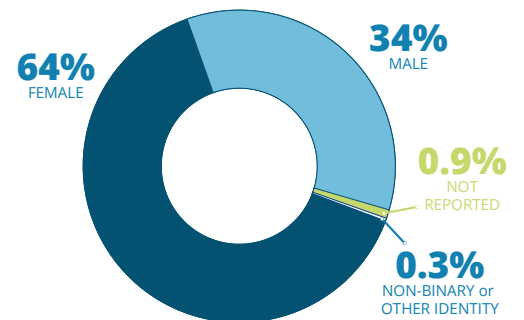


EDUCATION INTENTION



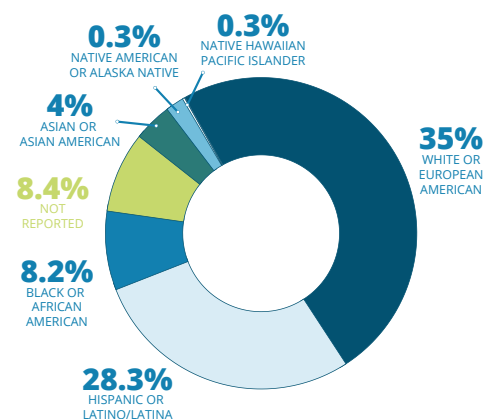
*numbers based on data from Rio Salado College

GENDER IDENTITY



*numbers based on data from Rio Salado College

RACE/ETHNICITY



*numbers based on data from Rio Salado College

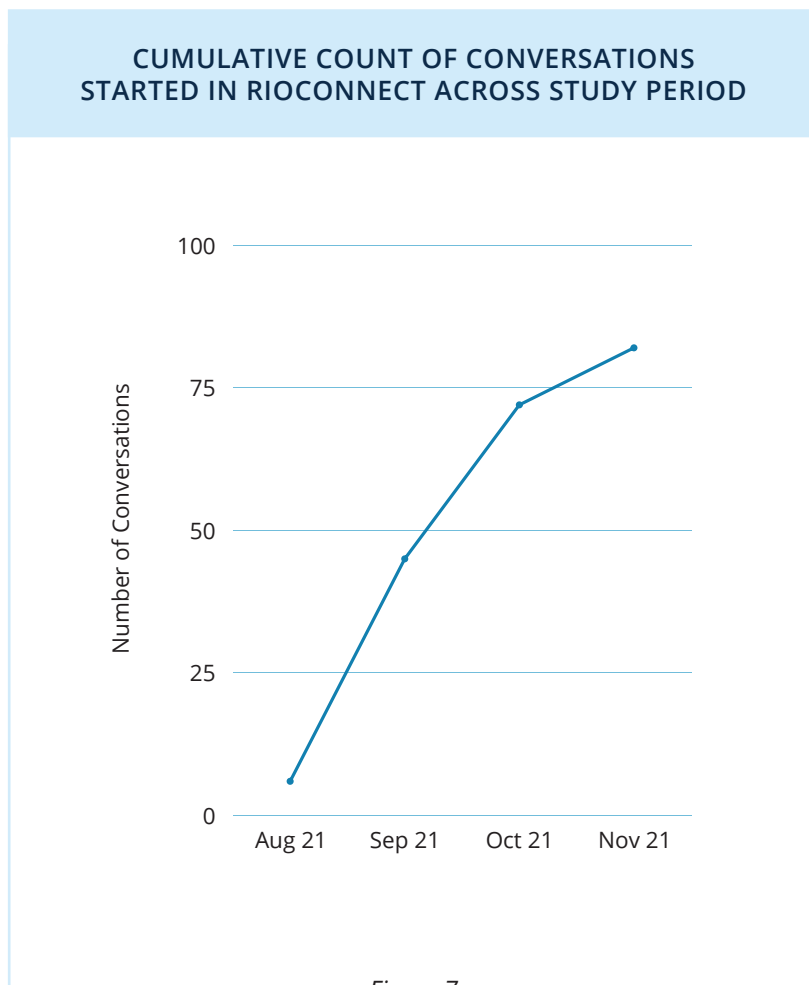
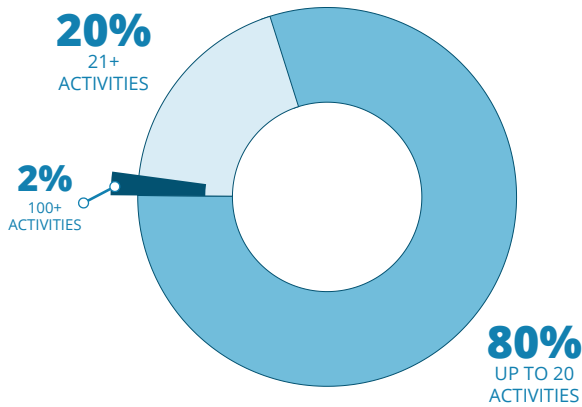


Figure 7

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Participation data from InScribe (see [Figure 8](#)) shows that students participated in an average of 20 activities during the study period (see [Box 2](#) for Activities). Across the study period:

- 80% of RioConnect students participated in up to 20 activities.
- 20% of RioConnect students participated in more than 20 activities.
- 2% of students were highly engaged and participated in 100+ activities.



Box 2. InScribe Activities

- **VIEWING POSTED RESOURCES**
- **VIEWING QUESTIONS FROM OTHER STUDENTS**
- **POSTING QUESTIONS FOR OTHER STUDENTS**
- **ANSWERING QUESTIONS FROM OTHER STUDENTS**
- **SHARING GENERAL POSTS TO OTHER STUDENTS**
- **VIEWING POSTS FROM OTHER STUDENTS**
- **REPLYING TO OTHER STUDENTS' POSTS**
- **REACTING TO POSTS**

DISTRIBUTION OF RIOCONNECT ACTIVITIES BY STUDENT COUNT; N = 7,960

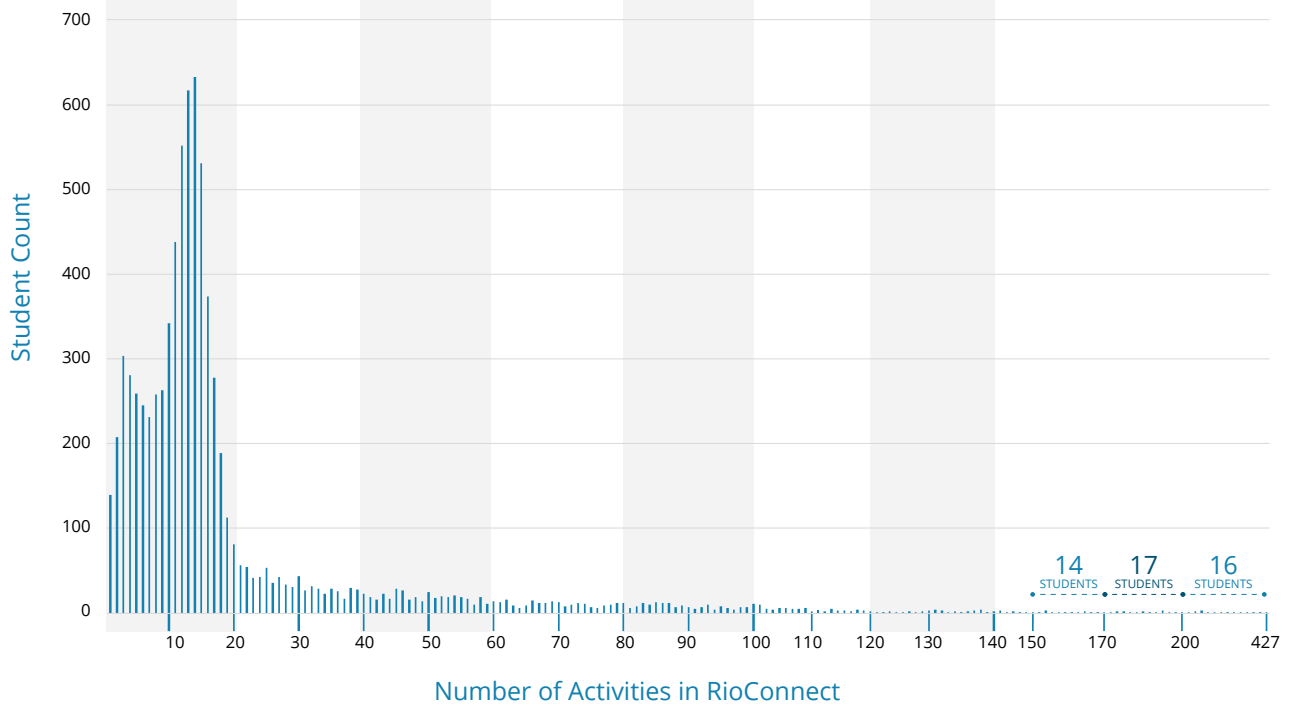


Figure 8

STUDENTS GIVE HIGH PRAISE TO THE USER EXPERIENCE OF INSCRIBE

RioConnect is built on the InScribe platform. InScribe is a highly customizable and engaging virtual community. **Figure 9** shows what RioConnect students had to say about their user experience on the platform. ■

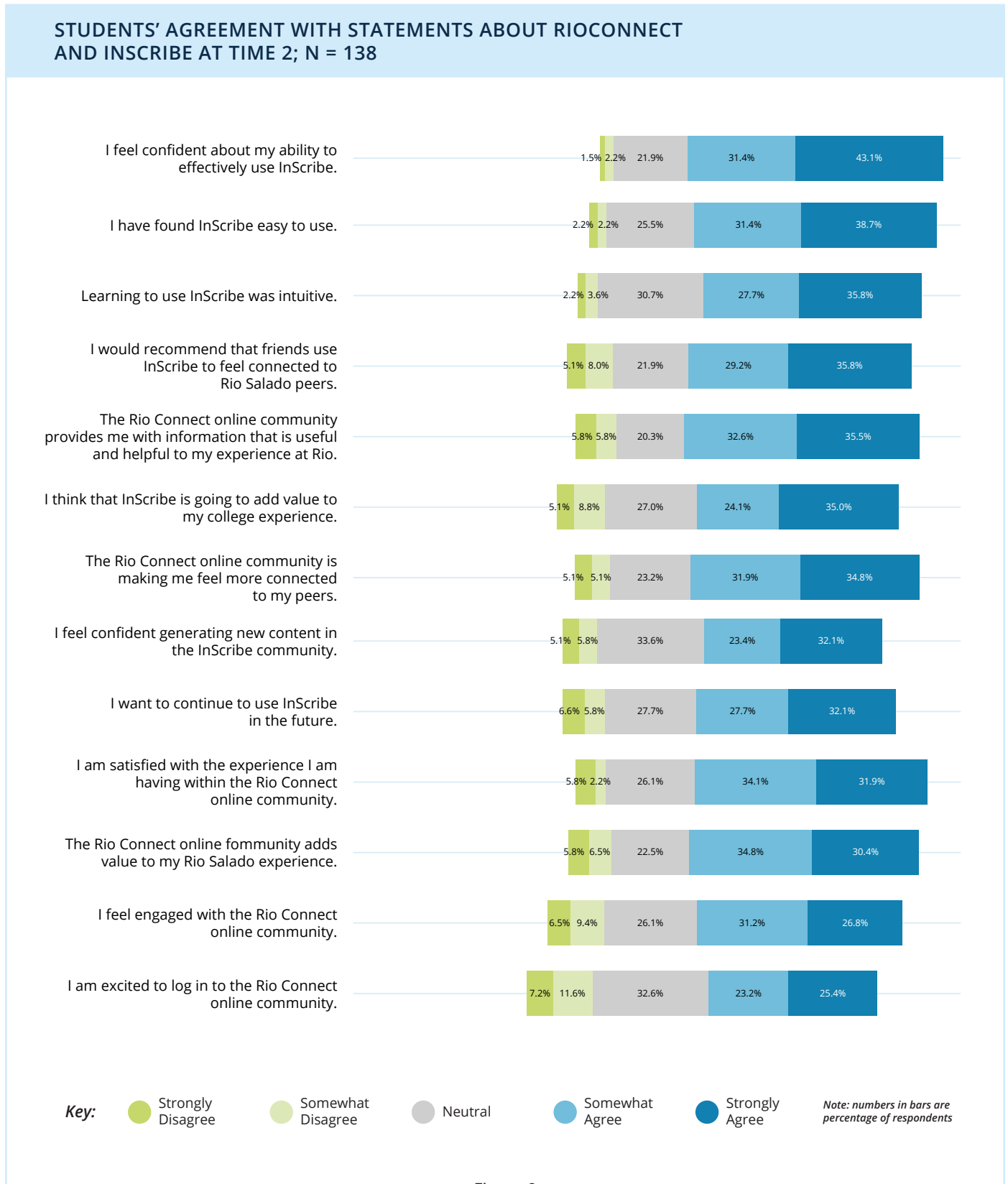


Figure 9

Strategies for Building Virtual Communities to Promote Student Belonging

College campuses are more dispersed than ever before. And online learning has caused a reconceptualization of the college campus. New high-flex learning environments, like those offered by Rio Salado College, provide empowering options for students, but they also come with the challenge of connecting online students in meaningful ways.

So, how can higher education leaders ensure a cohesive campus community where students from across the nation are able to engage in qualitatively rich interactions?

By implementing products like InScribe that can be customized to address the unique needs of students at an institution, higher education leaders can create

opportunities for genuine connection that can lead to greater sense of belonging. This look at Rio Salado College's efforts to build a virtual community for online students suggests that EdTech can help students to build a sense of belonging and connection to their peers.

We spoke with Janelle Elias, Vice President of Strategy and Advancement at Rio Salado College, and Sasha Flores, Project Manager for Strategic Initiatives at Rio Salado College about what advice they had for other administrators who want to build virtual communities for their students.

Below are five actionable strategies higher education leaders can adopt to create impactful virtual communities for their students. ■



INVOLVE STUDENT LEADERS

Because the goal of building virtual communities for students is to create a space for students, it is crucial to get students involved early to ensure it's optimized for them. Rio Salado College leveraged peer-to-peer influence by recruiting student leaders at the college to help design and promote the RioConnect community.

Communities are built from authentic engagement from their users – in this case, students – rather than from top-down administrator direction. By having these students lead within the community by starting conversations and sharing resources, they set a positive example of engagement for other students, in addition to encouraging participation from other students.



ADD VALUE TO STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE

Creating new spaces that students want to use requires adding genuine value to their student experience – what is new about this opportunity that students don't currently have access to?

Because of the high-flex, dispersed learning environment of Rio Salado College, students had limited means to connect with their peers across programs. The RioConnect virtual community directly solved this problem by easily connecting all students at the college.

The virtual community was also easily accessible 24/7. Put differently, RioConnect conformed to students' schedule so they could get help, ask questions, and share their story when it was convenient for them – something that available options didn't afford.



GET THE WORD OUT

Building authentic communities can take time, but students can't participate if they don't know that the community exists. Promoting spaces dedicated for students takes consistent effort by administration. Rio Salado College used two primary strategies to get the word out. First, they created dedicated email campaigns to advertise the RioConnect community directly to students, and second, students were auto-enrolled into the community to reduce access barriers to joining.

The project team also focused on consistent branding of the virtual community, ensuring that the community was advertised as a dedicated space for students with little involvement of staff and faculty. Just like a traditional on campus student union that is a place for students to connect and engage with one another, the RioConnect community was designed to be similar – and communicating that vision with students is crucial.



DEDICATED STAFF AND STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

As is clear from the above points, virtual communities need nurturing to thrive long-term and have the greatest impact on students. A long-term strategic plan with support of college leaders is necessary to ensure the viability and value-add of virtual communities.

Having dedicated staff, especially a project manager, to oversee and manage the implementation, building, and maintenance of the virtual community is a must. But to get dedicated staff and other resources to build and maintain the community takes buy-in from across the college. One way to do this is to align the need for virtual communities to a core strategic initiative of the college. By making clear how virtual student communities serve broader goals of the college can ensure teams have the resources they need to provide these spaces to promote belonging among their students.



ITERATE TO CONTINUOUSLY IMPROVE

Students' needs are constantly evolving. The institutions that support them must, too. When building the RioConnect community, college leaders turned to students to help design and build their community.

Virtual communities are not static, they rely on participants' continued involvement and administrators' continued iteration. Interview students about their experience and needs, gather their feedback regularly, and make adjustments as needed. Build in multiple touch points with students across the year to ensure that the community continues to serve them. And, build in evaluation plans to assess the impact of the community on the student experience.

The Importance of Student Belonging on the Modern Campus

Students are speaking out: they want peer connections, a sense of community, and support across their educational journey^{1,2}. This is unsurprising given that learning is a social process enhanced by peers, instructors, and mentors.

Students also want high-flex learning options³. The challenge facing higher education now is how to create virtual communities compatible with modern learning environments that promote belonging and connectedness among peers. Just as education technology is creating new learning environments, so too, can education technology create spaces for students

to build authentic connections with their peers and develop a sense of belonging within their institution.

The research results shared in this report show how an education technology product designed for community building can promote student belonging and peer connectedness. The creation of a virtual community afforded students a new opportunity to share resources, offer support, and find others like them despite learning in an online, dispersed environment. Participation in RioConnect resulted in an increase in belonging and peer connectedness after just six weeks of engagement in the virtual community. ■

College Innovation Network

THE COLLEGE INNOVATION NETWORK (CIN) at WGU Labs is a network of higher education institutions committed to addressing the core challenge of promoting belonging and engagement in the modern higher education environment. We're leveraging technology to build highly engaged learning communities from enrollment through graduation – and beyond. CIN supports educational institutions by identifying areas of need, implementing effective education technology for students, and demonstrating impact through research

JOIN US AS WE BUILD LEARNING COMMUNITIES WHERE ALL STUDENTS BELONG.

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Appendix

All survey respondents also completed measures of perceptions of support and satisfaction with Rio Salado College. There were no significant changes over time or differences across user groups for these measures. The responses to these items are shown in Figures A1 and A2. ■

STUDENTS' AGREEMENT WITH STATEMENTS ABOUT INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT ITEMS AT TIME 1 AND TIME 2 AVERAGED ACROSS GROUPS; N = 238

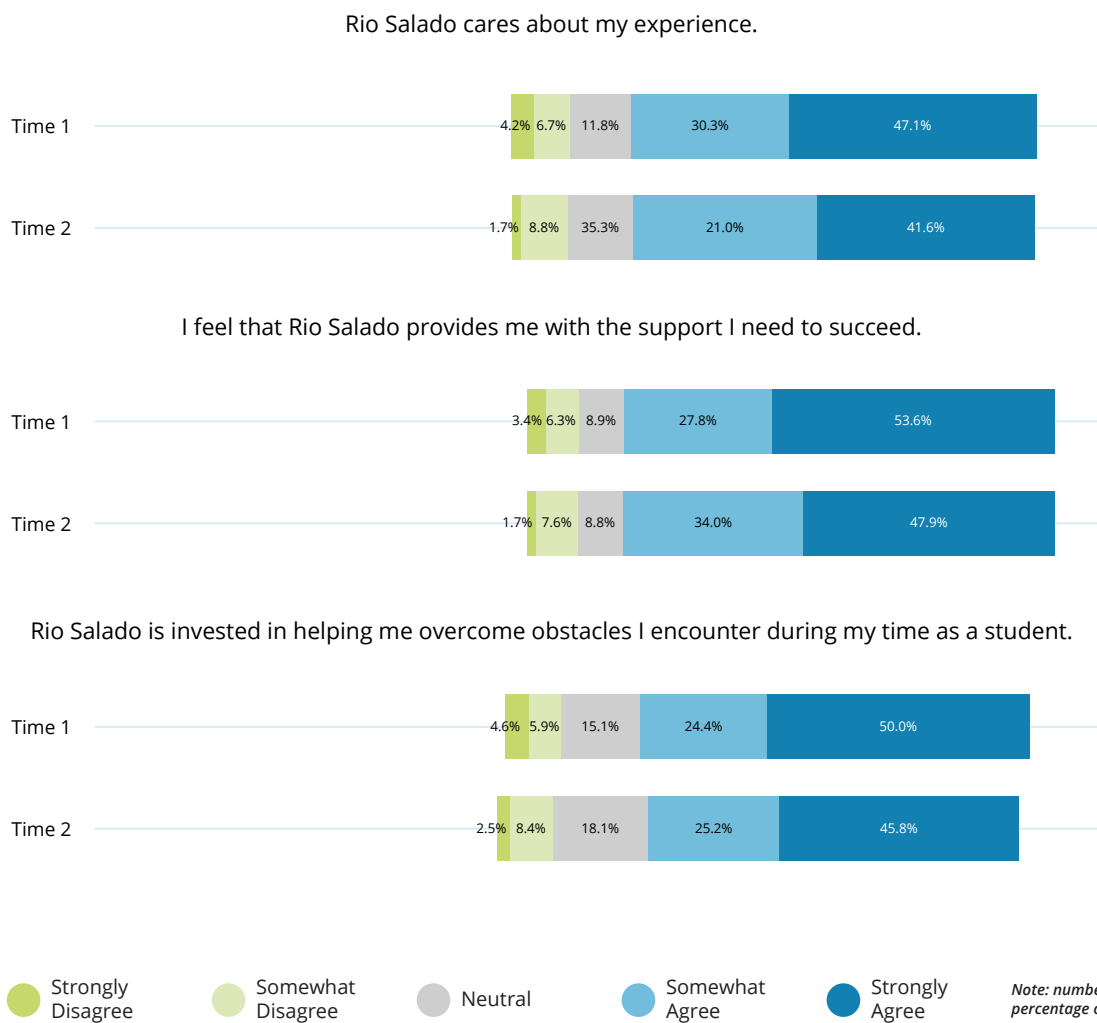


Figure A1

STUDENTS' AGREEMENT WITH STATEMENTS ABOUT INSTITUTIONAL SATISFACTION ITEMS AT TIME 1 AND TIME 2 AVERAGED ACROSS GROUPS; N = 238

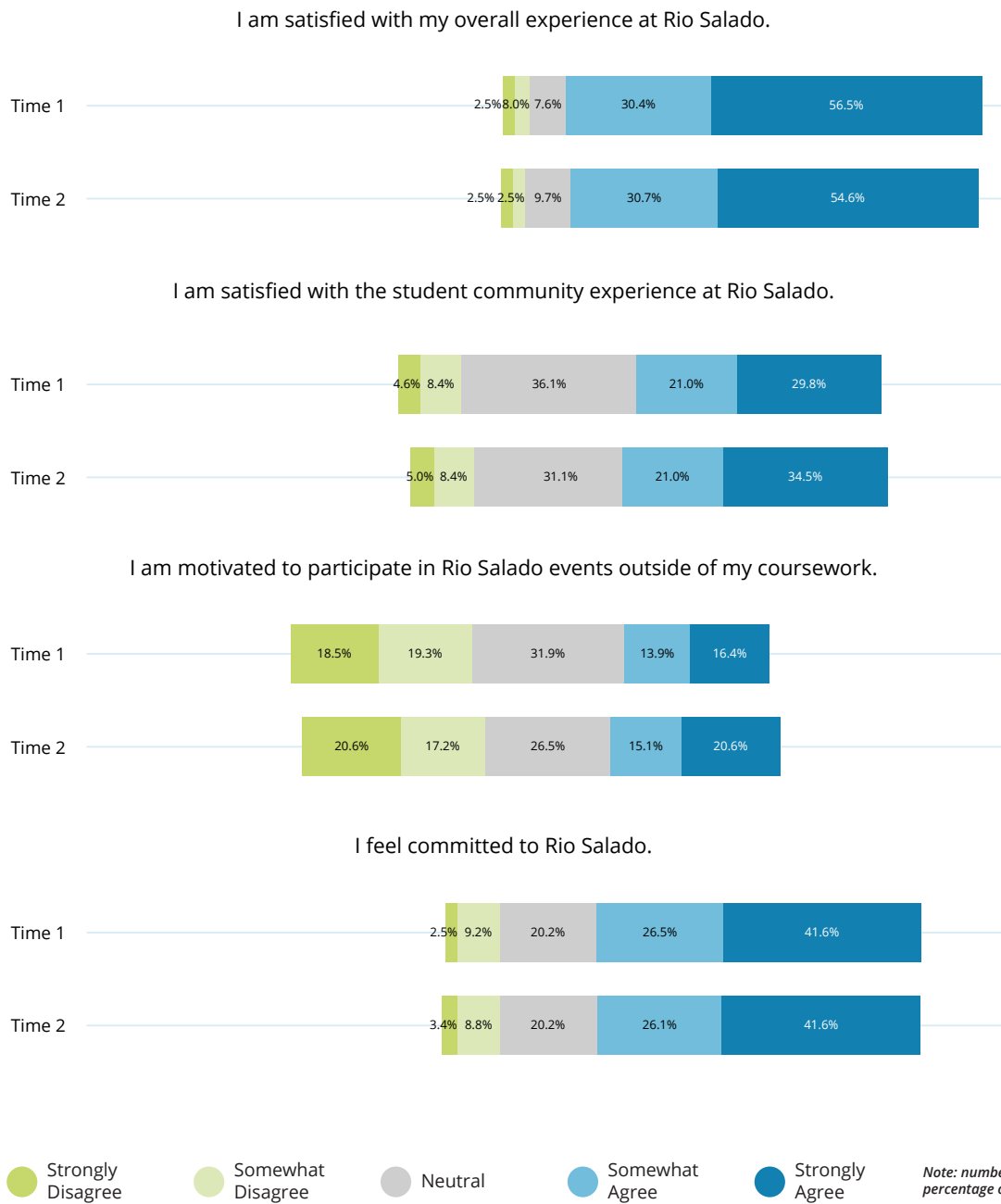


Figure A2



RIO SALADO COLLEGE

A MARICOPA COMMUNITY COLLEGE



College
Innovation
Network

RIO SALADO COLLEGE is one of ten Maricopa Community Colleges and one of the largest online public community colleges in the nation, serving nearly 40,000 students annually with more than 28,000 online in 50 states and internationally. Founded in 1978 and headquartered in Tempe, Arizona, Rio Salado offers 600+ online classes, 135+ degree and certificate programs and general education courses. The college also provides support for dual enrollment, military and incarcerated students and serves as the largest provider of adult education in Arizona. Learn more about Rio Salado College at: <https://www.riosalado.edu/>

INSCRIBE is a digital student support platform that leverages the power of community and artificial intelligence to connect students with the answers, resources, and individuals they need to succeed. InScribe's digital communities cut across the traditional support silos in higher education, giving students a single place to turn when they need help—no matter the topic or time of day. Students benefit from on-demand, peer-to-peer, and student-to-expert collaboration that helps them feel more connected, increasing student engagement, satisfaction, and retention. Learn more about InScribe at: www.inscribeapp.com/take-action

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REPORT CONTRIBUTIONS

This research was made possible through the collaboration of Janelle Elias, Sasha Flores, and student leaders at Rio Salado College, and Katy Kappler and Ana Hernandez at InScribe. Nicole Barbaro designed the study, analyzed data, and wrote the report. Omid Fotuhi, Betheny Gross, and Natalie Berkey at WGU Labs provided critical revisions to the report. The report was designed by Christine McDonough and CallyAnn Hamilton at WGU Labs. The work was made possible, in part, by funding provided to the College Innovation Network by the Charles Koch Foundation.

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Citation:

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