FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY

CASE STUDY

Fort Hays State University leverages virtual communities to increase engagement and peer connections among online learners.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Dr. Andrew Feldstein, Assistant Provost for Teaching Innovation and Learning Technologies at Fort Hays State University, is well-versed in incorporating technology into the learning environment to improve student engagement and success. When he learned about a significant gap in the social experience of online students in comparison to that of their on-campus counterparts, he began to envision a virtual environment that would provide an opportunity for all students - regardless of learning modality - to experience the serendipitous meet-ups, casual interaction, and authentic peer conversations that are often missing from the online student experience.

He found an effective and scalable solution with InScribe's digital communities, a collaborative online platform that creates an intuitive social learning environment in which all students can connect and contribute. In February 2021, FHSU launched it's new Tiger-2-Tiger community - a virtual space designed by students, for students. In just a few months, the community grew to more than 1,000 active students, with 287 conversations generating a total of 44,685 views. In addition to growing engagement, Dr. Feldstein was encouraged by the content of the posts, which included students introducing themselves from around the world, seeking advice about classes and schedules, sharing worries and encouragement, and asking others to be virtual friends. The online student population in particular embraced the new community, using it to reach out when they needed help and support.

ORGANIC GROWTH OF TIGER 2 TIGER

287
Questions

44,685
Views

12%
of Active Students asked questions

18%
of their counterparts supplied answers

"My first step was to create a holistic community for the entire campus so that students could discover people that they didn't know and make the type of connections that they may not have been able to make before."

Dr. Andrew Feldstein, Assistant Provost for Teaching Innovation and Learning Technologies at Fort Hays State University

WHO IS FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY?

Fort Hays State University is the fourth-largest public university governed by the Kansas Board of Regents, with more than 15,000 students enrolled each year. The university prides itself on its history of innovation - from its initial mission to support teachers in rural Kansas to its early adoption of the online teaching model. Dedicated to offering a cutting-edge online learning experience and student support, FHSU currently offers more than 200 online degree and certificate programs.

PROBLEM

In May 2020, FHSU sent all students a post-semester questionnaire to understand the impact of the transition to online classrooms and students' personal experiences during the COVID-19 quarantine. Answers to one question in particular drew Dr. Feldstein's attention. When asked "How did you do during this time?" a stark difference was noted between responses from the face-to-face and online populations.

About 36% of the online students responded that their academic experience hadn't changed much during the pandemic. This was compared to only 5% of face-to-face students reporting no change. During this transitional time, on-campus students reported a significant loss of social interactions in the shift away from face-to-face learning and many indicated that they missed connecting with others in shared spaces like after class or at the library. Online students didn't report similar losses, because they had never had access to these social interactions to begin with.

> **"We originally interpreted 'nothing changed' for online students as a good result because their experience remained constant," said Dr. Feldstein. "The 'a-ha' moment was the realization that we had been underserving the online students the whole time."**

In further evaluating this result of the online student experience, Dr. Feldstein realized that online learners were not being offered the opportunity to connect with peers outside of their required coursework. They lacked access to so called "third-spaces", where students could meet serendipitously for casual conversations, connecting before and after class, running into someone at the library, or chatting while waiting in line for coffee.

His goal became to develop an informal means of "recreating the serendipitous" for online students: an online community in which all students can take part in those third-space conversations, outside of the classroom.


TIGER-2-TIGER TAKES SHAPE

Dr. Feldstein was familiar with InScribe and saw its virtual community platform as a solution for creating this online space. InScribe connects students with each other in an on-demand,

digital space in which they can have conversations, ask questions, and share ideas.

Branded Tiger-2-Tiger after the FHSU mascot, this new community was intentionally designed as an open, free-flowing space specifically for students. Faculty and staff were encouraged to stay out of the space, allowing students to own the nature of the conversation, and creating more authentic interactions.

The community was not over-structured, and initially included a few general topic areas for students to discuss. To begin the process of organically growing the community, Dr. Feldstein talked with a few student groups about the community before it launched, encouraging early adoption and engagement.

Student Affairs, the library, the virtual Student Senate, and other student organizations were the first to know Tiger-2-Tiger existed. Tiger-2-Tiger was then introduced to the full student body by integrating it directly into the university's Blackboard LMS platform, with a welcome message and single sign-on access placed directly on the student landing page.
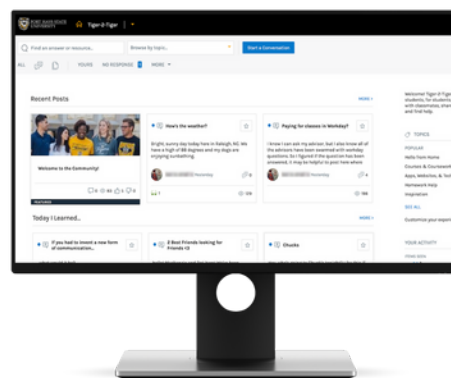
A small group of students engaged early on and were successful in connecting and encouraging others to join the platform. Allowing community adoption to happen organically reinforced the idea that this space was for students, by students, and encouraged conversations that were open, honest, and reflected the true feelings and needs of the community participants.

> **"Once Tiger-2-Tiger developed into a community that looked like a comfortable, safe place that was easy to navigate, and that they understood was just for students, they felt comfortable getting involved," said Dr. Feldstein.**

OUTCOME

While Dr. Feldstein initially thought there would be a benefit for both the face-to-face and online student populations, the primary benefit has been seen with online students. Tiger-2-Tiger met an unmet need and gave online learners a safe space to interact with each other candidly and organically.

Right away, students began saying "Hello!" to the community from coast-to-coast and all over the world. While open to both face-to-face and online students, the online population jumped in with both feet, relishing the opportunity to talk with other students outside of the classroom. The conversations reflected this desire, with several individuals seeking to form study groups, or create virtual friendships. Views of these top six conversations range from 198 to 327, with an average of 247 views per conversation.

One remarkable conversation caught the attention of Dr. Feldstein in October 2021. A student posted in the community, "Am I too old?" The poster described her challenges during the fall semester, saying she was overwhelmed and asking the community if perhaps she is just too old to go back to school. Within minutes, there were several encouraging student responses saying,
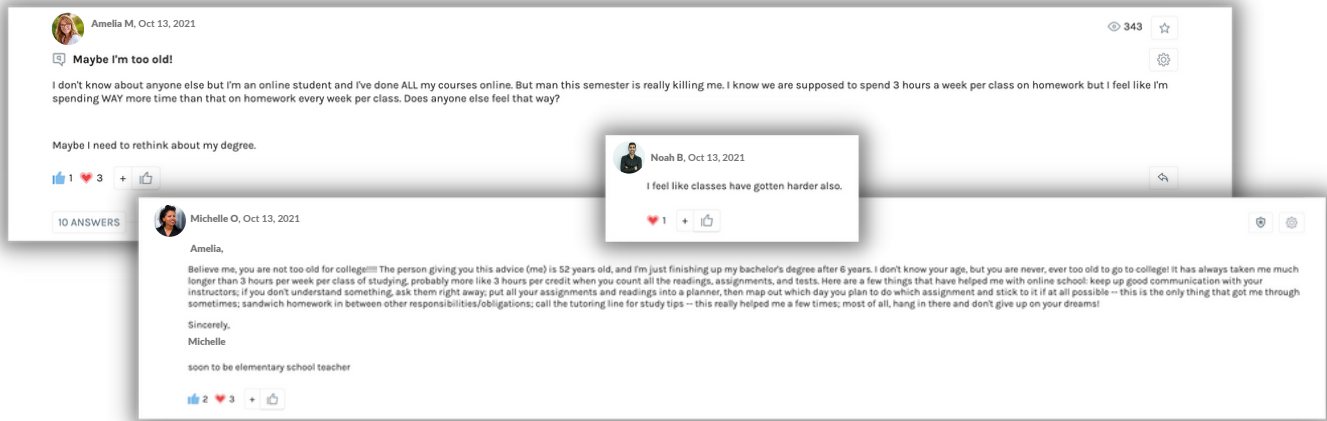
"No, you're not," and "You are not alone." One student responded that she was thinking about asking the same question. In all, there were more than 326 views of this post, at a time in which the community population numbered roughly 1,000 active students.

"If just one of them didn't give up, it's worth the entirety of that conversation," said Dr. Feldstein. **"That's not something we can easily track, but we know that these interactions can make a difference. To create a community in which our students can have that type of conversation is an amazing and rewarding thing."**

EXPANDING THE THIRD SPACE

Online students miss out on the spontaneous, in-person encounters their on-campus counterparts have daily. By using InScribe to create a space in which online students can "meet up" and engage with one another outside of the classroom, Dr. Feldstein has give FHSU's online student population that same opportunity. In seeing the success of the Tiger-2-Tiger community, he is investigating opportunities to further grow its functionality for future online students.

He is considering the development of a community for new online students, in which they complete an orientation program before being moved into the active Tiger-2-Tiger community. He is also considering the potential of creating a direct connection to student support resources, enabling students to get quick answers about university-wide resources like financial aid and registration.

Dr. Feldstein continues to meet with the virtual Student Senate since the launch of Tiger-2-Tiger and encourages them to take advantage of the community and make suggestions for future use of the platform. "As I learn how [they] use it and want to use it, I'll provide more affordances to make that happen," he says.

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