



RIO SALADO COLLEGE

A MARICOPA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

CASE STUDY

Strengthening Peer Connection and Sense of Belonging in Online Learning



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Belonging in online education is a growing challenge. Students who are dispersed and learning asynchronously often struggle to feel connected to peers, yet connection is essential for motivation, success, and retention. In 2021, Rio Salado College addressed this challenge by launching RioConnect, a virtual community powered by InScribe, and partnering with the College Innovation Network (CIN) at WGU Labs to evaluate its impact.

The six-week evaluation showed:

- **40% Increase in Belonging:** Students who engaged in RioConnect reported significantly greater gains in belonging compared to non-participants.
- **14% Growth in Peer Connectedness:** Both consistent users and late adopters of RioConnect reported stronger connections to peers.
- **Engagement and Ease of Use:** By the end of the study, RioConnect hosted 83 conversations, 56 student help requests, and thousands of views and reactions. 70% of students found the platform easy to use, and 64% said they would recommend it to others.
- **Authentic Student Community:** Students reported that RioConnect helped them feel less alone, connected them with peers in different programs, and created a safe space to share struggles and successes.

These findings demonstrate the value of intentional, student-centered virtual communities. RioConnect shows that belonging can grow quickly, even in just six weeks, and provides a model other institutions can adopt to strengthen connection, engagement, and persistence in online learning.

HOW RIOCONNECT HELPS STUDENTS



+40%

Belonging



+14%

**Peer
Connectedness**



Students reported
feeling less alone
and more supported.



“At Rio Salado College, we know flexibility is essential for our students, but flexibility alone is not enough. Students also need to feel seen, supported, and part of a community. RioConnect allows us to meet students where they are while ensuring they don’t have to navigate their education alone.”

Janelle Elias, Vice President of Strategy & Academic Affairs at Rio Salado College

ABOUT RIO SALADO COLLEGE

Founded in 1978 and headquartered in Tempe, Arizona, Rio Salado College (Rio) is one of the largest online public colleges in the United States, serving more than 40,000 students annually, including more than 21,000 online learners across all 50 states and internationally. With more than 600 online classes and 135 degree and certificate programs, Rio specializes in flexible pathways that serve diverse populations, including dual enrollment, military, incarcerated, and adult education learners. Learn more about [Rio Salado College](#).



THE CHALLENGE

Rio Salado College's (Rio) high-flex, online asynchronous model empowers students to fit learning into complex lives, often balancing work, family, and personal responsibilities. Yet this same flexibility introduces challenges. Many non-traditional learners report feelings of isolation and a lack of connection to a broader campus community, particularly in fully online environments.

Research continually underscores why belonging matters. Instruments such as the Social Connectedness Scale ([Lee & Robbins, 1995](#)), Classroom Community Scale ([Rovai, 2002](#)), and the Psychological Sense of School Membership ([Goodenow, 1993](#)) consistently show that students' sense of connection to peers and faculty predicts persistence and academic success.

For Rio students, the need to foster belonging is especially pressing. Unlike traditional colleges that rely on semester-based cohorts, Rio enrolls new learners almost weekly. This rolling model meets students where they are but places peers at very different points in their courses, limiting opportunities for shared milestones and organic community-building. While students can progress on their own personal semester, without intentional opportunities for interaction many may feel they are navigating their education alone rather than as part of a community.

Rio leaders recognized the urgent need to address these challenges through structures such as virtual communities, peer support networks, and proactive outreach that could strengthen belonging for online learners despite asynchronous, rolling entry points.

THE SOLUTION: RIOCONNECT POWERED BY INSCRIBE

Rio Salado College partnered with InScribe to launch RioConnect, a virtual community designed specifically for its flexible and geographically dispersed student body. RioConnect provided learners with a dedicated space to connect with peers, exchange resources, and find support on their own schedules.



Key Design Principles

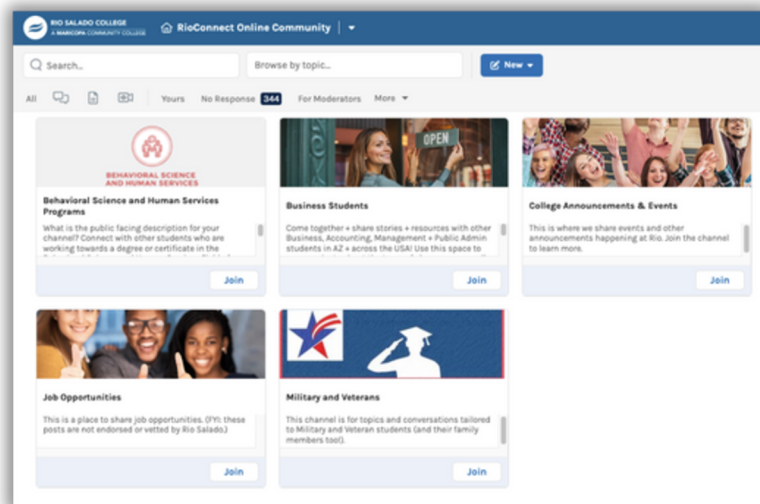
- **Designed with Students in Mind:** Students were involved from the beginning in shaping the platform, ensuring that conversations and resources reflected their lived experiences and real challenges.
- **Empowering Peer Leadership:** To reinforce that RioConnect was “for students, by students,” peer leaders initiated early discussions, modeled engagement, and set a welcoming tone. Their involvement created a genuine, student-driven space.
- **Easy Access and Awareness:** To lower barriers, students were auto-enrolled in RioConnect and informed through email and college communications. Branding emphasized RioConnect as a student hub, not a top-down institutional tool.

The Community Experience

Once launched, RioConnect quickly became an active and trusted gathering space. Students turned to the platform to:

- Ask questions about coursework, resources, and online learning.
- Share advice on balancing school, work, and family responsibilities.
- Support one another by normalizing struggles and reminding peers they were not alone.
- Build relationships across programs and geographies, forming networks they otherwise may not have had.

By design, RioConnect extended the “campus commons” into a virtual environment, offering students the chance to belong to a community despite learning at a distance. Within weeks, dozens of conversations were active, requests for help were answered, and students consistently reported feeling less isolated and more connected.



THE OUTCOMES

The CIN-led evaluation demonstrated clear and positive outcomes:

- **Belonging:** Students who engaged in RioConnect reported a 40% greater sense of belonging compared to non-participants, with late adopters also showing meaningful gains over the six-week period.
- **Peer Connectedness:** Both consistent users and late adopters reported a 14% increase in connectedness, significantly higher than unengaged peers.
- **Engagement and Usability:** RioConnect hosted 83 conversations, 56 student requests for help, and thousands of views and reactions. Seventy percent of students reported the platform was easy to use, and 64% said they would recommend it to others.

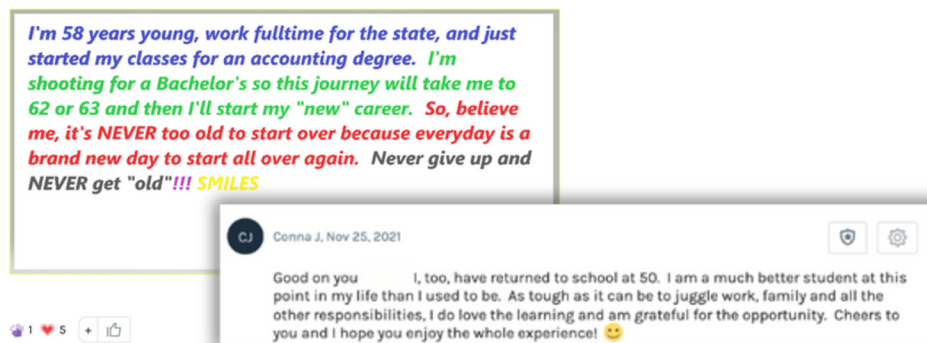
"RioConnect has enhanced how our students experience online learning. In just a short period, we saw measurable gains in belonging and connectedness, but even more powerful were the stories of students who said they felt like part of something bigger than themselves."

- Janelle Elias, Vice President of Strategy & Academic Affairs at Rio Salado College

Broader Institutional Benefits

The outcomes of RioConnect extend beyond students and create meaningful benefits for faculty, staff, and institutional effectiveness:

- **Reduced Burden on Faculty and Advisors:** Peer-to-peer support in RioConnect addressed student questions, allowing faculty and advisors to focus more on instruction and relationship development.
- **Improved Classroom Engagement:** Students who feel connected are more confident and motivated, benefiting both faculty and the institution.
- **Peer Belonging and Connection:** Sharing with their peers helps students feel connected to their fellow students and to their institution.
- **Actionable Insights for Staff:** Conversations within RioConnect revealed common challenges, enabling staff to refine advising, outreach, and support services.
- **Stronger Institutional Community:** A culture of belonging supports retention, helping faculty maintain continuity with students and supporting institutional goals.
- **Ease of Adoption:** Because students reported positive experiences, staff gained a reliable tool that required minimal intervention. Faculty and advisors could confidently direct students to RioConnect as a trusted support space.



LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

RioConnect's early outcomes provide a strong foundation for building community in flexible, online learning environments. Moving forward, Rio Salado College will focus on expanding participation—particularly among students who stand to benefit most—while refining features through continuous feedback. Sustaining momentum will also require aligning RioConnect with institutional priorities and engaging staff to ensure long-term success.

Future strategies include empowering peer champions, strengthening outreach, and maintaining ongoing evaluation to deepen belonging across the student body. By offering a student-led, peer-driven platform, Rio has not only enhanced belonging and connectedness but also demonstrated how technology can build meaningful communities at scale.

As higher education continues to move toward more flexible models, Rio's experience underscores a key lesson: belonging matters, and with the right tools it can thrive even in virtual spaces.

RESEARCH
REPORT



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