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Let's Not Forget Mission

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Moving abruptly online during the middle of a semester is tough. It requires translating on-ground pedagogies for online environments very quickly. Though, as tough as it is for instructors, we know that this transition is tough for students as well. Students need consistency; they need reassurance and predictability. Students need more than just online course content, they need the full pedagogical weight of the institution behind them. They need the support of institutional mission.

Each accredited college or university has one, an institutional mission. This mission, if well implemented, not only structures the institution but also gives meaning to the academic life of the institution. It characterizes the type of community that the institution forms. Mission gives institutional on-ground education a sense, a feel, that is distinctive to that institution. It promotes an ethos and a directionality unique to the institution's culture. This is particularly the case for confessional academic institutions for whom mission has religious significance.

It is now more important than ever for higher education institutions to provide consistency to their students by communicating mission pedagogically in online environments, to keep students engaged with the institutions to whom they entrusted their academic careers. Consider three ways to accomplish this:

Draw from institutional symbols.

Symbols bring people together to form community, and institutional missions tend to be built on symbols distinctive to the college or university. Your online environment can be enlivened through the process of identifying what these symbols are and evaluating how these symbols can be pedagogically leveraged to invoke your distinctive institutional ethos and culture.

Three types of institutional symbols are useful for consideration. 1) academic themes or virtues (such as “social justice,” “service,” “wellbeing,” “hospitality”) that characterize the institution’s expression of academic excellence 2) documentary symbols such as strategic plans, the mission statement itself, student codes of conduct, academic integrity policies, etc. 3) initiative-based symbols such as athletic or wellbeing programs, community engagement programs, institution-based institutes, etc.

Institutional symbols are particularly helpful when they are *diverse*. Diversity gives students multiple entry points into the communal life of the college or university and allows them to express themselves in a way that is most comfortable to their experience.

What are some of your institution’s symbols? How can these be incorporated into your online pedagogy to create a more supportive learning environment? How are these symbols diverse?

Invite the wider campus community into learning spaces.

Modeling mission in online learning environments is one way to communicate the mission to students. This can be done by drawing from those campus-based resources that were able to be moved online. For example, if your college or university librarian is now online, inviting him or her into the online learning space helps students to reconnect with the broader campus community supporting their learning. Similar assistance can be gained from resources such as guest lecturers, diversity and inclusion initiatives, campus ministry, career services, etc. When the larger campus community provides support according to the institution’s mission, the community models its mission for students and expresses a sensibility consistent with their prior on-ground educational experiences.

Do you have members of the wider campus community whom you can draw from? How can these persons contribute to your course? How do they model the institutional culture?

Engage students in practicing the mission in the online learning environment.

The mission is not something that institutional employees “give” to students, but something that the institution as a community enacts together. Once missional symbols and modeling are pedagogically incorporated into their curricula, students are initiated into the mission as active participants. As participants in the mission, it is important for students to develop their own creative take on the mission and what it means in their lives. Formative and summative assessments oriented towards evaluating student appropriation of the mission can help students practice the mission and help them come together as an online community.

What could the institutional mission mean to your students? How do students exemplify the mission in their relationships with one another? How can you help strengthen their relationships through the institutional mission?

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