Bridging the Gap for On-campus and Distance Students with Innovative Graduate Student Association Activities

Nick Fuhrman, Associate Professor
Chris Campbell, Graduate Assistant
Emilia Dover, Graduate Assistant
Emily Urban, Graduate Assistant
Ariel Waldeck, Graduate Assistant
Introduction

• Online learners can feel disconnected, lonely, and isolated (Zembylas, Theodorou, & Pavlakis, 2008)

• Student satisfaction in online programs influenced by quality of interactions with peers and faculty (Levy, 2007)

• Experiences that promote faculty-to-student and student-to-student engagement are recommended for online Master’s degrees (Burbuagh, Drape, & Westfall-Rudd, 2014)
University of Georgia Situation

- Master of Agricultural and Environmental Education
  - Mix of on-campus (30%) and distance (70%) students
  - Attend courses online, primarily synchronously
- Goal: enhance sense of community among all students
  - Graduate Student Association (GSA) started in 2013
  - Blackboard Collaborate used to connect students
  - Monthly professional development and social networking opportunities
Objectives

1. Identify specific GSA activities which on-campus and distance students believe have enhanced their graduate experience.

2. Describe student reactions to the activities and technology used to help bridge the gap.
Methods

- Informal conversations with GSA executive committee members and general membership
- Online questionnaire (qualitative)
- Responses summarized using content analysis
Findings

• Most influential activities
  – Informal, less structured **social networking** activities involving storytelling among on-campus and distance students and faculty

• Meet in a central location for all

• If meeting online, web cameras help
Findings
Findings

• Student reactions – Professors Are Real People
  – “The GSA has allowed for us as students to see our professors as people, and not just instructors. It gives us the opportunity to have meaningful, real-world conversations with our superiors.”
  – “When we went to the zoo and you brought your wife along, I loved getting to talk to her and learn more about you both.”
Findings

• **Student reactions – We Are In This Together**
  
  – “Sometimes it’s easy to feel alone...but hearing that other students struggle with the same stuff that I do helps me know I’m not crazy.”
  
  – “The GSA has allowed me to have a voice in our department...”
  
  – “Just seeing my peers on the web cam and Dr. F’s animal visitors really helps.”
Recommendations

• Balance professional development with face-to-face social networking activities (if possible)
  – If meeting online, use a web camera
• Allow time for storytelling and venting
• Bring your partner and/or kids along