Discussion Boards for Librarian Engagement in Asynchronous Online Programs

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Introduction

In Fall 2019, the new director of the online bachelor of business administration, management degree sought my help as the business liaison librarian. She was interested in making the library and information literacy portion of the program's orientation course more effective. The online management BBA is a 120-credit degree completion program geared at active military and veterans, mid-career professionals who do not have a bachelor's degree, and traditional college students who need additional flexibility (Boise State, 2022). The program was launched in 2017. Since then, 237 students have graduated and as of fall 2022, 279 students are enrolled.

Course Setup and Instructor Relationships

BUSMGT 300 is the seven-week orientation course that must be taken in a student's first semester. Before the program director contacted me, the class provided one week of library instruction using a modified, Process Oriented Guided Inquiry Learning (POGIL) worksheet that was previously used for in-person instruction in first-year experience courses. The director has a background in librarianship and recognized that the worksheet was too self-directed, particularly for their target student population who has often not been in school for 10 years or more. In addition to redesigning the worksheet and adding accompanying activities, we wanted some way for the students to engage with me directly. However, as a fully asynchronous program, we did not want to require a synchronous video session. Building on the popularity of "Ask Me Anything" (AMA) scenarios (Hara, Abbazio, et al, 2019), we decided to include a discussion board post in which students ask a question of me and a second question of their classmates. At the start of each semester, the current course instructor adds me as an instructor in Canvas. Initial posts are due on Thursday of the second week and responses are due by Sunday. I try to respond to all students the same day they post. I typically continue to respond to students through the following Tuesday to catch any stragglers. While I can continue to access the course throughout the semester, unless the instructor lets me know that there is a particular issue, I typically consider my interaction with the course complete at the end of week three.

Student Responses

While most students report finding the experience meaningful, some students have responded negatively to the collection of assignments because it is a substantial amount of information in a short period. In response, I now make sure to post an introduction on the discussion board that highlights this experience and encourages students to reach out to me before they reach this level of stress. One element of discussion boards that has proven very valuable is the engagement of a captive audience. As the discussion board posts and responses are required and graded by the course instructor, nearly all students participate at some level. In a video conference, or even in-person instruction session, a librarian may find themselves staring at a sea of silent faces who will not respond. A discussion board gives students time to reflect on the material, formulate their questions, prompt themselves based on others' responses, and participate with greater depth outside the limited time frame of a single class. Student questions range from directly assignment related, to topics from other business classes, to completely

random questions about library services and the history of libraries. During some semesters there is a fair amount of repetition, but usually questions differ enough to be meaningful.

Challenges and Limitations

It cannot be overstated that the greatest challenge of this instruction method has been scalability. The program has expanded from one cohort in fall and spring, each with about 40 students, to two cohorts in fall, spring, and summer ranging from roughly 10 to 42 students. As each customized response is essentially a research consultation, they often take anywhere from 15 to 45 minutes, which translates to a significant time commitment the week in which they take place. In some semesters this commitment has overlapped with multiple instances of regular, single-session instruction and has bordered on unmanageable. Curiously, the program has also not been reflected in consultation conversions. Even though the majority of the students have positive reactions to the activity, the students from these cohorts do not reach out to me with any greater frequency than students in other programs. This may indicate a need for better scaffolding throughout the full program, rather than just the orientation course.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations, if a librarian is interested in better engagement with online, asynchronous classes, discussion boards may be one option. While they require enough of a relationship with faculty to receive access to the course in the learning management system, they can be partnered with many different information literacy subjects and provide students a direct introduction to the librarian. For those interested, they can also provide a unique opportunity for assessment of student learning.

References

Boise State. (2022). Online Management BBA. Retrieved October 20, 2022 from https://www.boisestate.edu/cobe-management/undergraduate-programs/management-bba-online/

Hara N, Abbazio J, Perkins K. (2019). An emerging form of public engagement with science: Ask Me Anything (AMA) sessions on Reddit r/science, PLoS ONE 14(5): e0216789. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0216789