Using student engagement initiatives to invigorate a graduate program: A case presentation

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Student engagement has become a staple term in the realm of academia. It has been used to describe the amount of involvement and/or interest students have in all areas associated with their academic experience (Axelson & Flick, 2010). Initially, the notion of student engagement was crafted to refer to students' involvement in the classroom. In particular, the term was used to assist instructors in determining the effectiveness of their facilitation and delivery of classroom content. It was meant to be a means for assessment of teaching. This term, however, has evolved to reflect not only assessment of student involvement in the classroom but also their involvement and interest outside of the classroom, in non-academic related activities (Kahu, 2013). The quality of their involvement is thought to influence success throughout their academic journey (Bailey & Phillips, 2016). To this end, many institutions of higher education have revised their academic plans to reflect their support and investment in student engagement as a core notion. Furthermore, many institutions of higher education are being forced to embrace student engagement initiatives, as rates of student success have now become one of the key factors for funding. In particular, the amount of government-based grants a university receives is based on how successful an institution is in terms of student engagement outcomes that relate to student graduation rates, post-graduation employment, overall student grade point average, and attrition rates (Kahu, 2013). Even though academia has shifted towards embracing the notion of student engagement, this phenomenon is still relatively new in graduate education, as the majority of all student engagement initiatives appear to be focused at the undergraduate levels. Throughout graduate education, issues pertaining to isolation, loneliness, decreased motivation, and reduced interactions between peers is prevalent and has been shown to negatively impact on student success within various programs (Pintz & Posey, 2013). The purpose of this discursive paper is to critically examine a case study in which a series of student engagement activities are designed and implemented in an attempt to reinvigorate a graduate program. The paper will begin with an overview of the current state of student engagement within academia, followed by a presentation of the program in question. Specific issues will be identified followed by a discussion of a number of student engagement initiatives. A preliminary examination of the effectiveness of these student engagement initiatives will be discussed in addition to areas for future refinement and revision.

Student Engagement

Conceptually, to be able to adequately engage students, specific activities, programs, and resources need to be designed to address the behavioral, emotional and cognitive characteristics associated with teaching and learning (Fredricks, Filsecker, & Lawson, 2016). Specifically, the creation of events/sessions should be designed to encourage participation, interest, stimulation and investment in learning, and self-regulation. The

effectiveness of student engagement initiatives is most evident when faculty members are engaged on an ongoing basis with their students, are collaborating in teaching and learning activities within and outside of the classroom with students, and are engaged in activities that challenge students academically (Lumpkin, Achen, & Dodd, 2015).

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is one method used to evaluate student engagement across academia. The survey collects information from undergraduate students related to their level of participation, learning, and personal development as a result of their engagement in programs and activities provided by the academic institution (http://nsse.indiana.edu/html/about.cfm). The survey evaluates student engagement through the extent to which the academic environment provides a challenge (higher-order learning, reflective and integrative learning, learning strategies, quantitative reasoning), students' ability to learn from their peers (collaborative learning, discussions with diverse others), their overall experience with faculty (student-faculty interaction, effective teaching practices), and the general quality of the campus environment (quality of interactions, supportive environment). As stated, NSSE is predominantly used to assess undergraduate student engagement initiatives and does not appear to have been used to assess graduate student level of engagement (Fosnacht & Gonyea, 2018).

In lieu of the NSSE, indicators found within accreditation and/or institutional and/or program reviews have been used to determine, to a certain degree, the quality of student engagement within graduate education. These reviews are regular, periodic evaluations of academic degree programs that engage in the use of a formal process to obtain thorough, fact-based documentation and evaluation of a program. As well, contained with the review process is an examination of the university's environment and infrastructure to determine its effectiveness in supporting not only a specific program, but also a diverse set of student engagement activities; and anticipated plans for program growth and development (Marsh, 2019; Mandernach, 2015).

Case Presentation and Issues

The graduate program in question is a Master of Nursing program that has both a two year full time and three to four year part time offerings, with a current annual fall semester intake of approximately 95 students. Students' average age was 34.3 years and were primarily females (96.4%). The majority (91.5%) of the students were working with an average of 86.3% employed full time. The Master of Nursing Program has been offered since 2004. And until 2016, there were no student engagement activities, minimal alumni involvement, and stagnate enrolment. Marketing and promotion of the program was non-existent. This resulted in expressed feelings of loneliness and isolation among students; minimal engagement between students, as well as between students and faculty outside of the classroom; an unwillingness to study or use university resources outside of classroom hours; decrease motivation among students to speak about their graduate experience to family and friends outside of the university; poor academic productivity; and decrease likelihood of students applying content

learned in the classroom to their workplace or daily interactions. This information was acquired through post-graduation exit interviews.

An assessment of student perceived learning needs occurred at the beginning of each academic term throughout the last three years (2016-2019). The Master of Nursing Program is offered yearlong and contains three academic terms that include Fall (twelve weeks between September to December), Winter (twelve weeks between January to April), and Spring/Summer (twelve weeks between May to August). Results suggested a significant need and desire for the creation of programs, events, workshops, and seminars that can help students succeed and thrive during their graduate studies. Specifically, sessions that focused on leadership, networking, career advancement, conflict management in the workplace, and research engagement skills. There was also a desire to not only learn from each other, but to engage in ongoing opportunities to meet, interact, and network with each other on an informal, non-academic basis. Students reported not "knowing any of their classmates" even though many of their classes required that they work in small groups. They felt isolated and lonely in the program. Furthermore, a desire to work with and learn from alumni was expressed, as was the desire to work with and mentor undergraduate students.

Student Engagement Initiatives

As a result a series of student engagement sessions were created (Table 1). The first in the series of sessions focused on career advancement. These sessions were designed and launched in collaboration with the University's Career Centre. The series was titled: *Maximizing your Career Success,* which consisted of a number of lunch-and-learn seminars, live actor simulation workshops, and panel discussions. The first set of lunch-and-learn seminars focused on personal branding and how to use various online social media platforms (LinkedIn, Twitter, blogs) to promote oneself professionally; while the other set of career focused sessions addressed tapping into the "hidden job market" through various networking activities. The live actor simulations workshops provided two distinct opportunities for practicing of interview skills. The first workshop consisted of a 3-hour, fully interactive practice session with students being provided the opportunity to 'test drive' their job interview skills in a variety of professional settings. The second workshop, also a 3-hour fully interactive practice workshop, guided students through various tools and skills identified as being key to a successful job interview. Students were encouraged to reflect upon their goals, skills, as well as various experiences and strategies they could use to effectively convey their story to potential employers. Finally, two panel discussions were designed and delivered (one at the end of the winter semester in April and the other during the fall term in October), and consisted of Nursing leaders, who spoke about their respective professional journeys. The focus of these panel discussions were to provide career guidance and support to students in relation to career options and appropriate ways to seek employment.

With regards to conflict management and networking, specific professional development sessions were created with experts from the University's Conflict Resolution office and School of Graduate Studies leading various discussions. Experts and resources from

the University were intentionally incorporated into these various student engagement sessions as a means of introducing students to the University as a whole and encouraging them to take advantage of resources available.

In terms of research engagement, a Student Research Engagement Series, consisting of 7 one-hour workshops that addressed basic research skills aimed to enhance graduate students' roles as scholars, academics, and professionals. These sessions were purposefully designed to be concise, hands on, and reflective of student learning needs. They were titled the *How To* series and focused on facilitating an oral presentation at a scientific meeting; drafting an abstract and a poster for conferences; converting a course paper into a publishable manuscript; reviewing an abstract for a scientific event, including a scholarly manuscript; and networking at conferences. In addition, another set of *How To* series were created with thesis students in mind and included topics that addressed: getting started and staying engaged in the thesis writing process; determining what the general structure of a thesis might look like; engaging in effective and critical editing and revisions.

In addition, a student engagement committee was created that consisted of graduate students volunteering their time and energies to assist in the design, implementation, and facilitation of program related events. The intent of the committee was to create a positive, supportive, and inclusive community for graduate students. The committee was responsible for identifying and assisting in implementing strategies to build on and/or create new relationships among graduate students, the community, and faculty. The committee assisted in the communication of events, workshops, and sessions. In addition, one of their main tasks included working to foster a culture of engagement among their classmates. The committee was chaired by two students. The program director assisted in the facilitation of meetings to ensure activities and ideas being generated were feasible for implementation.

Finally, social media was integrated into the graduate program to enhance the visibility of the program; increase recruitment activities by measuring success of social media promotion through in-person event feedback; and to improve communication, interaction and engagement among students and the community, as measured via the number of views, likes, shares, comments, retweets, screenshots, and following of a number of posts. Additionally, an extensive review of the literature was undertaken, as well as a pilot study to examine the effectiveness of the different types of social media platforms in enhancing student engagement; as well as, when and how often to use social media to influence student engagement. Results obtained suggested Twitter, Facebook and Instagram were the most effective mediums for promoting engagement with the graduate program. Twitter was found to be most effective for the delivery of small bursts of information during lunch hour on the weekdays; Facebook was most effective when materials were sent during the early morning hours, just prior to the start of class; while participants were most receptive to Instagram when it was used various times throughout the day and incorporated bright colourful images and photos. A schedule for delivery of messages via these mediums have since been created and implemented with significant success among both students and the community at large.

Upon review of these student engagement activities, specific challenges arose related to marketing of each session. As noted, the majority of the students in the Master of Nursing Program were employed full time, with many also having children under the age of 5 years old. Additionally, more than 80% of the students commuted to and from the university with an average commute time of 45 minutes. As a result, any additional extra-curricular activities, workshops or seminars had to be strategically designed and delivered to reflect the prevailing needs of students. As students were already at the University for classes, it was decided that the best time to provide the engagement activities was during the lunch hour between 12 noon and 1 pm, as there were no scheduled classes during this period. Also in providing lunch or a snack during these events, it would not only serve as nourishment but also an enticement to attend the sessions.

During the first year (2016) these sessions were offered, an average of 20 participants attended; with the numbers steadily rising to 35 by 2019. This increase may be due to the ongoing revisions that were made following each session. During the first year, the sessions were characterized by its didactic style of teaching in which the instructor solely facilitated each workshop. There was minimal student engagement. In response to these observations, the sessions moved away from the instructor driven approach to teaching to engage in an interactive method of facilitation. There was a marked increase in instructor-to-student interaction through the use of hands on case studies, role-playing, and activities. As well, a significant amount of application-based activities, videos, and online games were incorporated into the sessions to increase the amount of student-to--student interaction.

Online and paper-based evaluations occurred immediately following the implementation of each session. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive with suggestions pertaining to focusing future sessions on different topics inclusive of elder care, health sexuality, gender issues, opioid overdose, and thesis writing and oral examination topics. Once feedback was received, future sessions were revised on an ongoing basis to ensure topics of interest were being presented. The evaluation that occurred was exploratory in nature, as it assisted in identifying the specific type of sessions to provide to students. Thus, allowing for continuous evolution of the engagement activities.

As well, a non-experimental multi-phase, descriptive pilot study was conducted to examine the most appropriate medium, dosage, and timing for delivering information advertising each of these student engagement initiatives. The study was conducted over a period of 18 weeks, in two phases, with one post being distributed on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn every day, for one week during a specific time interval. Findings suggest the use of Twitter was most effective for the delivery of small bursts of information during the luncheon period; Facebook was most effective when materials were sent during the early morning hours, just prior to the start of class; and participants were most receptive to Instagram when it was used various times throughout the day and incorporated bright colourful images and photos. LinkedIn was viewed as the interactive social media platform. Findings from this study highlight and confirm the

relevance of each medium and timing for engaging current and prospective nursing students.

Finally, leadership skills were interwoven throughout all of the student engagement activities presented above. As well, alumni and undergraduate students were invited to specific sessions to allow for networking and mentoring to occur. Finally, each session was grounded in evidence, as the nature and type of event, session, and workshop created was determined based on theoretical literature and/or research evidence. This evidence was obtained through a thorough review of the literature.

Future Direction

However, a more structured research study needs to be designed to rigorously examine the effectiveness of these sessions in terms of their overall quality based on the following indicators: 1) overall learning environment, 2) student-faculty interaction, 3) student-student interaction, 4) effectiveness of curriculum in addressing perceived student needs, 5) qualification and effectiveness of session facilitator, and 6) quality of student engagement activity to encourage participation, interest, stimulation and investment in learning, as well as self-regulation. Specifically, a mixed methods study should be employed to allow for both narrative and structured responses. Data should be collected using questionnaires, observation, and existing data. A pre-post quasi-experimental study can be employed in which the student engagement initiative is delivered over the period of a year. Data related to quality should be collected both before and after the delivery of the student engagement initiative. Revisions to the student engagement initiative should be made based on the results obtained.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the notion of student engagement has become an integral part of the functioning of institutions of higher education. This is because many grants and funding initiatives are directly related to indicators of student engagement success. In spite of the significance of student engagement within academia, these initiatives tend to not be common throughout graduate programming that has led to challenges related to student isolation, poor academic productivity, and decreased motivation to succeed. A presentation of the design and implementation of student engagement initiatives over a three-year period (2016-2019) for a specific graduate program was presented that included: sessions focusing on leadership, networking, career advancement, conflict management in the workplace, and research engagement skills. These sessions have evolved over the course of their implementation from didactic delivery to interactive, application-based facilitation. In addition, a pilot study was conducted to examine the most appropriate medium (i.e. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn), dosage, and timing for delivering information advertising each of these student engagement initiatives. Findings suggest each medium had a specific time of the day in which it was most effective in terms of advertising these student engagement sessions. However, the need for continued evaluation in the form of a structured research study to rigorously

examine the effectiveness of these sessions in terms of their overall quality and effectiveness in helping students to succeed is still needed.

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Appendix A

Table 1

Student Engagement Initiatives

Title of Session	Content
A. Maximizing your Career Success	1. Lunch-and-learn seminars on personal branding
	2. Lunch-and-learn seminars on networking
	3. Live actor simulation to practice interview skills
	4. Live actor simulation to guide students through various tools and skills identified as being key to a successful job interview
	5. Two panel discussions (one at the end of the winter semester in April and the other at the start of the fall term in October) – each consisted of Nursing leaders, who spoke about their respective professional journeys
B. Conflict Management and Networking	1. Eight professional development sessions were created with experts from the University's Conflict Resolution office and School of Graduate Studies leading various discussions
C. Student Research Engagement Series	1. Seven one-hour workshops that addressed basic research skills aimed to enhance graduate students' roles as scholars, academics, and professionals
D. Student engagement committee	1. Responsible for identifying and assisting in implementing strategies to build on and/or create new relationships among graduate students, the community, and faculty.
E. Social Media	1. Purpose: to enhance the visibility of the program; increase recruitment activities by measuring success of social media promotion through in-person event feedback; and to improve communication, interaction and engagement among students and the community, as measured via the number of views, likes, shares, comments, retweets, screenshots, and following of a number of posts