

## DESIGNING AN ONLINE STUDENT CENTER

Holly Fiock, *Purdue University*

This design case focuses on the design, development, and management of an online student center. In order to bridge and build community among a population of master's students in an online program, an online student center was developed to become a one-stop-shop. This center houses vital program information and helps to foster relationships among online users. This case will dig deeper into the process one university took to design and develop this center, give an overview of information provided to students, and discuss the maintenance of running the center to best support their learners. Insights and reflection on the design process and next steps will be described and discussed. Finally by detailing the process, the author hopes that readers will gain a better understanding of building community among learners in a fully online program.

**Holly Fiock** is a Senior Instructional Designer at Purdue University where they also serve as an adjunct professor. Her role is multifaceted and includes learning design, course development, and providing support to faculty to enhance and develop courses and learning communities relating to innovations and effective practices in instructional design. As a doctoral student in the Learning Design and Technology Program at Purdue University, her research focuses on distance education, in particular the Community of Inquiry framework, online learning environments, and practitioner focused practices.

### INTRODUCTION

At Purdue University, the Online Student Center was developed to house vital program information and foster relationships among online master's students in the Learning Design and Technology program. Rooted in the concept and backed by research on *community*, this comprehensive online student center hoped to address student concerns of isolation and transactional distance by creating a place where individuals develop and feel a shared sense of belonging with like-minded learners. This paper will highlight one program's process and end product—the creation of an online student center - through this design case.

### STUDENT CENTER DESIGNER

I (Holly Fiock) am a Senior Instructional Designer in the Teaching and Learning Technologies department at Purdue University. I am housed in the College of Education where I work directly with the Learning Design and Technology (LDT) program in the Curriculum and Instruction Department. Adding another layer of complexity, I am a master's graduate and a current doctoral student- both in Purdue's LDT program. I was hired on as the instructional designer in 2015—almost four years after the online program had been up and running.

As experts in the field of instructional design and online learning, the faculty helped with the vision and creation of the student center. Although some choices and decisions as presented in this design case were my own, it was not without faculty buy-in and support that this project was possible. Given my background, I am able to provide a unique understanding, knowledge, and varied viewpoint of the LDT program from multiple perspectives: a master's and doctoral student, practicing instructional designer, and staff member.

As such, my design perspective as presented in this design case is from my history with program administration and is rooted in research, specifically research focused on community building in online environments. To fully understand the need and design of the Online Student Center (OSC), I will provide the background of the online master's program.

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## UNIVERSITY & PROGRAM CONTEXT

In 2011, the Learning Design and Technology (LDT) program in the College of Education at Purdue University began a new online Master of Science in Education (MSEd) degree program. Prior to the program launch, the faculty had a few concerns that are important to highlight as they provide background into the choices and direction of the online student center. The concerns revolve around: 1) course design and sequence, 2) grouping of students, and 3) course and program community.

### Program Development Concerns

The LDT Program was the first, fully online program offered through Purdue University. Developing a fully functioning online program from scratch has its own laundry list of challenges, but a few choices are vital for the background of this design case. First, when structuring the online program, courses were developed in an eight-week format, allowing students to complete the full master's program in 20 months (five traditional semesters). Given that each course was to be offered asynchronously and our learner population were mostly working professionals, the eight-week online format allowed for greater flexibility for our students.

Second, two major factors played roles in the sequencing and grouping of students: 1) program scalability and 2) program organization. By grouping students in a cohort model, the faculty members would be able to focus one course at a time. In this paper, a cohort is defined as a group of students who, in this case, will enter and leave the program at the same time. Initially, elective options were limited. As the first cohort was small, only one elective would be able to "carry" or meet the course registration requirement (i.e., the number of registered students needed to be considered a class by

Purdue standards). As the program scaled, students of the same cohort may now choose between different elective courses but will continue to follow the same schedule of classes (see Fig. 1).

Third, in addition to organization and scalability, a cohort model is ideal when trying to build community among learners as Anderson et al. (2005, as cited in Friesen & Jacobsen, 2021) noted "the cohort model structure scaffolds and supports improved student learning through deeper discussions, which are the foundation for professional networks that support learners' future leadership roles and serve as a scaffold for building collaboration and communication skills" (p. 67). The faculty were aware that community building in online programs and courses must be intentionally designed. Therefore, it was determined three discussion activities would be included in each course in the program: an introduction discussion, "Ask A Peer/Ask The Instructor" discussion, and the "Easy-Going Café" discussion.

### Introduction Discussion

Each course in the LDT program has an "Introduction" discussion board (other names include Course Bios, Introduce Yourself, etc.) that includes icebreaker questions. Introductions (Fig. 2) and community building/icebreaking exercises are required in all LDT courses as they provide a space where all participants in the course (learners and instructors) can "meet" each other. When asked about the selection and inclusion of icebreakers, faculty explained the inclusion was a "known" or "required" piece they knew they must include in the course model. In design cases, this knowledge is known as "precedent" or as explained by Boling (2010) "the unique knowledge embedded in a known design" (Oxman, 1994, p. 146), meaning, in everyday terms, that the memory of having experienced an existing design is a memory that contains special forms of knowledge" (p. 2). Faculty did not actively seek out research to justify their design choice; they knew it is a necessary element for developing high-level online courses with a focus on building community.

Not surprising, research does show icebreakers and community building exercises help to build social presence and minimize the sense of transactional distance (i.e., the space felt between learners and instructors; Dixon et al., 2006; Fiock, 2020; Moore, 1997; Richardson et al., 2009). Social presence is the ability of an individual to establish themselves as real people by expressing their personality during mediated communication (Garrison et al., 2000). However, social presence does not just develop without support. Dixon et al. (2006) note "Collaborative and supportive environments must be developed through enhanced instructional design and facilitation skills" and found introductions/icebreakers aided in a positive educational experience, enhancing the

Course sequence for students starting in the FALL	
Fall	
Term 1	Term 2
EDCI 51300	EDCI 57200
EDCI 60001 (16 Weeks)	
Spring	
Term 1	Term 2
EDCI 53100	Elective
EDCI 60002 (16 Weeks)	
Summer	
Term 1	Term 2
EDCI 56900	EDCI 52800 or 56400
EDCI 60002 (16 Weeks)	
Fall	
Term 1	Term 2
EDCI 57700	EDCI 67200
EDCI 60002 (16 Weeks)	
Spring	
Term 1	Term 2
EDCI 57300	Elective
EDCI 60003	

FIGURE 1. Sample course sequence for students.

**WHEN TO RESPOND:** Prior to the beginning date of the course or shortly thereafter, please introduce yourself.

**WHAT TO CONTRIBUTE:**

1. A brief introduction of yourself.
  - a. Current position and activities, why you chose your profession, what you find most professionally rewarding and challenging or difficult.
  - b. What you hope to accomplish with this course and program, how you aspire to use it in your professional life.
2. An example of one way in which you have evaluated or assessed the value of something in the past (e.g., 4-H rabbit judging, political candidates, restaurants).
3. A brief description of your life outside of the LDT program and your professional work. Perhaps include your personal background, where you were raised, and non-professional interests. Share any pictures you would like as they help us to have a face go with a name when we are working with you in class.

**FIGURE 2.** Sample course introduction and icebreaker.

development of community and collaboration among learners (para. 3).

Faculty were aware, however, that icebreaker questions must be evaluated at different points in the program. For example, the introduction prompt/discussion is necessary in each course for maintaining community; however, the icebreaker exercises within the introduction prompt can be minimized (i.e., less elaborate questions/guidance as each cohort moves through the LDT program). Furthermore, LDT faculty noted the importance of creating a variety of icebreaker activities (not the same icebreaker in all courses). An assortment of icebreakers helps to “meet a variety of needs” and “contribute to improved student participation, increased student persistence, and ultimately enhanced student learning” (Chlup & Collins, 2010, p. 35). To illustrate this variety, a few examples include: “tell us about your first online learning experience,” “share any non-professional interests you may have,” “feel free to share pictures of yourself or your pet(s),” “create a quick 2-minute introduction video.”

In a larger cohort, these icebreaker exercises are needed for continued team building, especially when a course may have cohort members who have yet to take a class together. Developed with instructor flexibility in mind, it is important each instructor participates in these exercises to showcase their own unique style(s) for getting to know their class.

#### **“Ask A Peer/Ask The Instructor” and “Easy-Going Café”**

Two additional community building elements in each online course are the: “Ask A Peer/Ask The Instructor” and “Easy-Going Café” discussion boards. The first, “Ask A Peer/Ask The Instructor” (also known as Open Forum, Questions?), focuses on a centralized area where students are able to ask general course questions to each other or the instructor at once. Purdue faculty member, Dr. Jennifer Richardson had created

this forum because they saw that students could sometimes answer technology-related class questions just as fast as the instructor could. Therefore, peers could help each other through question responses, which also help to build a sense of community among learners in the course. The design of this forum aids the instructor’s role to evolve to facilitator, allowing students to recognize all members of the course are learning together in a shared community. Furthermore, it is helpful for students to see other students ask questions or share the same misconceptions about assignments or other course materials (Chin & Osbourne, 2008). By viewing peers’ questions and helping to answer, students can “monitor their own learning, explore and scaffold their ideas, steer thinking in certain specific directions, and advance their understanding of scientific concepts and phenomena” (p. 34). In this regard, learners work together to answer each other’s questions, make connections with their own ideas, and combined, aids in individual self-assessment (Black et al., 2002).

The second forum, “Easy-Going Café,” is an informal discussion for students. Instructors are asked to not participate in these discussions but should monitor to ensure no misconduct is occurring. The “Easy-Going Café” (also known as ‘The Water Cooler,’ ‘The Commons,’ and ‘Social Area’) is a place where students can share and communicate about matters outside of course content (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). It can be thought of as an online student commons. In some courses, this discussion forum really takes off with multiple conversations regarding a range of topics; in other courses, the forum lays empty.

#### **A PROBLEM WITH COHORTS**

Even with the use of a cohort model and intentionally designed discussions, a community does not always develop

naturally. To remedy this lack of community, a program Facebook page was created for the students by the faculty. However, the created Facebook group did not take off as planned. Faculty determined students in the program needed to organically create that sense of community for themselves. And, as if cued to do so, the first cohort of students in the program created their own, closed Facebook group, free of faculty members, that grew and led to a community space created for and by our student population. One problem remained: Facebook did not appeal to our entire population of learners—as some did not want to join a social media platform just to connect with their peers.

Another identified issue was as the program scaled, the cohort model limited the ability for students to meet other students *outside* of their cohort. For example, let us look at the spring 2018 cohort of 64 students: 31 students are in educational environments, 13 are in the field of instructional design, three are in the medical field, and 14 are considered in the other category (see Fig. 3). This mix of students are diverse in terms of where they are located, years of experience, backgrounds, age, and other demographics. The next cohort that comes in (fall 2018, see Fig. 3) has 46 students: 24 are in educational settings, seven are in instructional design, five are in management, etc. Again, all students are diverse in location, years of experience, and so on. We now have two cohorts of individuals with similar interests or experiences, but who may never actually meet each other because they are in two *separate* cohorts. As the LDT program has five cohorts at any given time, this divide only grows as the program scales.

## ORIGIN OF THE STUDENT CENTER

The faculty soon realized the community between cohorts, students, and faculty may be lacking. As previously mentioned, LDT students traditionally stay within their cohort while completing courses, but the increase in student populations (i.e., larger admittance) led to several individuals with shared interests who never met or took courses together, either within or outside of their own cohort. The Facebook page met a specific subset of our population, but as a program, we had no control or say in the information being discussed there. As such in 2015, a space to help bridge student populations and leverage the growing network of our students was needed. Specifically, the following affected our design approach: context, relevancy, and theory.

First, since our learners are all online, it made sense to create an *online* student center—similar in vision to an advising or

Spring 2018 Cohort Backgrounds		
Category	Example Positions	Number of Students
Education	Teacher, professor, instructor, etc.	31
Instructional Design	Instructional designer, training, e-learning, etc.	13
Medical	Nurse, fire fighter, speech pathologist	3
Self-Employed	Self-employed	2
Unemployed	Unemployed	1
Other	Insurance, receptionist, engineer, etc.	14

Fall 2018 Cohort Backgrounds		
Category	Example Positions	Number of Students
Education	Teacher, professor, instructor, etc.	24
Instructional Design	Instructional designer, training, e-learning, etc.	7
Medical	Nurse	1
Management	Communication manager, category management, etc.	5
Military	Navy	1
Unemployed	Home maker, unemployed	2
Other	International liaison, recruiter & staffing, counselor, etc.	6

FIGURE 3. 2018 student demographic breakdown.

admission office in a brick-and-mortar campus. This online center would serve as a single location for all relevant program information in the same LMS the students are already familiar with.

Secondly, the center would not only provide opportunities for students and faculty to network and build community, but would also help store program goals, resources, and materials. The center must be relevant to learners; therefore, curated materials include portfolio guidelines and milestones, associated paperwork, course descriptions/syllabi, practicums/internships, professional organizations, and general campus resources such as libraries and software licenses. Although many items are available online already, we recognized our learners can become overwhelmed trying to search, access, and find these resources via the larger University website.

Third due to our learner population, the online student center must be designed and developed in a way that mimics the design principles and theories we are teaching in our online courses. As an instructional design program, we know the importance of designing with intention, knowing our audience, and creating materials with these theories and concepts in mind. Next, we discuss the process of developing our initial prototype of the student center.

## A Familiar System

When I began writing this design case, all online courses in the LDT program were developed and taught using the learning management system (LMS) Blackboard Learn (see *'Moving Learning Management Systems' section of this paper for the current status on the student center*). Since students and faculty were already familiar with this LMS as means of teaching and taking courses, a natural first step was to utilize the same LMS for the online student center.

A non-credit course was created in the University LMS for the online student center. By creating a non-credit course,



learners can access the student center directly from the same LMS in which their courses are listed (saving learners from having to access an external system or website). A non-credit course also allows the LDT program to control the population (e.g., students, teaching assistants, instructors, faculty, staff).

### Initial Prototype

In the LDT program, each student must complete a practicum experience prior to graduation. In keeping with knowing your audience, the faculty first opted to have a current master's level practicum student design and develop the prototype of the LDT Online Student Center (OSC). There were two main reasons this was important to the LDT Program.

First, by having a current student design and develop the prototype, we were able to determine what items and elements are most important to our target audience. In this sense, we had a built-in needs assessment. The student designer of the center would know from their perspective what is important. Additionally, the practicum is completed at the end of one's study; therefore, the student would be able to provide insights from all stages (e.g., brand-new to almost-graduating). The decision to use a practicum student was vital for our design process as it allowed for "focus on the needs of learners, [and] taking into account their prior knowledge" (Hilgart et al., 2012, para. 1).

Second, the student designer was able to design, organize, and deliver the instructional components (in this case, organization of links) in a manner that made sense to them—the learner. This provided another level of influence on the final design of the student center. We (as a program) now know what is most viewed as important by learners.

Ultimately, the student-designed initial prototype was basic, providing only duplicate information found in multiple places across campus. To elaborate, information can be difficult to find since each department in the University has their own section of the website where items are located. For example, the College's Office of Graduate Studies houses specific college and departmental level documents such as plan of study and individual program requirements for the College of Education. Whereas the University's Graduate School houses degree or University level documents for *all* degree programs. One overall goal of the student center was to streamline important links for our graduate students in one area. Specifically, an important design choice was not to duplicate information on the student center (i.e., copy and paste from other office's websites), but provide a live link to the resource.

First, this ensures information is current and up to date; that is, we (LDT) do not have conflicting information from the other offices we've linked out to. Second, linking out to other

pages allows for quick access to our students (i.e., learners are not having to dig through pages to find what they are looking for). The prototype also provided us with an initial outline of how one student perceived the organization or hierarchy of items within the OSC. At this point in the process, the LDT Online Program Convener reviewed the student designer's prototype; it was determined and approved by all LDT faculty that this initial design would be a great starting point for our project.

### A 'Worked Example'

As our learners typically find practicum opportunities with non-profits, corporate, or other businesses, we were able to see how students applied instructional design concepts into a university context – an outcome not initially planned for. This had backwards-type implications as the faculty saw how worked and modeling examples from classwork were being applied in the higher education setting. From this specific prototype, faculty saw what "relevant aspects of the modeled behavior" students were applying (van Gog & Rummel, 2018, p. 203). The process of modeling examples has been successful with "university students to workplace-learners" (p. 203) and works best when paired with instructional explanations or "having learners self-explain the principles behind the worked-out solution steps" (p. 205).

### WORKING MODEL

Faculty determined to move forward with the design of the OSC, using the prototype as a course shell (i.e., starter structure for a course). At this point in the design process, ownership of the student developed course (prototype) was transferred to the LDT program, specifically the instructional designer (author of this article) and the online program convener.

The instructional designer and online program convener met to discuss the direction of the OSC. This meeting was held to determine if the original purpose and goals of the student center still aligned with the feedback and development of the prototype. After discussion and review of the prototype, the purpose and goals were the same (no changes to initial vision). Therefore, the two individuals (instructional designer and program convener) worked together to further develop the outline of information that should be housed in the student center. Referenced as 'tabs,' the outline provided categories of topics that should be included in the student center. Next, this outline was presented to all LDT professors at the weekly faculty meeting.

When presented, the faculty conversed and identified several existing resources used in current courses (e.g., tutorials, job aids, guest speaker video presentations, educational videos, Open Educational Resources (OERs), tool and resource links, etc.) could be shared in the student center. Moreover, many course resources were intentionally developed to be utilized

## Welcome



### Welcome from Dr. Alsup



Welcome to graduate studies in Purdue's Department of Curriculum and Instruction. The Learning Center is the largest and most respected in the department. Its strengths are many, including high quality and experienced faculty in the field of online learning and instructional design; consistent and reliable communication with administrators and students; and program content that is innovative, timely, and research based. The Learning Center serves across many fields and contexts, and as a graduate of this program you will join thousands of Boilermakers who have benefited from a Purdue education. We are excited to welcome you to the LDT MS program and to the Boilerplate community.

Sincerely,

Janet Alsup,  
Department Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
PhD Professor, Literacy and Language Education

FIGURE 4. Welcome notes.

across courses (e.g., Camtasia job aids can be referenced in any course where videos are created). The next section of this design case will focus on each 'tab' created as a result of the prototype, outline, and faculty input.

### 'Welcome' Tab

The 'Welcome' tab has personalized notes from the Department Head, LDT Program Convener, and a Professor Emeritus - of the LDT Program who also was a former Associate Dean of the College of Education - who all three greeted students into the online program and the OSC.

These three individuals wanted to communicate the strength and value of the program to the students (see Fig. 4). Sample excerpts from these statements include:

- 1) *"We welcome you and are excited you have chosen to join our ranks. We promise that work lies ahead, but the learning you will experience will be well worth the effort.";*
- 2) *"The LDT master's degree program was designed and developed by the outstanding LDT faculty members, who are themselves recognized leaders in the field, to give you the knowledge, skills, and abilities to become successful practitioners and leaders in learning design and technology.";* and 3) *"Additionally, the Purdue brand carries significant weight across many fields and contexts, and as a graduate of this program you will join thousands of Purdue Alum around the world who have benefitted from a Purdue education."*

Our hopes with the 'Welcome' tab are that students truly feel important and valued. Feeling valued is important as noted in Tinto's (1997) model of institutional departure which states that "other things being equal, the lower the degree of one's social and intellectual integration into the academic and social communities of the college, the greater the likelihood

of departure. Conversely, the greater one's integration, the greater the likelihood of persistence" (p. 116). Thus, by providing personalized welcome statements, we want our students to feel valued, welcomed, and integrated—not only to the program, but the Department, College, and University as a whole.

### 'About the Student Center' Tab

Like introducing a new topic in a course, it was important to communicate the value of the center to our learners. To communicate this, we created a tab that explains why the center was created and our hopes for how it will be used. Course navigation, a breakdown of each tab, and resources available are explained in this section. 'About the Student Center' essentially serves as our table of contents—explaining each area and why it is useful for our students. Furthermore, as research on online course development notes, content must be structured to help reduce student cognitive load and navigation should be intuitive to users (Baldwin & Ching, 2019). Therefore, this section introduces students to the navigation of the course—where to look for what and how to utilize the student center.

Also located in this section is an informal formative evaluation of the OSC. This is in place to ensure students are getting the most out of this student center, as well as provide the program with improvement information. This evaluation is in the form of a feedback survey (*discussed in more detail in the Design Failures and Solutions section of this paper*).

### 'Program Information' Tab

Although this section may seem redundant (i.e., learners should know about the program that they are enrolled in), we found the vision, goals, and accomplishments of the program are normally communicated to our face-to-face

**Marisa Exter**  
Associate Professor  
Learning Design and Technology  
[Curriculum and Instruction](#)

**- Profile**

Dr. Marisa Exter has 15 years of experience in software design, design, and MS in Computer Science, along with a PhD in Instructional Systems. She has a focus on formal and non-formal educational experiences and professional technology (such as Instructional Design, Computing, and Engineering) in undergraduate education, especially through interdisciplinary programs.

Marisa takes a mentorship approach to teaching and co-leads an online program from a wide range of backgrounds and interest areas (<https://disruptiveeducation.purdue.edu/>). She is a member of the Computing Curriculum 2020 Task Force and its co-coordinator of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology Symposium. She is currently the Purdue PI for a \$3M multi-institutional computing competencies. She is a certified Mental Health First Aid.

**+ Education**

**+ Experience**

**+ Professional Memberships**

**+ Research and Publications**

**+ Courses Typically Taught**

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**GO BACK TO FACULTY FINDER >**

New Search

**FIGURE 5.** Faculty profile example.

populations through informal conversations. Therefore, we wanted a space where this same information be communicated with online learners; therefore, the 'Program Information' tab was created.

While students are introduced to the program via the University website and admissions agents, this section of the student center devolves into deeper program information such as the background and history, program guides, College and program awards, the program mission statement, and information such as graduate plan of study, portfolio, and other degree requirements. Furthermore, program FAQs and advising/registration point of contacts are provided. These are important elements in our online center. As many of our learners are geographically distanced from the University and are working adults, keeping all program information together helps to streamline all information together for learner convenience.

### 'Faculty' Tab

As mentioned earlier, social presence is important for learners in online environments. Therefore, all faculty profiles are provided via links in the 'Faculty' tab. Initially, faculty information was fully housed in the OSC. However, we found the same faculty information was present on the University's website; and when an instructor wanted to change personal

information, both the program's website and the OSC had to be updated. To increase efficiency as well as keeping information up to date at all times, links are now provided in Blackboard to LDT instructors' online profiles (*more information on the impact of the program's website changes in the Unplanned Benefits & Outcomes section of this paper*).

Faculty profiles include: a picture, bio, educational background, appointments, selected publications, previous experiences, and LDT courses taught (see Fig. 5). It is important for the students to not only know each other in this program but build relationships with their instructors to help "counteract the structural isolation and disconnectedness of the graduate experience," especially when that experience is all online (Brandes, 2006, p. 89).

Another unique aspect of our program is the hiring of external (outside of the University) adjunct faculty. Our adjunct faculty (who all hold doctoral degrees in the field of instructional design, educational technology, online learning, etc. from a range of universities) provide an additional layer of expertise in areas where our faculty may not. In most cases,

these individuals are employed full-time positions outside of their role as an adjunct professor (e.g., instructional designers, independent consultants, eLearning, and online program directors, etc.). Therefore, providing students with instructors' biography information helps students to build connections with individuals who may have expertise in students' field of interest.

### 'Courses' Tab

As most of our learner population are working adults, the courses section of the student center contains class information on the courses students will take or are offered to take in the program. Although this section seems intuitive, there are specific reasons for its importance.

First, students are required to complete a practicum experience (*discussed earlier in the Initial Prototype section*). As students are required to find their own practicum experiences, providing information early and often allow learners to seek these experiential learning experiences sooner rather than later. This section also provides them with practicum FAQs, examples, and resources to best set learners up for success. Second, our student population tend to work ahead and want to prepare and learn about their courses in advance.

Therefore, this section allows for learners to get a feel for course objectives, assignments, workload, etc.

Third, many of our students are earning their degrees as part of professional development or job-related programs that pay for their education. For this reason, students may be required to provide employers with course information—syllabus and learning objectives, activities or assignments, confirmation of registration, etc. Since course information is limited on the public facing program website as well as University course calendar, students can use this section of the OSC to access additional course information.

In the 'Courses' tab, classes are broken into two sections: required and elective courses. In their corresponding section, each course has its own folder where students will find a course description, a sample syllabus, the textbook information, the lead faculty member, and if appropriate, any additional readings or files. Students are aware (via a note in each course folder) that information may change from course to course and from instructor to instructor. For this reason, the syllabi presented give students a *sense* of course expectations, learning objectives, and assignments; students are advised to contact the course faculty or lead instructor directly for course particulars.

Further complicating things, in the fall of 2017, the LDT schedule of courses changed to reflect a move towards a digital badge competency-based program and portfolio - rather than a standard portfolio completed at the end of one's course of study. This change affected which courses students should take based on their admittance into the program (i.e., students admitted after fall 2017 followed a different course schedule than students admitted before fall

2017). The course tab provides a clear outline as to which students should be taking which courses based on their program start dates.

### 'Presentations' Tab

In the LDT program, both online and face-to-face courses utilize guest speakers to supplement course topics, help provide skill acquisition, and enhance issues or problems taught in courses. Guest speakers typically change from course-to-course (i.e., the same guest speaker does not typically do multiple talks). Ergo, the program started recording the guest speakers' presentations so that all students can access at their convenience. While originally the recordings were created for those students who were unable to attend the live presentation (e.g., work responsibilities, time zone issues, illness, family time, etc.), it soon became apparent all students in the program could profit from watching the recordings, regardless of the course(s) they were taking at the time. As a result, the program tries to record and upload all guest speakers' presentations to the OSC as a resource for all students.

All presentations are grouped together in categories for ease of student access. Topics include developing a research agenda, seeking professional positions, how to use a certain tool, etc. In some cases, each time a course is offered a new guest speaker will talk on the course topic. For example, we have range of guest speakers who spoke on how to frame and develop a professional portfolio. Through the range of speaker videos, presenters are "representing their own 'personal goals, interests, and self-presentation techniques," allowing students to see the wide variability in how

Forum: Student and Faculty Lounge				
In a thread, you can view the post and information about it, such as the author and posted date. All replies appear on the same page with the parent post. <a href="#">More Help</a>				
Create Thread		Subscribe		
Thread Actions		Collect		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Date	Thread	Author	Status
<input type="checkbox"/>	8/27/19 3:02 PM	Changes to AECT - India		Published
<input type="checkbox"/>	10/22/18 9:26 AM	AECT - Kansas City, MO		Published
<input type="checkbox"/>	2/15/18 1:50 PM	Lafayette Regional eLearning Conference		Published
<input type="checkbox"/>	6/29/17 9:29 PM	AERA Faculty Sponsor		Published
<input type="checkbox"/>	7/11/16 11:12 AM	To Make You Laugh On a Monday!		Published
<input type="checkbox"/>	11/4/15 12:58 PM	Questions for Faculty		Published

FIGURE 6. Sample student and faculty lounge discussion topics.



instructional design is applied in different contexts (Smith & Dalton, 2016, p. 720).

### 'Student and Faculty Lounge' Tab

Building a community outside of the classroom was important to the LDT program; in fact, it was one of the main reasons for the creation of the center. And while all courses have the three introduction and class-building discussions, the student center needed something similar for students across cohorts. Thus the 'Student and Faculty Lounge' discussion board was developed (see Fig. 6). This lounge is an area where an individual can share information with *all* LDT students—regardless of which cohort they entered in with. Thus far, these discussions have been used to touch base regarding upcoming conferences and who will be in attendance.

Later, the program added threads focusing on creating student connections for those interested in the same context (e.g., non-profit, government, higher education, K-12, and other). The hope is these threads will allow students to build connections with others in a low pressure setting.

### 'Graduation' Tab

In our online program, many students make their first trip to the Purdue campus when they attend their own graduation. This should be a happy and joyful time for our students when they make the trip to Purdue, and they step on that stage to accept their degree. We know they have worked hard for over the past year and a half, and the LDT program wants this to be a stress-free visit, especially given that traveling to a new city, state, or country can be tense. As such, the 'Graduation' tab was created. Included first is a link to the University's commencement page. This houses all of the information students need to register for graduation, check their graduation status, order announcements, plan for commencement attire, order gowns, hoods, and tassels, etc. This website also holds commencement tickets, seating, parking, accessibility, schedules, and other relevant information needed when students come for their big day.

Second, we provided a direct link to the University's website for ordering cap and gowns. Although cap and gown information can be found through the first link provided, we often field student questions on cap and gown information specifically. Third, detailed information regarding the LDT

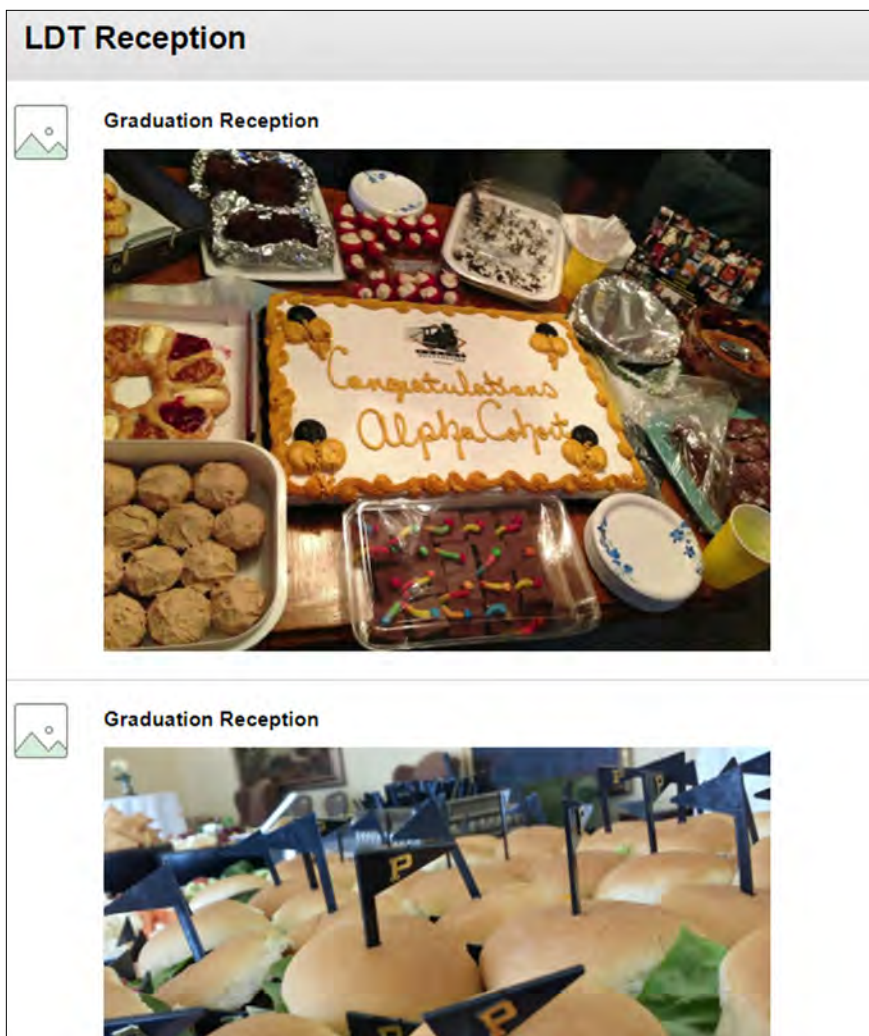


FIGURE 7. Graduation reception images.

graduation reception is included— what to expect, time and location, and other specifics needed for the event. Fourth, we provide suggestions on what to do, where to stay, and other visiting related information when coming to campus. We link to the city's visitor website that has hotels, travel directions to campus, restaurants, attractions, and other guest information for our graduating students and their families who make the trip.

A popular document in this section of the student center is a list of student traditions that our graduates may want to participate in (e.g., attend Breakfast Club, do a fountain run, visit Harry's Chocolate Shop, etc.). The history of the University and a walking tour for those who want to learn more about the Purdue are also included in this section. Lastly, we provide pictures from previous LDT graduations - cohort pictures, student submitted photos, graduation images, and so on (see Fig. 7). Our hope is by reading (and seeing) graduation celebrations that our students will make the trip and meet their cohort peers, faculty, and staff all in a face-to-face environment.

## 'Beyond Graduation' Tab

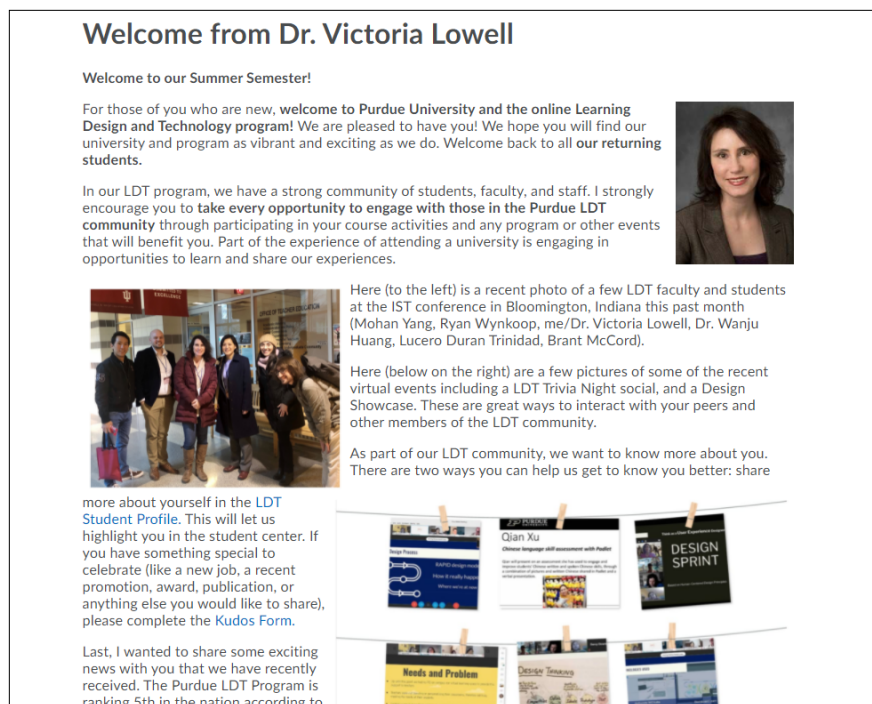
This section of the OSC contains tips and tricks for job hunting, building communities outside of the program, and professional organizations. Many of our students apply and start new positions while working on their degree, not necessarily after the degree has been awarded. Therefore, we wanted a section in the student center that focused on preparing students for the job hunt, how to search for positions, and what can be expected while on the job. In April 2016, IntentionalFutures created a report on the role, workflow, and experiences of instructional designers from self-reported data. This report effectively explains how different instructional design positions vary from company to company or environment to environment and is included in this section of the student center.

While students are required to produce a portfolio during their program, many try to update and refocus from an academic to a professional audience once they earn their degree. The 'Beyond Graduation' tab includes information, tips, and guidance on how to update their portfolio to a new audience. In addition to their professional portfolio (typically a website), we provide articles on how to leverage LinkedIn and other professional organizations/associations to obtain jobs.

## 'Useful Resources' Tab

The most accessed section of the OSC is the 'Useful Resources' section. Due to the mixed background and experiences of our student population, some enter in the program having no or limited knowledge of field related concepts, training and/or instructional design experience. It is not uncommon to feel overwhelmed when learning a new field - concepts, theory, or knowledge (Fiock et al., 2022), and by providing useful resources, our hope is that students will be able to worry less on searching and learning about different tools, programs, and assets typically used in instructional design.

One of the first areas covered in 'Useful Resources' is the online learning toolkit. This toolkit focuses on Purdue specific considerations when learning online - such as organization, communication, study habits, online group work, and where to get support while learning online. Second, we provide our students with instructional design professional organizations they can join. Third, we share publications that may be of interest as they complete and work through their master's program. Fourth, specific information on practicums and internships is available. In some cases, students are already



The graphic is a welcome announcement for the Summer Semester. It features a header 'Welcome from Dr. Victoria Lowell' and a sub-header 'Welcome to our Summer Semester!'. The main text welcomes new and returning students to Purdue University and the online Learning Design and Technology program. It mentions a recent photo of LDT faculty and students at the IST conference in Bloomington, Indiana, and lists the names of the attendees: Mohan Yang, Ryan Wynkoop, Dr. Victoria Lowell, Dr. Wanjun Huang, Lucero Duran Trinidad, and Brant McCord. Below this, it mentions recent virtual events like a LDT Trivia Night social and a Design Showcase. It then asks for more information about the community and provides two ways to share: via a 'Kudos Form' or by sharing news. The bottom section shows a collage of various documents and posters, including one titled 'DESIGN SPRINT' and another titled 'Needs and Problem'.

FIGURE 8. Sample semester welcome announcement.

working in the field and can easily obtain a practicum experience. In other cases, students need help knowing who to reach out to or what types of experiences we are looking for. This folder lists companies who are looking for people with the skills and knowledge we teach our students in our program. It is the students' responsibility to reach out and secure their practicum on their own (much like finding a job in the real-world).

Lastly, we provide students with helpful software and websites. These are grouped in a number of categories: APA help, apps, cloud storage and file sharing, flowcharts/diagrams/visual tools, presentation technologies, project management tools, site hosting, instant polling, course management systems, and Open Educational Resources (OERs). We try to share field popular tools as well as free applications open to students. The LDT program strives on teaching the foundational educational and required background needed for instructional designers. Tools will change over time, but the knowledge required to utilize those tools and technologies properly will not. Our students should be able to apply research-based practices to a range of tools or settings.

## Announcements Landing Page

The 'Announcements' section is the most active element in the OSC. Any staff or faculty member of the program has authorization to send announcements through the center. A variety of items are featured: programmatic changes, job postings, semester welcomes, graduation information, student and instructor profiles, etc. Each semester begins with a welcome announcement from a faculty member who

discusses program, department, or college changes, features of the student center, and any other interesting facts about the University since the start of the last semester (see Fig. 8). These messages have appeared in both text and video format. It is, however, worth noting that involving and asking for faculty involvement with these announcements is crucial. While one student center moderator may be posting all announcements, other faculty and staff encouraged to be involved as students like to hear directly from faculty voices too. Therefore, the moderator of the student center must plan for faculty engagement (see *Management Notes for more information*).

The student center announcements are very important in developing and building community. The announcement landing page is the first page the learner sees when they enter the student center. Ng (2011) states,

*The average person knows all he wants to know about your community in the first 10 seconds. If a visitor lands on your community pages, looks around, and leaves within a few seconds, something is wrong. Your landing pages have to be intriguing enough to keep potential members interested longer than 10 seconds and encourage them to check out other areas of your community. (p. 246).*

Therefore, the content of the announcements is critical in keeping our students interested in the center. This page also contains the direct link to self-submitted kudos form.

After the launch of an evaluation survey of the student center (discussed in more detail in the *Design Failure & Solutions* section of this paper), student-submitted kudos were created and added to the student center. As part of this change, a student can submit their own kudos. When the learner clicks on the kudos form, they are met with the following, "Thank

you for sharing in your good news! Please complete the form below and we will add your information into the LDT Online Student Center." Next, the student is asked to answer the following questions:

1. What kind of information would you like to share with the group?
2. Please provide your first and last name.
3. Please provide your email—we will only reach out to you for more information or for a photo to share with the group regarding your kudos.

## DESIGN FAILURES & SOLUTIONS

After launching, we found that many students did not access or view the OSC materials. Each semester, students were added to the center and still no activity occurred; it was not gaining attention or activity as we were hoping. Upon researching as to why this was occurring, we found that students were not aware of the center via any other method other than the course appearing in Blackboard (i.e., students were not notified of a new course being added - it simply just appeared in the listing of their courses). To remedy this communication error, many steps were taken.

1. Prior to starting the program, students must complete an orientation where they become familiar with the LMS system, program policies, procedures, and requirements. We added a write up about the student center in this orientation. Therefore, new students are aware that the OSC exists, and it should be available to them upon officially starting in the program.
2. Each semester, after students are added to the center, they will receive an email in the form of an announcement to introduce them to the student center (see Fig. 9). This email is sent by the student center moderator in

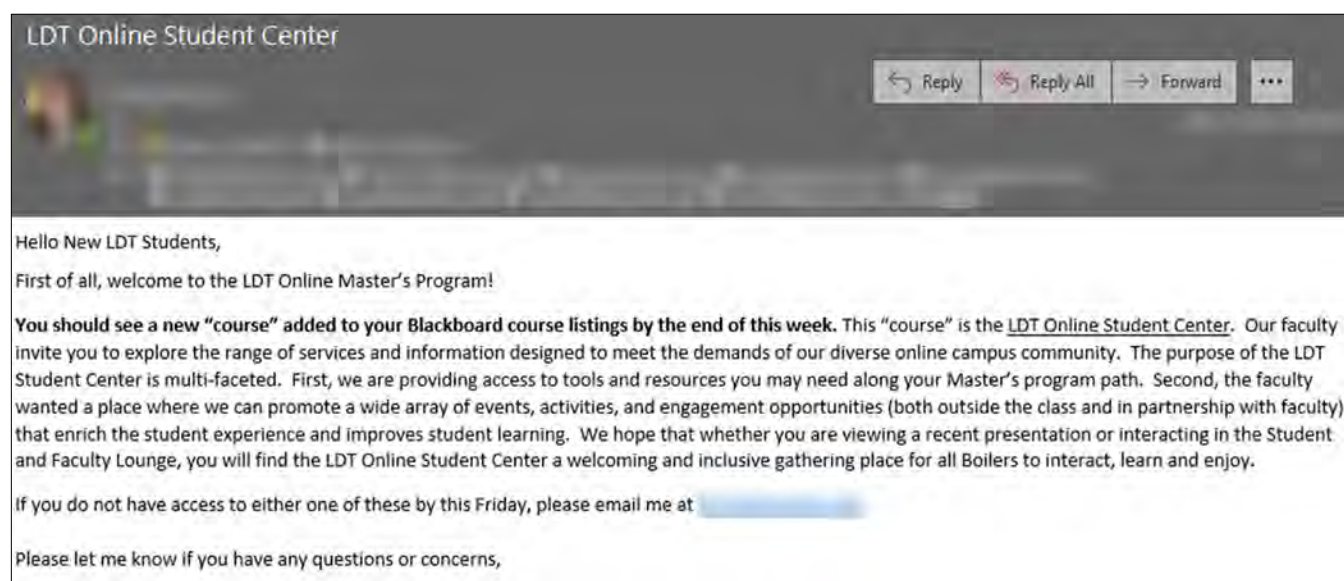


FIGURE 9. Student center welcome email.



hopes learners will read an email from a person rather than a LMS system.

3. A change was made in how announcements were sent to students. Initially students were notified of a new announcement via a Blackboard notification. In asking students if the announcements were aligned with their interests, we found students were not aware of the announcements since they did not actively check their Blackboard notifications, nor did they read their initial email about the student center. The lack of reading email is a typical issue with new students who often forget to check their school email accounts. To increase the views of announcements, we selected the 'send email' option when posting new announcements—an option originally overlooked by the manager. Selecting this option ensures that students receive notice of the new announcement via an email - in addition to the standard Blackboard notification. After using this option, we noticed an increase in the student center views per Blackboard data.

### **Increased Views Do Not Equal Increased Activity**

Although we were excited that the improvements increased the views of the student center, it did not mean student activity within the student center increased. We first assumed that students were viewing the announcements in their emails and did not have a reason to go into the student center. To confirm our premise, we developed a survey to obtain feedback from the students regarding the student center. First, this survey was sent directly to all students via email. Second, this survey was (and is still) linked within the student center. The survey is promoted yearly via announcement to obtain feedback and keep up with the ever-growing student population. Survey data helps guide changes and information presented within the center. The survey included the following questions:

1. What would you like to see more of in the LDT Student Center?
2. Do you find the LDT Student Center beneficial as a supplement to your program? If no, please explain why.
3. Any other additional comments?

Much like a regular course, evaluation from your learners is very important. Obtaining this data provides the LDT program with benefits as described by Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick (2016). First, our program receives immediate feedback which allows for quick adjustment of materials if needed. Each time a survey is completed, we receive an email of the responses which allows for quick changes or student response if warranted. Secondly, "engagement and satisfaction increase because learners are being heard and see immediate response to their concerns" (p. 40); when a change is made, students are notified via the course announcements or LMS system announcements.

Moreover, Blackboard provides LMS data regarding when the student center was accessed, how long the learner stays in the center, which elements the learners are reading, etc. This data paired with the student feedback permits us to determine how successful the student center is, what elements students are accessing or not accessing, and what elements students enjoy or dislike.

### **Data Driven Changes**

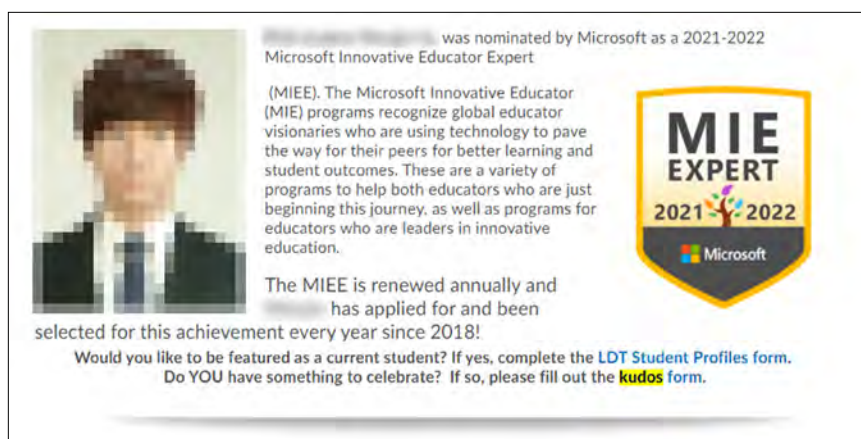
Since the launch of the survey and after carefully reviewing data collected from students, the OSC evolved to include more announcements and information based on student interests. A study conducted by Baab (2004) showed that learners with shared course experiences reported that these experiences helped to enhance their learning and supplement their understanding of how topics connect to the real world. Therefore, we wanted to mimic these types of conditions within the student center; this was done in two ways.

First, a profile feature was added to include instructor and student biographies. These profiles allow students to see the other side of their peers and instructors—focusing on outside activities, informal sharing of information, and more personalized stories. The faculty profiles were reported as especially interesting to students as faculty provided personal aspects beyond what was included in the University bios website. Additionally, these informal profiles allow for individuals to bond on topics or shared interests not often discussed in the online classroom (e.g., Star Wars fans). This aligns with research from Gallagher-Lepak et al. (2009) where they found establishing commonalities with peers and instructors helped to build online community.

Second, a kudos form (via online survey) was created for students to share successes with each other. At first, learners were reluctant to submit their own kudos to the survey. To remedy this problem, faculty shared individual student accomplishments or stories to the student center moderator. The moderator then reached out to the student congratulating them on their recent accomplishment, asked for additional information, and if they would approve of an announcement being made on their behalf (see Fig. 10). Once student kudos started to be posted, other learners were more open to submit their own kudos. Kudos have included announcements on recent promotions, awards, new jobs, publications, etc.

Another issue that arose was student-reported concerns of announcement frequency. Therefore, to keep a balance between student interest and burn-out, we determined one announcement a week was the best way to keep LDT learners connected. This posting schedule also aligned with the amount of information we typically have on hand—enough for one weekly announcement with three to four items per posting. Items differ from week to week. For illustration - in





**FIGURE 10.** Student kudos example announcement.

one month, we had announcements on the following: week 1: student submitted kudos announcement for a new job, free graduate level training, job posting; week 2: online invite to a research seminar focused on big data in education, graduate student publication; week 3: practicum opportunity, job posting; and week 4: kudos announcement for faculty members who received a University award.

The weekly announcement change showed increased views as well as boosted kudos submissions, profile features, and student-submitted trainings and activities of interest. This finding is not surprising as Ng (2011) discusses the importance of highlighting and sharing in community members' accomplishments. As a result of this increased submission of kudos and other types of activities, our weekly announcements are now significantly larger housing 2-5 topics of interest a week—more like a weekly memo.

### Alumni Interest & Activity

In the summer of 2020, we started dual or cross posting some student center announcements on our social media channels. These posts led to some LDT program alumni wanting to be involved and give back to the program. Therefore, starting in late summer/early fall of 2020, a new feature was created highlighting program alumni.

The alumni profiles highlight the diverse field of instructional design to prospective and current students in the program—showing a variety of professional employment experiences that are available. Furthermore, we were able to leverage this opportunity to provide current students with alumni advice by tailoring the questions (e.g., what advice would you give current students).

Lastly, these profiles opened the door between program and alumni relationships. For example, many alumni reached out after receiving their survey and asked how they could give back to the program—guest speaking opportunities, serving on panels, providing program feedback as part of focus groups, helping to write letters of support for program award

submissions, etc. This was an unintended benefit of this feature that has helped our both the LDT program and our student/alumni populations.

### UNPLANNED BENEFITS & OUTCOMES

Late in the fall of 2016, the College received notice that the communication office would be updating their entire website to align with University templates, navigation, color schemes, available content, accessibility, etc. While not an initial concern, one outcome of the website redesign was the removal of program documents and information—specifically, student facing texts. The reason for the removal was due to data obtained from College-wide website review. Since most website traffic accessed general information, recruitment, and undergraduate programs, the decision was made to streamline, clean, and remove documents (i.e., a lot of out-of-date documents were still accessible on the website).

This change made the OSC an even more important resource for current students as information previously housed on the program website was no longer available. Retention of these documents were normally maintained on the website; therefore, our program needed to find a new “home” for these important files. Moreover, students quickly realized that some documents were lost in the website redesign. When asked where to find these files, faculty were able to point learners to the OSC—helping to retain program records and also give students a reason to visit the center.

A new website change occurred in the fall of 2020. The University determined all online programs need to be housed in a new section of the larger University website focused only on online certificate and degree programs (i.e., a student would look under Purdue Online for the LDT online master's program rather than the College of Education website). As part of this move, elimination of program information from the website occurred, again. It was important for the new website to have a consistent look and feel from one program to another. As such, course descriptions and other information was reduced from an unlimited to a specific number of characters. The information about the goals, purpose and history of the program were removed. This change did not directly affect us because as part of our design process, we already determined this information should be available to students in the student center.

The website change did, however, prompt us to create a new tab/section in our student center for doctoral students since their program related documents were removed from

the website. Due to the success of the OSC, we knew that this would be the logical place to store doctoral student related documents. This change essentially expanded our population from online master's students—to all students in LDT programs (face-to-face doctoral, face-to-face certificate, and face-to-face and online master's level students).

The change in audience had unintended benefits we did not intentionally plan on. First, it helped bridge the gap between master's level and doctoral level students. Announcements now feature students of all levels. Master's students were able to view doctoral program files, which led to increased interest in our doctoral program, specifically by master's students.

Other than the addition of the 'PhD Students' tab, we were prepared for the issues that came with the website changes—having a system already in place. Other online programs, however, had to be reactive to the situation. As a result, our program's OSC became a model for several other programs across the University.

In the next section, we will discuss the design reflection and considerations when running an online student center.

## DESIGN REFLECTION

The need for a centralized place for online programs and related documents was one reason for writing this design case. I wanted to share with others the challenges, obstacles, and research-driven decisions we faced during this process. For others looking to develop similar online centers or websites, we hope our process and explanations show intentional use of theoretical frameworks and instructional design principles based on our program's goals: community building and housing vital program information.

I would be remiss in writing this case and not discussing the time and effort required in running an online student center. One question I often field from others who utilize our student center as a model is asking about the time, energy, and effort that is needed to run one. I will discuss these concerns next.

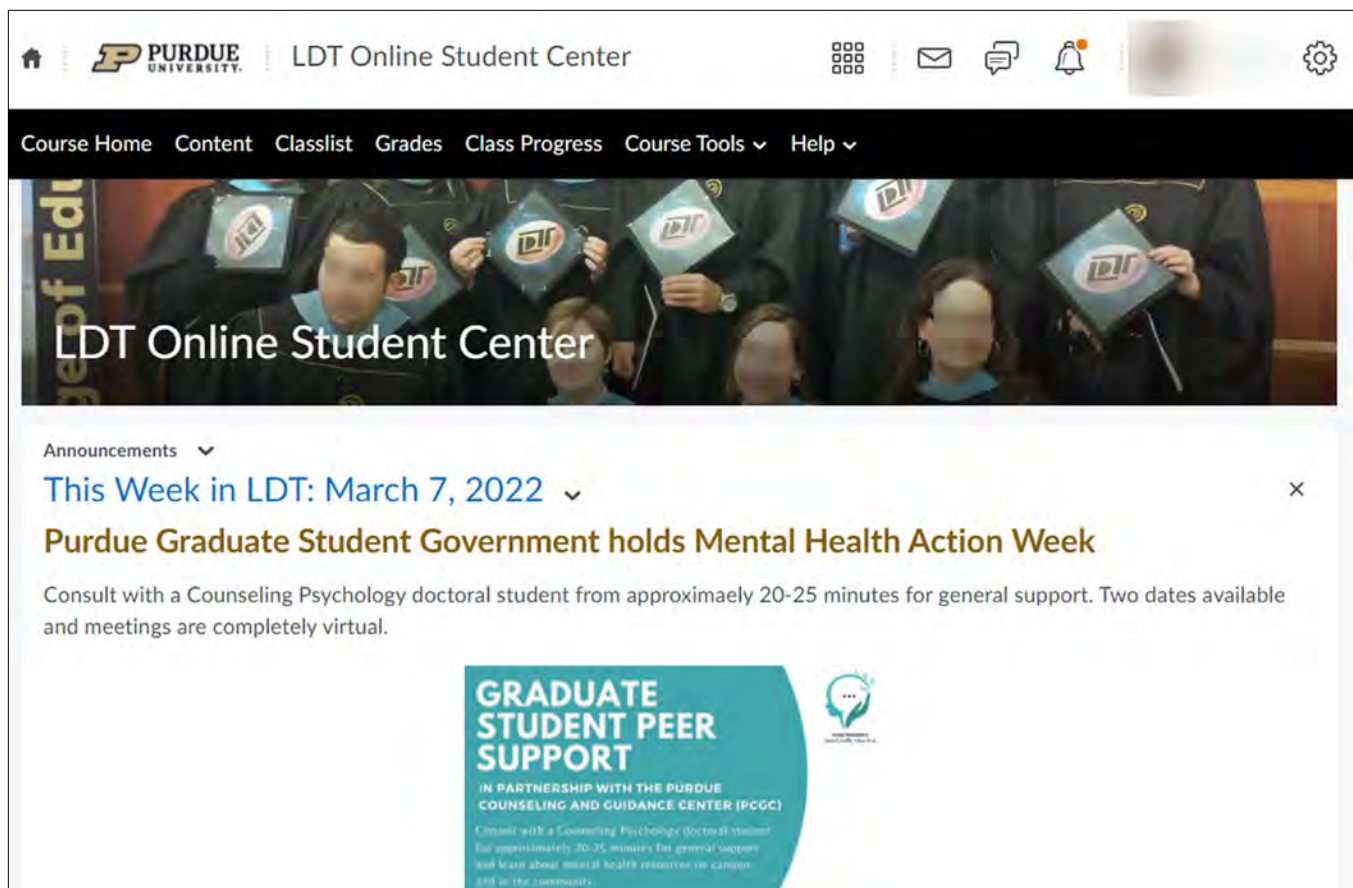
First, I recommend that a program identify the *purpose* of their center. If you are looking to develop a repository of information for learners—treat it as such, sell it to your learners as such. Consider the best way to share documents with your students. Can it be housed in the LMS, a paper manual, a website? If wanting to treat it as a student center where learners can and will interact with each other—market it to your learners as that. Furthermore, if using as a student center for interaction, identify an individual to be actively involved. You want to make sure there is activity, discussion(s), purpose, and reason(s) for your learners to utilize the center. Ensure you have an individual monitoring the students' interaction. The reason I state monitoring is because not all

students will use the center for the way it was intended. This aligns with Ng's (2011) advice: "forums do require a bit of technical expertise to install and keep running properly, but they're not difficult to manage. If not moderated properly, forums are magnets for spammers, trolls, and other negativity" (p. 15). Make sure the center is being used for the reason it was intended—not as a place for students to rant, harass, sell things, cause issues, etc.

Regardless of the route you go (e.g., repository of information, student center), have someone take ownership and moderate the place you develop. This means keeping content updated and maintaining student interest and activity. As previously discussed, our program sends out a weekly announcement. This information is gathered by me—an individual who works for the University as an instructional designer in the program, was previously employed in the College's graduate office for two years, was a master's student and am a current doctoral student in the program. Based on my background, I am uniquely qualified to identify different activities, announcements, and topics both across campus and in the field of instructional design that would apply *specifically* to our learners. I recommend identifying an individual who has a background in student services, has relationships with offices related to student services, or is an individual who works in the field of study as your learners.

Another consideration that the manager needs to be aware of is the time required on their end for creation of materials, announcements, and other items. If announcements are going to be used, make sure to consider the time it takes to develop materials on the schedule determined by the program (i.e., weekly, bi-weekly, monthly). Specific to announcements, I previously mentioned the process I took to get the profile and kudos features off the ground. What I did not mention was the time it took to get this up and running. The first year heavily fell on me to reach out to students to ask for their accomplishments. We did not have enough kudos or profiles to feature one per week. Initially, these were completed monthly or based on availability. A lot of time and energy was spent finding that fine line between asking students for information without spamming their accounts to where they would not pay attention to the requests.

Ensure you understand and know how the enrollment and unenrollment of users works for the system you create. For example, at our University since the course is considered non-credit, users must be manually added each semester. While not a huge time commitment, I do need to plan time to add users at the beginning of each semester—keeping in mind that some learners will be added to the course rosters after the semester start dates as late-registered students. I would also recommend checking with your system on how many individuals can be in a course or system at once—enrollment caps may cause additional issues in the system you are not aware of (e.g., website loading times). If enrollment



**FIGURE 11.** Brightspace landing page with announcement.

caps are an issue—consider removing students a semester after they graduate to save on space.

Plan a time (e.g., yearly, bi-yearly, once a semester or term) to conduct a review of the center and ensure content is accurate. In an ideal world, if a faculty member or course developer changes something in the course (e.g., syllabus, textbook), they would contact you to update the student center. This is not always the case. Therefore, the manager must build-in time to review and check the information being presented to the learners in the center. A few things I check for include verifying course requirements, confirming access to tools (is a free version still available, is the tool still in use, did the tool get renamed), are links in the student center still live and active, etc.? Having your center reviewed by an external member or student learner is a great way to help ensure all items are relative and working for your audience.

Realize your program is different than what I present to you in this case. What works for me—as the manager of the OSC—may not work for you and your program. I recommend sitting down with your faculty and identifying your needs and wants. Knowing the outcome of what you want from an online student center should be the first major step in your own design process. For our program, it was

creating a place—one place—where learners can interact, build community, share, and know the resources available to them. This goal has always been at the forefront of our design; knowing your own program's goals will help you succeed in the development of your own center - however that center may look for you.

## MOVING LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

In summer 2020, the university switched learning management systems from Blackboard Learn to D2L's Brightspace (Fig. 11). As part of the move (and the yearly audit) all materials were checked for accuracy and availability. This is especially important when providing access to different online tools where links often break. One major difference between the systems is the announcement tool and capabilities. As such, many Brightspace learner tutorials have been created in the form of videos and job aids to help the users become acclimated to the new environment. These tutorials and guides are uploaded into the OSC. As such, instructors can direct students to the student center documents in their own class. A Brightspace user feedback survey has also been implemented where learners can submit requests for specific help or tutorials on how to complete tasks in the new LMS.

The biggest Brightspace challenge to date, is that students can opt in (and opt out) of receiving course announcements via text or email. This challenge extends to credit-bearing courses as well. Therefore, important program information may be missed by students who do not opt in for announcements. We have tried to remedy this by sending out an email through the student center directing students to sign up for these notifications. Tutorial videos have also been added to help assist with this process. However, at the end of the day, it is ultimately the student's responsibility to sign up for announcements.

Lastly, we as a program are still learning about the different tools and features within Brightspace. We plan for additional changes to the student center if the tools or features benefit and serve our learner population.

## CONCLUSION

Since its launch, the Online Student Center (OSC) has been an exemplar across campus for other online programs looking to build community among their learner populations. Parallel online student centers (i.e., similar format and design) have launched in different programs from different colleges across the University. Requests for access to LDT's OSC were a main driver in writing this article. One, to first explain what an online student center looks like and the necessary sections and elements within it. Two, highlighting the need for and importance of a student center moderator. And three, discuss and share in our design process, the reasons for our choices, and the outcomes of the final development so that others can benefit from our design experience.

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