Integrating Applied Learning and Community Outreach into Online Education

Presenters:
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1. **Learning Objective(s) of the presentation:** Participants will:
   a) understand how service requirements in an online program can be met,
   b) understand how to increase student engagement through applied learning in an online program, and
   c) understand how to increase an online program's presence within the local community.

Abstract for program and website:

For online schools and programs fulfilling service requirements can be challenging. To address this issue, an online program can utilize an integrated outreach program with local stakeholders. This session explores how to link applied learning and community outreach to allow students to impact the local community while experiencing applied learning and increasing the presence of the online program in communities.

Description of the session:

The tenants of education, service, and scholarship shape the development and operations of academic institutions from the promotion of faculty to the foundation of schools, colleges, and universities. In efforts to gain legitimacy, institutions of online education grapple with how to develop and secure their roles as educators, servers, and scholars. The fully online Masters of Public Health Program (MPH) at A.T. Still University (ATSU) addressed this issue in a unique and integrated manner. It built a partnership with the local health department, Troop B in northeastern Missouri, to have an integrated outreach program. The partnership linked applied learning and community outreach in a format which allowed students to impact community members while experiencing applied learning techniques.

The "experiential education" aspect of the Troop B program allowed the online program to have an applied learning component which improved academic and workplace outcomes. The Troop B program gives students an opportunity to gain real world skills and experience. The program provides Troop B with outreach materials that have a local focus. The efforts of the students allow Troop B health professionals to pick from many offerings to address local topics or general topics with a local focus. The program also allows students to develop outreach skills and enter the response phase of a needs assessment. This moves the focal point of academic assignments from theory to practice. ATSU courses benefit from integrating current public health issues and needs into the curriculum. This process creates stronger courses while providing key outreach services to Troop B and the communities it serves. Research of the program effectiveness completes the picture. The research focuses on what is used and how much of an impact those items have.

The maturation of online education involves the integration of traditional education methods usually reserved for residence based institutions such as experiential education. Experiential education builds on the educator's ability engage learners in "direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities." (Association for Experiential Education, 2016) Experiential education affords students the opportunity to take academic concepts, apply them to real world problems, and then develop solutions which can be evaluated against outcomes. Transforming information from academic theory into real world resource increases retention of information and concepts while building skills.

From this session, chairs will have increased awareness of the opportunities available to link courses within an online program to community partners to increase learning outcomes as well as community service. They will also understand methods used to leverage an applied learning approach to benefit the institution, program, student, and external stakeholders. Attendees will be expected to provide personal insight into their approaches to increasing service and applied learning within an online program and time will be used at the end of the session to share these best practice.