

The power of social connectedness: strategies for enhancing student persistence in online higher education

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Abstract

Persistent low completion rates remain a significant challenge in online post-secondary programs, compelling educators to explore and address the factors that affect student persistence. Research by Ortagus, Hughes, and Allchin (2024) suggests that online students may face varied outcomes in completion rates, inviting a deeper understanding of supportive educational practices. At the same time, a comprehensive study by Shaikh and Asif (2022) finds that social connectedness plays a key role in online student persistence, emphasizing the importance of fostering a sense of belonging, shared goals and norms, and online communities. Drawing on these insights, this paper proposes actionable tactics for educators to strengthen social connectedness in online classrooms, aiming to enhance student persistence and completion rates. Through these strategies, this inquiry contributes to the broader discussion on overcoming challenges in online learning environments and offers promising pathways for improving student outcomes.

Keywords Student persistence, Online learning, Post-secondary education, Social connectedness, Sense of belonging, Higher education, Norms, Community building, Online communities

Paper type Research paper



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Introduction

This inquiry aimed to respond to a call for strategies to address the issue of low student persistence and completion rates in online post-secondary programs. Drawing upon insights from peer-reviewed publications, practical sources, and the 2U/edX Learning Experience Framework and extant knowledge base, considerations are revealed for creating a sense of belonging, cultivating a shared purpose and norms, and fostering online communities. The overarching goal is to equip educators with tactics to enhance social connectedness and

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address the problem of low student persistence in online programs. Specifically, this research investigated three overarching questions:

- (1) How could a sense of belonging be created in post-secondary online learning settings?
- (2) How could educators establish and cultivate a shared purpose and norms in a virtual post-secondary program?
- (3) How could online communities be fostered by educators in the post-secondary context?

The following section delves into the motivation behind the work and its approach, emphasizing the significance of addressing these questions to improve the overall online higher education experience.

Research motivation

The landscape of online education has experienced exponential growth over the past two decades, marking it as the fastest-growing sector within the education industry (Oxford Learning College, n.d.). Since its inception in 2000, the global market for online learning has surged by over 900%, a trend largely attributed to technological advancements and infrastructure improvements (Oxford Learning College, n.d.). This growth trajectory has been consistent, steadily rising for nearly a decade, propelled further during the COVID-19 pandemic when in-person opportunities were limited. Despite the gradual return to traditional classrooms, online programs, especially at the graduate level, have continued to expand (Hamilton & Beagle, 2024). A staggering 98% of universities have pivoted to offer online courses, indicative of the pervasive influence of virtual learning across higher education institutions (Cooke, 2024). Projections shared by Peck (2024) suggest that this trend is set to continue, with online learning expected to grow by as much as 9.1% annually until 2026. Alongside this growth, there has been a noticeable shift in the perception of the value of online programs, with a significant portion of Americans viewing them as equally valuable, if not more so, than their on-campus counterparts (Coffey, 2023).

However, challenges persist regarding completion rates in online education. Research by Ortagus *et al.* (2024) suggests that degree completion rates might be favorably impacted by the in-person educational experience, compared to the online route. According to Shaikh and Asif (2022), the issue of low completion rates stems from a lack of persistence among online students. While this phenomenon has been studied, Shaikh and Asif call attention to the fact that schools are still seeking resolutions to this issue.

To unveil the factors influencing the low persistence rates of online students in post-secondary programs, Shaikh and Asif (2022) conducted a comprehensive review of peer-reviewed empirical studies spanning the past two decades. Their analysis synthesized key findings from this body of research, identifying both positive and negative contributors to student persistence in online post-secondary programs. Building upon these insights, Shaikh and Asif revealed arrangements that illustrate the relationships between these factors, shedding light on the complex dynamics at play.

In their examination of the various factors affecting online learning persistence, Shaikh and Asif (2022) emphasized the pivotal role of educators in maintaining students' interest, motivation, and successful completion of courses and programs. Educators wield a range of strategies to influence student persistence and promote progress toward program completion. Particularly noteworthy is the emphasis placed by Shaikh and Asif on the role of educators in fostering social connectedness among students. Specifically, Shaikh and Asif identify the efforts of educators in creating a sense of belonging, establishing shared goals and norms, and nurturing online communities as key factors contributing to a sense of social connectedness among students.

Building upon this research, this paper aims to provide educators with considerations for creating social connectedness – by fostering a sense of belonging, establishing shared goals and norms, and nurturing online communities – in post-secondary programs. This research is driven by the imperative to address student persistence in online higher education, while also recognizing the essential need to ensure social connectedness in learning contexts, particularly in virtual settings where it holds even greater significance.

Online programs can sometimes make students – particularly those who are more accustomed to traditional classroom settings or may be balancing their studies with work, family and other responsibilities – feel isolated and disconnected from the learning community (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). This can lead to feelings of loneliness and disengagement from their studies, diminishing the overall learning experience and persistence of students (Shaikh & Asif, 2022). When this occurs, students may not have a desire to engage, participate in class, collaborate on projects, share insights, ask questions or seek help when needed. Furthermore, they may become passive observers rather than active participants, feel less motivated or committed, and possibly struggle to find purpose or meaning in their academic journey.

Research purpose and questions

For these reasons, this research sought to uncover considerations for facilitating social connectedness and addressing the problem of student persistence in online programs. This examination drew upon ideas from peer-reviewed publications, practical sources, and the 2U/edX Learning Experience Framework and extant knowledge base to explore and reveal considerations for creating a sense of belonging, cultivating a shared purpose and norms, and fostering online communities. Specifically, this research investigated three overarching questions:

- (1) How could a sense of belonging be created in post-secondary online learning settings?
- (2) How could educators establish and cultivate a shared purpose and norms in a virtual post-secondary program?
- (3) How could online communities be fostered by educators in the post-secondary context?

This research aimed to reveal strategies for educators to consider in facilitating social connectedness, to address the challenges of low persistence and completion rates among students in online post-secondary programs.

Theoretical framework

This work is based on constructivism, which posits that students actively construct their understanding through experiences, reflections and interactions. In constructivist learning communities, there is shared responsibility for a common goal, with students and educators co-creating the learning environment (Hewett-Olatunde, 2015). This process values diverse perspectives and encourages students to become reflective, independent thinkers, fostering individual growth and a collaborative spirit in online post-secondary education (Brau, 2020).

Conceptual frameworks

This research incorporates the ideas of St. Augustine and bell hooks as key theoretical underpinnings. St. Augustine's teachings on love and human relationships emphasize nurturing relationships characterized by caring, empathy and respect between teachers and students, viewing these elements as the essence of education (Augustine & Boulding, 1998; Immerwahr, 2008). Love, as envisioned by St. Augustine, shapes how knowledge is

transmitted and constructed (Augustine & Boulding, 1998). bell hooks' (1994) concept of engaged pedagogy further informs this framework, promoting inclusive, empowering learning environments that actively involve students, foster dialogue and create a sense of belonging. Together, these perspectives emphasize the importance of fostering nurturing relationships and strong connections in education.

Understanding of key terms

This research focuses on fostering social connectedness in online post-secondary programs, as described by Shaikh and Asif (2022). Key tactics include promoting a sense of belonging, establishing shared goals and norms, and nurturing online communities. These strategies help educators build social connectedness, potentially improving student persistence.

Central to these efforts is the concept of shared purpose and norms. Shared purpose aligns individual goals with the program's broader objectives, while norms set behavioral standards for communication, collaboration and engagement. Together, they create a positive learning environment and foster a sense of belonging characterized by acceptance, inclusion and connection.

Online communities play a crucial role in cultivating this belonging, promoting social connections, collaboration and engagement. Educators design these communities to facilitate interaction and support, despite physical distance.

The goal is to achieve social connectedness, combining personal connections, shared goals and norms, and community presence. This enhances students' educational experience and persistence, supporting both individual belonging and the collective strength of the online learning community. Ultimately, these strategies create an inclusive environment that promotes academic success and personal growth.

Considerations

Before exploring strategies to foster belonging, shared purpose and online communities, it is important to outline the organizational framework of the proposed methods. This research used two systems: the 2U/edX Learning Experience Quality Standards and a leveling schema. These systems provided a comprehensive approach to enhance social connectedness in online post-secondary programs.

The 2U/edX Learning Experience Quality Standards emphasize efficiency, effectiveness, engagement and equity. Efficiency involves strategic use of resources, effectiveness ensures measurable outcomes, engagement harnesses human connection, and equity provides fair access and outcomes for all students. These standards guide the creation of quality learning experiences that foster social connectedness and student persistence.

The leveling schema categorizes the complexity and time commitments of learning activities. Implementation complexity is divided into low, medium and high, while time commitments are classified as brief, moderate, extended and ongoing. This schema helps educators plan and prioritize strategies based on their goals and resources.

This section offers strategies for educators to address low persistence and completion rates in online programs by fostering belonging, shared goals and vibrant online communities, ultimately enhancing social connectedness among students.

Considerations for creating a sense of belonging

Creating a sense of belonging within an online educational program helps foster an inclusive and supportive learning environment. This can be achieved through various considerations that address different aspects of the student experience, such as designing inclusive curriculum frameworks and demonstrating a genuine interest in learners. Each of these elements plays a vital role in cultivating an environment where students feel valued and supported. The following sections will delve into each consideration in more detail.

Inclusive curriculum frameworks. To foster a sense of belonging, designing inclusive curriculum frameworks is a key strategy that reflects the diverse backgrounds, experiences and perspectives of students. These frameworks offer an equitable approach, albeit complex, requiring ongoing and extended effort. In online learning environments, fostering inclusivity involves various methods such as presenting topics from multiple perspectives, ensuring the accessibility of course materials, and providing diverse avenues for student interaction and connection.

Demonstrating interest. Demonstrating genuine interest in the experiences of students is also essential for creating a sense of belonging. This entails actively engaging and facilitating interaction – between the instructor, class and peers – to cultivate a supportive environment. It involves ensuring the educator is accessible to support learner needs and encourages open dialogue. Examples of demonstrating interest online include actively listening to student perspectives and maintaining an open-door policy for meetings. This efficient approach, low in complexity and involving an ongoing, brief-to-moderate time investment, underscores the importance of nurturing a cohesive online community.

Instructor presence. Extending this approach, maintaining an active instructor presence is crucial for supporting students throughout the learning process, particularly in asynchronous spaces. Instructor presence involves interacting, communicating and providing support, with an emphasis on humanizing strategies such as asynchronous audio or video feedback to build trust and create a more equitable classroom environment (Pacansky-Brock, Smedshammer, & Vincent-Layton, 2020). Offering personalized, substantive, constructive and timely support based on individual needs and goals enhances this presence. By sharing common ground with students and becoming part of the class (Hooks, 1994), instructors can cultivate an engaging and supportive environment. This approach is of medium complexity and requires ongoing, brief-to-moderate efforts.

Promoting learning over performance. Another consideration for creating a sense of belonging is prioritizing learning over performance. This approach emphasizes skill acquisition and mastery of new situations, focusing on personal growth and learning outcomes rather than academic pressure. When prioritizing learning over performance, instructors model a growth mindset by openly sharing their own struggles, failures and moments of development. This approach is further exemplified when educators encourage student ideas, challenge them, ask learners to explain their work, and establish clear and realistic performance expectations while emphasizing that mistakes and setbacks are natural parts of the learning process. This effective approach is low in complexity and involves ongoing, brief efforts.

Relating learning to the students. Furthermore, relating learning to the lives and interests of students creates a more meaningful connection with the content, which is another consideration for fostering a sense of belonging. This approach involves educators creating space to get to know their students, facilitating connections between the course content and their worlds and interests. One effective method for learning more about students in online environments is by implementing a confidential getting-to-know-you survey at the start of courses. Such tools can provide valuable microdata about individual student needs. Example questions might include: “How can I support you?” “What are your life aspirations?” and “I may leave feedback via video, does that work for you?” (Pacansky-Brock, 2020). By learning about students, educators can find ways to integrate their interests into the course material. This approach is efficient; of medium complexity and requires ongoing, moderate efforts.

Establishing a psychologically safe learning environment. Fostering a psychologically safe learning environment stands as another pivotal element in cultivating a sense of belonging. By establishing clear expectations for respectful communication and modeling these behaviors, instructors can lay the groundwork for an atmosphere where students feel empowered to engage openly and authentically. Deliberately designing opportunities for community formation and collaboration further enriches this environment, ensuring that students can share their thoughts, perspectives and experiences without fear of judgment. This multifaceted

approach demands ongoing, extended efforts, but the result is an inclusive learning space where students feel valued, heard and supported, contributing significantly to their sense of belonging and engagement with the online academic community.

Adaptability. Adapting to the changing needs of students is another crucial aspect to consider. This involves adjusting learning strategies, approaches and behaviors in response to various circumstances or challenges. For instance, if some students struggle with grasping a complex concept, the professor might pause the lecture to provide additional examples and practical applications in real time. This intervention helps clarify the material and ensures that all students can follow along effectively. Educators can further demonstrate adaptability by continuously reflecting on and regularly assessing the learning experience to identify areas for improvement. Additionally, being open to student perspectives and contributions in the learning process enhances adaptability. Overall, adaptability is an efficient and medium-complexity approach that requires an ongoing, brief-to-moderate time investment.

Empowerment and agency. In tandem with fostering adaptability, empowering students to take ownership of their educational experience is vital for creating a sense of belonging within online post-secondary programs. This approach encourages exploration and growth and prompts students to contribute meaningfully to their learning. By actively participating in shaping the direction and goals of a program, assuming leadership roles, facilitating discussions, leading group projects or presenting topics of interest to the class, students foster a collaborative learning environment where every voice is valued. Educators play a key role in empowering students by providing opportunities for peer collaboration and knowledge sharing, along with necessary support and guidance.

Additionally, educators can design student-centered programs. This involves structuring the learning around the interests, needs and prior knowledge of students, allowing them to play an active role in shaping their experience. In such environments, students are encouraged to engage in self-directed inquiry, exploration and discovery, and to co-create learning resources and materials with educators. This learner-centered approach requires substantial effort from educators due to its high complexity in implementation. However, it is enhanced by initiatives such as establishing student advisory boards or committees for advocacy and decision making within a program. These platforms provide students with a voice to express opinions, concerns and suggestions, empowering them to actively participate in shaping their educational journey.

Considerations for cultivating a shared purpose and norms

To enhance collaboration and community cohesion in online post-secondary programs, exploring strategies to foster a shared purpose and norms is key. This section examines vital aspects of creating an environment for student success, including establishing community norms, feedback mechanisms, development sessions and comprehensive orientation processes. By implementing these strategies, educators can cultivate a sense of belonging and shared commitment, ensuring every member feels valued and motivated to contribute to the collective growth and success of the online learning community.

Community norms and contracts. One consideration for cultivating a shared purpose and norms is the establishment of community norms and contracts. This involves creating agreements that outline the expectations, behaviors and responsibilities of members in a learning community, thereby fostering a shared understanding of how individuals should engage with one another and the academic environment. When using community norms and contracts, consider collaborating with students to co-create these agreements, ensuring they are specific to the learning environment and its objectives. Additionally, consistently model and reinforce the behaviors outlined in the community norms and contracts to maintain their effectiveness and consider using these agreements to address conflicts or issues that may arise within the learning community, promoting a respectful and supportive atmosphere for all members. This approach is characterized by its equitable nature; medium complexity; and ongoing, brief-to-moderate time investment.

Feedback and suggestions. To further cultivate shared purpose and norms online, consider implementing feedback mechanisms. Regularly seek student feedback and implement suggested improvements to enhance the program. Use a two-way communication strategy, seeking feedback and providing transparent updates on changes. Emphasize the purpose behind collecting feedback, demonstrating genuine concern for student growth. Tools like surveys and virtual suggestion boxes can gather feedback effectively. Prioritizing feedback demonstrates a commitment to valuing student input and striving for improvement. This approach is effective; of medium complexity; and requires an ongoing, brief-to-moderate time investment.

Development sessions. In the pursuit of cultivating a shared purpose and norms, the integration of development sessions stands out as an essential component. These sessions are designed to provide virtual professional development on a variety of topics, such as resume building, job searching and industry trends. To maximize their effectiveness, encourage active student interaction through Q&A sessions, group discussions and hands-on activities. Prior to hosting these sessions, consider polling students to identify their preferences, allowing for customization and alignment with their needs. By incorporating development sessions, educators create opportunities for students to enhance their skills, knowledge and professional readiness, thereby contributing to a cohesive and supportive learning community. This approach is characterized by its effectiveness, moderate complexity and extended duration.

Guided reflection. Another consideration in fostering a shared purpose and norms is through guided reflection. This involves incorporating regular opportunities for students to reflect on shared experiences. Using a structured format – like guided prompts and reflection journals – helps guide students through this process consistently. Flexibility in reflection format should be offered to accommodate diverse needs and preferences. Providing ongoing support, such as feedback, addressing questions or concerns and offering additional resources as needed, are also integral tactics to sustaining reflective practices. This initiative, while effective in cultivating shared purpose and norms, entails a medium level of complexity and an ongoing, brief-to-moderate time investment to maintain consistency and engagement.

Wellness and balance. In the pursuit of cultivating a shared purpose and norms within an online academic community, another vital aspect to consider is the promotion of wellness and balance. This endeavor involves demonstrating empathy and compassion towards students and colleagues, recognizing the significance of fostering a culture of health and well-being. To effectively address this, consider organizing workshops or seminars on stress management, mindfulness and other well-being topics. Additionally, encouraging breaks and offering guided meditation sessions or mindfulness exercises can greatly contribute to achieving wellness goals. By placing a focus on wellness and balance, the academic community can establish a supportive environment conducive to personal and academic development. This initiative demands a medium level of complexity and an ongoing commitment to ensure equitable access to resources and support for all members of the online learning community.

Orientation and onboarding. Orientations and onboarding sessions are additional aspects to consider when seeking to foster a shared purpose and norms online. Such endeavors involve designing a comprehensive process to acquaint new students with the overarching goals, expectations and communal standards of a program. Following this initial orientation phase, consider sustaining engagement by providing subsequent communication enriched with supplementary resources, pertinent contact information and clear guidance on forthcoming steps to facilitate students' seamless transition into a program. For instance, an institution might employ a series of self-paced modules to prepare students for the orientation experience, which is subsequently augmented by a wealth of guidance and resources aimed at navigating school procedures and protocols, program intricacies, and the array of platforms and technologies integral to the educational journey. Embracing such an approach helps ensure an engaging onboarding experience and underscores a commitment to nurturing a supportive academic community. While this initiative involves a moderate level of complexity, fully realizing its potential requires a sustained investment of time and resources.

Considerations for fostering online communities

In the landscape of post-secondary education, cultivating robust online communities is crucial for student interaction, sustained engagement and collaborative learning. This section explores various strategies, from implementing online discussion spaces to personal storytelling, to foster vibrant virtual communities. These efforts prioritize active engagement, inclusivity, and bridging the gap between students and educators to create immersive online learning environments that inspire academic success.

Online discussion spaces. Strengthening student interaction and maintaining continuous engagement is a critical aspect of fostering online communities. This can be achieved through various online discussion spaces, such as forums, ongoing chats or social media groups. Faculty should be encouraged to actively participate in these spaces by responding to posts using student names, asking probing questions, and offering guidance or clarification as needed. Utilizing discussion forums for activities like role playing or topic debates can further enhance engagement. Adhering to these practices ensures efficient community building with a low complexity level. These activities require an ongoing time investment, ranging from brief to moderate engagements.

Online social events. Another significant consideration for cultivating communities is the incorporation of online social events. These engagements offer opportunities to build connections and provide entertainment and relaxation for participants. To ensure their success, involve students in the decision-making process for event selection. These social events enable educators to create engaging and inclusive communities with minimal complexity. Organizing and implementing these events requires an ongoing commitment but with a moderate level of effort.

Collaborative inquiry. Another essential approach for fostering online communities is incorporating collaborative inquiry. This method emphasizes collective problem-solving, investigation and reflection, encouraging students to work together to explore questions, issues or problems. Conrad and Weber (2015) suggest ensuring that collaborative inquiry engagements are meaningful to promote a sense of presence and community. To achieve this, focus on creating interactive and relevant activities that align with students' interests and real-world applications. Incorporate varied instructional strategies, encourage active participation and critical thinking, and provide continuous feedback. Additionally, offer opportunities for students to influence their learning paths and apply their knowledge in practical contexts. Examples of collaborative inquiry activities include joint research projects and group presentations. This equitable approach requires ongoing, manageable engagement with intermediate complexity but can yield substantial benefits in terms of student engagement and learning outcomes.

Virtual study groups. In the effort to cultivate online communities, study groups offer a powerful method to enhance collaborative learning among students. Composed of two or more students, these groups amplify learning through shared insights and perspectives. Fostering connections among members by encouraging a consistent schedule for study sessions can further enhance the learning experience. Providing resources to aid students in organizing and managing these groups effectively is essential, including discussion prompts, peer evaluation forms and sample activities. For instance, in a study group meeting, each student may take turns leading a peer-teaching presentation on the application of a key theory in a course. Embracing these principles facilitates efficient community building with low complexity. The ongoing commitment to organizing and implementing these study groups entails brief to moderate engagements over time.

Shared academic and extracurricular activities. In fostering online communities, shared academic and extracurricular activities complement the collaborative learning ethos of virtual study groups. These activities offer a holistic approach to engagement beyond formal coursework, providing collaborative opportunities for students to interact both academically and socially, thus fostering a sense of community and belonging. Encouraging students to pursue leadership roles within these activities enhances their sense of ownership and

investment in the community. It is also crucial to involve faculty in these initiatives, enabling them to contribute their expertise and mentorship. Examples of such activities include community service initiatives or service-learning projects involving volunteering at local organizations or addressing social issues. Adhering to these considerations promotes equity and requires a moderate level of complexity to implement. The ongoing commitment to organizing and carrying out these activities involves moderate engagement over time.

Dialogue-based learning. To further foster vibrant online communities, incorporating dialogue-based learning that prioritizes interactive communication between students and educators is essential. This approach, also known as conversational learning, facilitates knowledge acquisition, conceptual understanding and skill development through active engagement (cf. Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2002; Hooks, 1994). It utilizes thought-provoking prompts or discussion topics to guide conversations, as well as dialogue circles and breakout rooms with student facilitators to enhance participation and ensure equitable engagement. This practice is engaging and of medium complexity, requiring an ongoing, moderate time investment.

Multi-level seminar. Another consideration is the provision of multi-level seminars that are open to all students in a program, regardless of their academic level (Dake, Ribaud, & Day, 2018). These seminars offer opportunities for exploring supplementary material and interacting with peers across different stages of a program. By incorporating pre-work and rotating student facilitators, active involvement and varied perspectives are ensured. Dake *et al.* (2018) also found value in using seminars to publicize upcoming program events, coordinate activities, and foster enthusiasm and greater engagement in research projects. This practice is engaging, of medium complexity, and requires a moderate and ongoing time investment.

Combining asynchronous and synchronous learning. Combining asynchronous and synchronous learning is also crucial. Providing flexibility through asynchronous learning while anchoring learning sequences with synchronous sessions fosters engagement and community without sacrificing flexibility (Hess, McAuliffe, Gleckman-Krut, & Shapiro, 2021). Designing activities to lead up to live sessions and integrating post-processing activities ensures continuity and student participation. This approach is effective; of medium complexity; and requires an ongoing, moderate time investment.

The practice of personal storytelling. Lastly, integrating personal storytelling into course content humanizes the learning experience and strengthens community bonds. Educators sharing their experiences can make the content relatable, while inviting students to reciprocate fosters a sense of belonging and interactivity (Ginsberg, 2007). This practice is engaging; of low complexity; and requires an ongoing, brief time investment. By implementing these considerations, programs can create enriching online learning environments conducive to community building and academic success.

Research significance

This research reveals strategies to cultivate a sense of belonging, a shared purpose and norms, and strong online communities in higher education. These approaches enable educators to strengthen social connectedness, with the potential to boost student persistence and raise program completion rates (Shaikh & Asif, 2022). Allen *et al.* (2021) and Owusu-Ansah and Kyei-Blankson (2016) have identified that programs incorporating components to facilitate social connectedness – such as those discussed in this paper – experience various positive outcomes. These include students displaying favorable sentiments towards school, feeling a strong sense of connection and belonging, trusting in the care and support of teachers for their education, recognizing the significance of their educational journey, perceiving discipline as equitable, and experiencing positive psychosocial and behavioral changes (Allen *et al.*, 2021; Owusu-Ansah & Kyei-Blankson, 2016).

Given these benefits, the importance of schools building student connectedness with the institution, its faculty, staff, the program and their peers becomes key. Research (e.g. Allen *et al.*, 2021; Owusu-Ansah & Kyei-Blankson, 2016) supports that with the right strategies, this connectedness can be established, leading to significant benefits for both a program and its students.

Conclusion

This white paper outlines strategies designed to improve student retention and completion rates in online post-secondary programs by addressing a key factor affecting persistence. Through methods that foster a sense of belonging, cultivate shared goals and norms, and build robust online communities, this research provides actionable approaches to enhance social connectedness in virtual learning environments. These strategies have the potential to transform the online educational experience and promote student success.

As online education continues to evolve, implementing these approaches is essential for creating supportive and engaging learning environments. The positive outcomes from these strategies underscore their transformative potential. Educators in online post-secondary programs are encouraged to integrate these practices to make meaningful improvements in student academic outcomes.

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