Ghosting in Online Courses: Data and Strategies to Save the Academic Journey

Q&A from March 30, 2022, webcast

How do you handle the student who ghosts, then reappears after you locate them, agrees to a reasonable support plan for makeup and other supports, then ghosts again and comes back during exams and wants extensions?

Great question. When a student first reappears from ghosting, your reasonable support plan is a great step. Be sure to create very clear commitment steps in the support plan with deadlines that you both agree on. If the student later returns requesting extensions again, you can refer to the commitments made in the support plan and discuss what got in the way of the original agreement. If we can get to the bottom of the challenge, we can create a new working plan for the student. If the student does not follow through on the second support plan arrangement, they may need more support than you can provide at that time. However, I would not consider that student a ghost anymore as you provided support when the student reached out.

How do you get contact hours with online courses with BITE size lectures?

Excellent question. Bite size lectures are a part of the course design, but must supplement other interactive activities including open office hours, reading reflections, discussion boards with instructor engagement, etc. If you work with an instructional designer, they can be a great support resource to ensure contact hour requirements are met in a way that translates well to the online learning environment.

What about those students who are afraid to show themselves online and in videos?

Wonderful point and question. It is not necessary for students to show themselves on video or online to create connections. We can engage in written connections and verbal touch points. Reflecting on our chat discussion during the presentation, there was quite a bit of connecting happening without video interactions.

I work with an OPM and their staff are the ones who do the advising and connecting as students go through their program. How can higher level administrators make those connections when they aren't the initial point of contact (like the professor or OPM staff)?

Love this question, especially as an OPM provider! Some higher-level administrators will make very short videos on topics relevant to their student population and then send those via text or email. Text tends to get higher open rates, in my experiences. Another strategy is to ask the faculty or OPM staff for a list of students you can reach out to for extra support or encouragement. Send 5 emails/texts per week to introduce yourself and provide some personalized words of wisdom. These short messages can go far with creating a community and supporting your teams.

How is Shame Resilience different from Grit?

Wonderful question. While the concepts have some overlap, they are indeed different. Here is a quick overview resource on Shame Resilience Theory (SRT): Shame Resilience Theory: How to Respond to Feelings of Shame (positivepsychology.com).

The main difference is SRT has an emphasis on shame as the root of the challenge and "…empathy, connection, power, and freedom" are the strategies to overcome shame. Grit, on the other hand, has an emphasis on perseverance as a predictor of success.

What if the ghosts are faculty and we're trying to help train them (with no authority, just enticement!)

> Echoing this! Can we have vignettes for faculty as well?

Tough and unfortunately common situation! Thanks for bringing this up! When the faculty are ghosts, the reasons for ghosting are likely similar (lack of connection, lack of support, and lack of shame resilience). My suggestion would be to attempt to create connection and community whenever possible. Ideally, proactive outreach would start at the beginning of their teaching engagement. Opportunities to connect will need to provide a benefit to the faculty to entice them to participate. You may want to send out a very short survey to faculty to determine what types of benefits would encourage them to participate in training.

Do you guys use resources like Student Success programs and the Library to help overcome some of these issues?

Yes, if you have access to student success programs and library support resources, they can be extremely valuable.

What interventions do you recommend for unusually large online classes? I'm thinking 200 to 300 students per TA.

These are much more challenging to create personal connections, so open office hours and small group meetings/assignments can be helpful. Automated outreach is also a large help to send out texts and emails of encouragement. If you have professional advisors in your institution, I would engage their support for outreach when students are in these large classes. Finally, in our experience, 10-15% of the students need additional support. I would encourage the TA's to focus their energy on the 20-30 students who are showing signs of potential ghosting and develop clear support plans with those learners.

All of the data I have seen shows the 2 main reasons students withdraw from class are work and family. So is there anything we as faculty can do about those issues?

In the case of work and family, faculty can support students with empathy and extensions as needed. Sometimes having a supportive educator helps the student find ways to balance their obligations with school. Other times, students need to take a break. The support plan approach allows you to spend time understanding the unique needs of the student you are working with and develop a plan of action.