Leveraging Technology to Support Belonging

UCLA recreated in an online environment the same academic community found in the Café Synapse coffee house

This is the third article in a three-part series on cultivating a sense of belonging among online students. This installment looks at how The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) cultivated a sense of community and belonging among full-time students and working professionals through a strategy dubbed The Synapse Café.

Key Takeaways

- Online programs must attend to feelings of belonging at the programmatic level.
- Foster community online by recreating the serendipity of the local coffee house and engaging in conversations with faculty, professionals, and alumni.
- The Synapse Café helped students forge strong ties to their program and UCLA.

Building Community, Creating Bruins

UCLA's Fielding School of Public Health created an online Master of Healthcare Administration (MHA) program. During the design phase, the school's leaders set a goal that they wanted the online MHA students to feel as much like UCLA students as those in the on-campus programs. They wanted the online students to develop the same strong sense of identity as UCLA Bruins—an identity they would carry with them as alumni.

> ""To be a Bruin is to be a community in and outside of the classroom."
>
> —Clarissa J., 2nd Year, Pre-Communications major

Belonging develops in many ways, sometimes through the chance encounters and casual conversations that organically occur in campus spaces such as coffee houses. "We wanted to recreate that type of serendipity for our online cohorts," recalls Dr. Laura Erskine, professor of public health and director of the MHA program. "We partnered with iDesign to help us make this vision a reality."

iDesign

An instructional design service provider, [iDesign](#) worked with faculty and administrators from UCLA to develop a solution that would cultivate a sense of community and belonging among students who are typically also working professionals. The collaborative effort between MHA faculty and iDesign learning architects led to the development of two innovative tools: the "Synapse Café" and the "Bruin Chat." These innovations demonstrate the power of leveraging technology and instructional design at the level of an entire program. In this article, we explore the impact of The Synapse Café.

The Synapse Café

Inspiration for the online solution came from a real campus restaurant. Nestled within the UCLA campus is a small coffee house named Café Synapse, known for its specialty panini, gourmet pizza, and made-to-order breakfast sandwiches—and its iconic, synapse-inspired disc-and-line motif interior design. Located in a corner of the Gonda Center across from both the Medical Center and the Fielding School of Public Health, Café Synapse is a popular spot for faculty, researchers, students, and medical professionals to meet and share ideas—as well as to host the occasional informal talk or study session. The solution for MHA was to create a similar community online.

To offer a live environment that brings instructors, students, and the UCLA community together, each quarter MHA faculty set up weekly one-hour synchronous sessions for every course. The weekly sessions are called "The Synapse Café" in honor of the campus coffee house. These sessions are carefully designed to foster a sense of belonging at the programmatic level.

"By dedicating this time solely to meaningful interactions and discussions," explains Dr. Erskine, "the MHA Program aims to establish and strengthen connections between the online cohorts and the UCLA campus, bridging the gap and ensuring a cohesive learning experience for everyone."

The Synapse Café sets aside dedicated time for faculty and students to connect weekly in real time. However, the sessions are not uniform—each session is oriented toward a different course or specific instructor, and not all sessions follow the same format. Some are discussion-based and participation can serve in place of written homework. Others have required readings and a planned agenda led by a faculty member. Still others are

student-centered, either used for individual and/or group presentations or actually run by the students themselves, who sign up in advance as session leaders.

Students are required to attend at least 6 of the 10 scheduled sessions, a minimal requirement that provides flexibility for working students. All sessions are recorded and students who are unable to attend are expected to watch the recording. To encourage students to actively participate, the Synapse Café sessions count for 10% to 25% of the participation grade depending on the course.

"The Synapse Café, in its various formats, played a pivotal role in creating a programmatic sense of belonging for the students," noted Dr. Leah Vreisman, professor of Health Policy and Management. "My feeling after just three of these sessions was that it was fostering an amazing and supportive environment that promoted engagement, reinforced learning, and encouraged accountability."

The café provides a platform for small-stakes and high-stakes group projects, allowing students to collaborate, exchange ideas, and provide, and receive, constructive feedback to support each other's growth. MHA Program assessment has revealed that the Synapse Café sessions facilitate the development of relationships among and between faculty and students, extending beyond the program and forming lasting connections. In addition, the involvement of former UCLA alums as mentors or presenters showcase real-world successes and potential career paths, while expert sessions with healthcare professionals offer diverse perspectives and cutting-edge knowledge.

The Synapse Café's commitment to peer feedback, relationship-building, alumni involvement, and leveraging industry experts contributes to a strong community and enriched educational experience. The students forge connections with alumni and develop an affinity with the MHA and UCLA as a whole. And they are encouraged to visit the real Café Synapse when they are on campus for their first immersion (usually held in Term 2).

Through this innovative translation of the on-campus experience to the online context, the MHA faculty and administrators succeeded in creating a close-knit academic community where students forge strong ties to their program and to UCLA despite being physically distant.

Read about other innovative approaches to redesigning online programs in iDesign's open educational resource *The iDEA Book*.

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