



## Virtual Student Union

### Objective

The purpose of a Virtual Student Union is to connect the program community in a virtual space. On the most basic level, it can be a repository for basic information about a program, and the portal to answer any question. At its best, it can draw together a community of online learners and enhance the student experience. In our traditional programs, students often cite the quality of interaction with faculty, administration and their fellow students as a key element of satisfaction with the program. We want to make sure the same is true of the online program.

### What the VSU provides

The VSU should be an alchemy of elements—information, connections, and activities.

### Information:

- Basic administration program info: How Advising works, Tech requirements/help, etc.
- Announcements from the program Administration: here you can put things you might normally send out via email to particular student groups. While you could still use the regular communication channels, these announcements posted on the site provide the opportunity for students to post questions.
- Portal to other campus/program websites: Here we can create links (or sites if none exist) students to access current university services such as Financial Aid, Careers development, the libraries.

### Connections:

- Access to events and opportunities outside the classroom experiences: clubs, speaker series, competitions
- Easy means of connecting to fellow students and faculty
- Space for students to meet in study groups, organizations, with faculty.
- A place where a Success Coach can be “present” for students. Most Success Coaches hold office hours. Some students dropping in have real questions, others just come up to pass the time of day.
- Similarly, space for other program or university staff to be present, if desired.

## Activities:

Ideally, a program would move towards becoming “agile,” described in the document, “The Agile Campus,” available in the resource library. To move in that direction, the VSU can help the program by becoming a place where on-ground events that are open to the program community are streamed, allowing remote students to participate.

- VSU serves as the location for the streaming of on-campus events
- Site for webinars open to program students, including career workshops, “lunch discussions” by individual faculty, and discussions with key stakeholders in the field
- Student organizations can hold meetings virtually through the VSU, and include remote students

## Best Practices for Facilitation and Engagement

Facilitating student participation in the Virtual Student Union (VSU) can be a critical engagement strategy for encouraging collaboration and a sense of community. The following are best practices to kick-start the management of the VSU and promote student engagement:

### Promote campus events

Meet with university offices (e.g. program student affairs contact, career services, writing center, etc.) once per semester and review the academic calendar to determine what campus events can be shared with online students through the VSU. Keep in mind that the events shared in the VSU should be accessible to online students, ideally via a live stream or through a link to a recorded event

### Make this the “go-to” for announcements to students

Coordinate with relevant colleagues to ensure that important dates (e.g. start of term, add/drop date, financial deadlines) and information are shared in the VSU.

### Share resources

Generate a list of resources available for online students and chart them across the university or semester calendar to provide need-based touchpoints. For example, a study tips guide may be an excellent post around midterms and finals

### Incentivize student-to-student engagement

Get creative! Think of fun competitions or discussions to host with students. Think beyond using this space for posts and replies. Consider the use of tools such as polls, video posting, sharing links and providing prompts for students to share and connect with one another. Examples are listed below to help generate ideas.

## Organize a posting schedule

Create a calendar for posting to the VSU. The posting cadence should be consistent so students know when they can expect updates. This cadence also helps organize what announcements will go out and when, and helps you determine when you may need to fill a gap (for example, have a week with no events or announcements? Sounds like a great week to host a photo challenge!). Determine who will own posting responsibilities within the VSU.

## Example Announcement Topics

The following are examples of topics for announcements to post in the VSU. Note that each program will offer different experiences to their students.

- Important dates (first day of class, university closings, add/drop dates, reading weeks, homecoming, etc.)
- Meet your faculty/program staff
- Reminders of university closings
- Events on campus accessible to online students:
  - Career based webinars
  - Speakers
  - Skill workshops
  - Live-streamed events
  - Student Government Meetings
- Student Support Services:
  - Writing Center
  - Disability Services
  - Career Services
  - Counseling Center
  - Tutoring
  - Library Services
- Post industry news articles you (or program staff/faculty) find to share with the larger group
- Office hours for faculty and staff

## Examples of Engagement

Below are examples of ways to foster engagement in an engaging VSU. We always welcome new ideas and encourage creativity depending on the program and students you work with.

### Host competitions:

Encourage students to post photo/video challenges:

- Homecoming week: mirror the festivities on campus online and encourage students to participate
  - This could include: social media posting challenges, participation in spirit day (e.g. wearing university apparel throughout the week), participating in fundraisers or campus events via a live stream

- Photo challenges: find a weekly photo challenge online and have students participate
  - Examples of the photo contest could include:
    - Photos of at-home workspace
    - Photos of study sessions (virtually or in person) with other students
    - Photo of students wearing university gear
      - Bonus: offer you some swag for any students who fully engage and participate in the challenges
      - Encourage students to comment on other's posts

## Schedule meet and greets

Help students connect who are local to one another. Some campuses have students who live near campus, you can also coordinate a visit to campus for a group of students to help foster a sense of connection back to the institution

## Use the tools to help students find each other

Utilize a doodle poll (or other scheduler) to help connect students with a study group or study buddy available at the same time zone or area

## Host office hours

Create easy ways for students to meet one-on-one with the coach outside of scheduled check-ins. These sessions can include study/review time, and can also be themed (think 90's trivia).

## Host VIP chats

Have faculty make a guest appearance in the VSU or office hours to discuss topics students are interested in that may not be covered in the coursework.

## Host discussions and discussion forums

Create discussion boards on pop culture topics for students to post and collaborate on (one campus had a weekly Game of Thrones recap discussion board that popular among students). Host discussions about events that students attended (either in person or virtually) to recap what was covered and hear the student's reflections.

## Create a job board or a virtual Craig's List

Encourage students to post job opportunities available at their employer, or offer a session for students to swap resumes for review.

## Create ways for new and returning students to connect with alumni and one another

Have returning students post tips and words of encouragement for new students. Offer mentorship opportunities between alumni and/or returning students

## Ask for feedback

Use the space to collect feedback on events, services, etc.