

Selecting a Product for Your Virtual Student Union

Introduction

We know from the research that engaged students persist better in online programs than students who are not engaged (Savvides, Ye, Verdine, & Kampa, 2019). For this reason, Noodle Partners works with our campus partners to create “fiercely social” learning environments. A learning environment that is fiercely social is one in which students, faculty and staff consistently engage with one another, by thinking, talking, debating, and interacting, resulting in greater achievement of learning outcomes, a stronger sense of identification with the institution/program, and a higher retention rate. Learn more about defining, creating, and assessing social engagement in virtual communities [here](#).

This document is designed to introduce you to the process of selecting a tool for your Virtual Student Union (VSU) and some basic set up steps. Learn more about what a VSU is and best practices for facilitating a VSU [here](#).

Choosing your product

As you make the decision for the product that best works for your space for the Virtual Student Union, we suggest you consider the following elements.

Functionality Considerations

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| Frictionless engagement / re-engagement | This tool should be as easy as for students to engage with and continue re-engaging; if there are too many clicks involved, students will not use it. A frictionless engagement includes availability of the VSU with a mobile device and with push notifications |
| Student-friendly user experience | You want to ensure the platform is student-friendly with a simple and clear user experience. Consider the following questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the navigation and flow easy to understand? • Is it easy for students to understand how to post and interact? |
| Create channels or groups | When thinking about your goals for the VSU, you might want to ensure you can create channels or groups within the larger forum. |
| Upload photos / files | Another functionality you may desire is the ability for you or students to be able to upload files and photos. |
| Built-in or Integration to live video or calls | If you intend to use live video or voice calls in the VSU, you should confirm that this is built into the product you select. |



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| Lock down some channels or discussions to be invite-only or hidden | The platform you use may have the option for you to create channels or discussions that are hidden or available via invite-only. This might be useful if you want to create opportunities for subgroup discussions (e.g. graduation year cohorts, student organization, staff only, etc.) |
| Integrations with add-ons / apps / enterprise services | Widely used platforms (especially ones in consumer or enterprise markets) may have an ecosystem of add-ons and integrated services. This will provide valuable extensions of the platform capabilities that may meet your specific needs, as well as integrate with other services used in your program (ex. Google Calendar). |
| Analytics | Analytics can provide you a pulse on engagement health in your program and whether your own efforts to encourage engagement are successful. At minimum, you should be able to see how activity (both passive and active use of the platform) trend over time. Most (but not all) platforms will offer an analytics dashboard. |

Security

- Review the company’s data and privacy agreements to ensure they are compliant with your university’s requirements
- Most consumer or enterprise products do not specify themselves as FERPA-compliant
- [Ponto.io](#), as a higher-education focused product, is self-declared FERPA-compliant

Accessibility

- It’s highly recommended that you review the product’s accessibility ratings and any statements they may offer. Occasionally, companies will share their VPAT (Voluntary Product Accessibility Template), which provides a detailed report on their accessibility.
- Mobile apps are often the most accessible method of using a product because of what the mobile operating systems offers app developers.
- As of March 2020, here is the accessibility of Slack, Discord and Pronto:
 - Slack: As of March 2020, Slack is not fully AA compliant; it plans to be by 2021. Review their statement [here](#).
 - Discord: Not AA, and as a consumer-oriented platform, it doesn’t seem to be prioritizing accessibility.
 - Pronto: Certified WCAG AA. ([VPAT](#))

Mobile Friendliness

- To enable a frictionless path for students to engage, mobile apps for both iOS and Android are a necessity. Students expect that everything they can do on the computer, they can also do on their phones.
- Mobile apps offer push notifications, which can greatly increase the re-engagement rate.
- Before choosing a product, check on the current rating for the app in the Apple App Store and Google Play.



Product Comparison

| |  slack |  DISCORD |  CANVAS |  pronto |
|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Included in Free Plan | Up to 10,000 messages Up to 5GB of file storage Video and voice calls for 2 users 10 integrations with third-party services | Unlimited Messaging Up to 8 users in a video call 5,000 users online at the same time | Included with your university's license | (Free during COVID-19) Unlimited messages Up to 10 simultaneous video Broadcast video to 400 |
| Frictionless | Great | Great | Not great | Excellent (Seamless integration to Canvas) |
| Multiple Channels/ Discussions | Yes | Yes | Yes with groups | Yes |
| Upload photos/files | Yes | Yes | No | Yes |
| Analytics | Limited on the free plan | Limited on the free plan | No | Yes |
| Accessibility | Not quite AA | Not AA | Mostly AA (VPAT) | AA (VPAT) |
| Mobile Friendly | Yes (Apps) | Yes (Apps) | Glitchy experience | Yes (Apps) |
| Interface for text communication | Channels, 1-1 DMs + threaded messaging | Channels, 1-1 DMs | Chat room | Channels, 1-1 DMs |
| Voice and video communication | Start voice call from text channel | Voice channels separate from text | N/A | Start voice call from text channel |
| Integrations | Almost 1000+ integrations/ add-ons* | YouTube, Blizzard Entertainment, Twitch, Skype, Steam, Reddit, Facebook, Twitter, Spotify, and Xbox Live. | N/A | Canvas |

*Slack Add-Ons

- [Giphy](#): Enables users to share fun gifs from a curated set by keyword
- [Donut](#): Automatically connects two users and suggests time for a one-on-one meeting using calendar integration
- [Zoom](#): Quickly create a Zoom call from any channel or Direct Message conversation
- [Simple Poll](#): Easily create a poll in any channel



Pricing Considerations

When determining if you will use the free or paid version of available tools. It is worth considering the following:

- User provisioning/de-provisioning: The free version will usually require a manual adding/removing of users. The paid/enterprise version may offer an automatic integration with another system (SIS/LMS/CRM)
- SAML SSO: The free version will likely require users to sign in with a unique username/password for that platform. The paid/enterprise version will likely offer an integration with your university's authentication system.
- 24/7 Support SLAs: The free version of a platform usually will only offer self-support through a knowledge base. The paid/enterprise version may offer 24/7 support and commitments to specific SLAs (Service Level Agreements), ex "We'll respond within four hours to a support request."
- Ask if they have an education discount (e.g. institutions are eligible for an 85% discount using Slack for education)

Start-Up Settings

- As you're naming your community, you will want to consider if this will be for the institution, school, program, or a specific cohort of your program..
- We recommend not permitting students to create their own channels or discussions, make sure your platform or pricing plan allows for this.
- You'll need to determine how you want people to join your community and adjust settings accordingly. This will be different depending on the tool you use.
- Once a user enters the community, you will need to select which channels they see by default and which they can join if they have interest in the respective topic.
- Depending on the channel, you may wish to limit who is permitted to post (e.g. if it is an announcements channel)
- [Here](#) are further considerations for being the workspace administrator for Slack.
- [Here](#) are resources for setting up a server with Discord.

Recommended Channels/Discussions

Consider starting your community off with the following channels or discussions. "Default" means that when the user is created, they are added to a default set of channels.

| Channel | Description | Availability | Default? |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|----------|
| #Announcements | Sharing out announcements with everybody | Public | Yes |
| #AdminWorkspace | Private space for workspace administrators to share information | Private | No |
| #Ask"Name" | A place to ask questions of a primary facilitator / community coordinator | Public | Yes |



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| Student org channels | A channel for each student organization to discuss with each other | Public | No |
| Region or state-based channels | Pre-create channels where students to connect with other students nearby | Public | No |
| Major or grad-year channels | Students can connect with others in their cohort/graduation year or their specific major | Public | No |
| Interest-based channels | Students connect around a specific interest e.g. sports, parenting, job search, dogs, music, etc. | Public | No |

Community Guidelines

Below are some suggested guidelines to post or pin in your VSU.

- Keep your language and remarks positive and professional.
- Be respectful.
- Never denigrate another person, program, college or university.
- Challenge each others' ideas, but don't challenge each other personally. Remember, sometimes it is better to be kind than to be right.
- Be lively, debate, but do so with dignity and respect.
- Write in proper English with proper grammar and punctuation. Text messaging abbreviations are great for texts... they should not be used.
- Be kind and forgiving of mistakes (i.e. do unto others as you'd have others do unto you)
- Adhere to the same standards of behavior online that you follow in real life (i.e. be ethical)
- Respect other people's time and bandwidth (i.e. avoid long rants)
- ***Have fun! Engage!***

All University Standards of Conduct for Students apply while participating in the Virtual Student Union