



## Student Success Story: Reaping the benefits of online student associations and clubs at Saint Leo U

Virtual meetups contribute to a sense of community, boost retention and create networking opportunities for online learners

By: [Emily Ann Brown](#) | July 19, 2019



Tim Robinson, a graduate student at Saint Leo University in Florida, wasn't sure how the interactions in online clubs and associations would compare to in-

person gatherings of traditional clubs. But he quickly warmed up to the convenience of online student organizations because he could meet remotely with faculty and peers.

“When you’re an online student, sometimes you feel secluded from the rest of the university or like you’re on your own, but being involved with the online organizations helps me set my own schedule, and I learn more,” says Robinson, an active-duty sailor in the U.S. Navy who has a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice from Saint Leo. “We believe that we are one community, regardless of whether we’re online or in one of the many learning centers around the world or on the main campus.”

Saint Leo University launched online student organizations, such as clubs and associations, seven years ago to help military and civilian students acclimate to college life, says Shadel Hamilton, senior associate vice president of Saint Leo Worldwide Operations. Students who are involved in the university’s extracurriculars tend to do better academically and complete their degrees, he adds.

The institution’s eight associations are based on majors, such as criminal justice, business, healthcare management, psychology and computer science. Four clubs are centered around student interests, such as communications and online accounting.

Members of these groups meet online biweekly or monthly using Blackboard Collaborate and are invited to join virtual events with guest speakers from various industries. For example, the Healthcare Management Association has partnered with Tutor.com on a webinar. And the Online Criminal Justice Association held a webinar with a regional librarian, who discussed how to find statistics using government websites. Group members also discuss important issues in their fields and career opportunities.

Academic advisors serve as facilitators as part of their job responsibilities, and faculty are also asked to volunteer based on subject matter. Their involvement is considered essential to fostering student engagement and increasing student satisfaction, Hamilton says. The online groups also give instructors a chance to individualize support for students when needed.

“When we first created this, we received feedback suggesting that adult learners are not really interested in clubs and associations,” Hamilton says. “We changed the narrative and made it more about networking opportunities and sharpening their skills in their respective industries.”

Ready to launch online student organizations at your institution?

Hamilton offers the following tips for organizing online clubs and associations:

- Survey students regularly with a brief poll after each event to determine speaker quality and areas for improvement.
- Create groups that are based on specific topics or majors, and hold events that fit into the lives of busy students.
- While the student life services department should lead or organize groups, recruit faculty and students to help facilitate and promote the groups.
- Periodically review associations and clubs to determine if they are meeting students' needs and if any should be eliminated or added.

“Online students don’t have the face-to-face exposure that traditional students would, so this is a way to manufacture some of that engagement, which is important,” Hamilton says.

*Emily Ann Brown is associate editor.*

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