

## **Building Community through Discussion Forums in an Online Accelerated MLIS Program: Perspectives of Instructors and Students**

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**Abstract :** Creating a sense of community in online learning is important for student engagement and success. The integration of discussion forums within online learning environments presents an opportunity to explore how this computer mediated communications format can cultivate a sense of community among students in accelerated master's degree programs. This research has two aims, to delve into the ways instructors utilize this communications technology to create community and to understand the feelings and experiences of graduate students participating in these forums in regard to its effectiveness in community building. This study is a two-phase approach encompassing qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The data will be collected at an online accelerated Master of Library and Information Studies program at a public university in the northeast of the United States. Phase 1 is a content analysis of the syllabi from all courses taught in the 2023 calendar year, which explores the format and rules governing discussion forum assignments. Four to six individual interviews of department faculty and part time faculty will also be conducted to illuminate their perceptions of the successes and challenges of their discussion forum activities. Phase 2 will be an online survey administered to students in the program during the 2023 calendar year. Quantitative data will be collected for statistical analysis, and short answer responses will be analyzed for themes. The survey is adapted from the Classroom Community Scale Short-Form (CSS-SF), which measures students' self-reported responses on their feelings of connectedness and learning. The prompts will contextualize the items from their experience in discussion forums during the program. Short answer responses on the challenges and successes of using discussion forums will be analyzed to gauge student perceptions and experiences using this type of communication technology in education. This research study is in progress. The authors anticipate that the findings will provide a comprehensive understanding of the varied approaches instructors use in discussion forums for community-building purposes in an accelerated MLIS program. They predict that the more varied, flexible, and consistent student uses of discussion forums are, the greater the sense of community students will report. Additionally, students' and instructors' perceptions and experiences within these forums will shed light on the successes and challenges faced, thereby offering valuable recommendations for enhancing online learning environments. The findings are significant because they can contribute actionable insights for instructors, educational institutions, and curriculum designers aiming to optimize the use of discussion forums in online accelerated graduate programs, ultimately fostering a richer and more engaging learning experience for students.

**Keywords :** accelerated online learning, discussion forums, LIS programs, sense of community, g

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