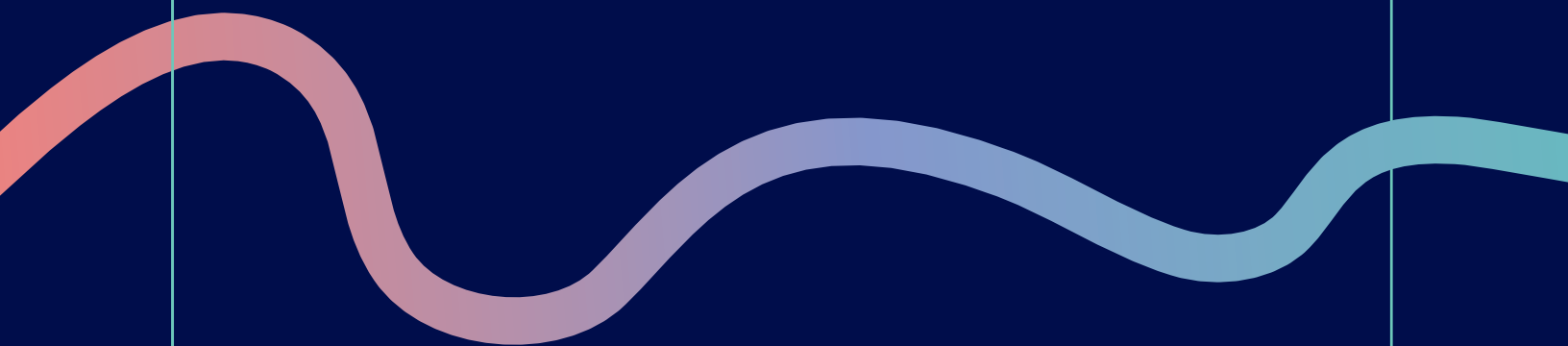## Pathify

Playbook:

Building Digital Communities in Higher Ed

What Happened to Community in Higher Ed?

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Let's start with a story.

A long time ago, I was a college student at the University of Texas. When I was in college in the '90s we didn't have all of these fancy tools that we have these days. What UT had back then was a phone enrollment system called TEX that was really horrible. It would hang up on you all the time when you were midway through your call. At the end of your call, TEX would very famously say, "Thank you, goodbye and good luck." Sometimes you would hear that "goodby and good luck" at really inopportune times and have no idea if TEX did what you needed. So most of the time when we were enrolling in classes or looking for clubs we went to campus fairs. I signed up for classes in the gymnasium after standing in line. If you wanted to sign for clubs you went to the quad where people set up tables once a month for you to sign up.
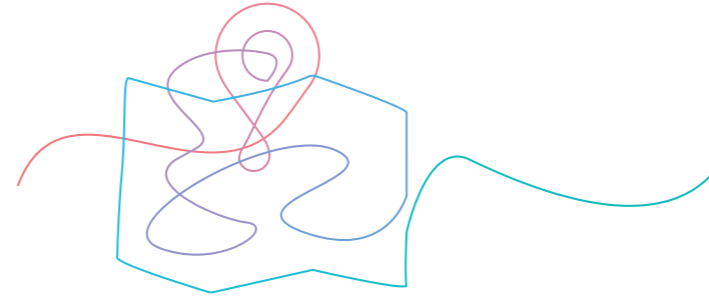
There weren't a lot of tools and you had to wait in line, but there was this real sense of us all being in it together because we were literally in the same room. You could see how popular classes were by how long the lines were. Or you could see which clubs people were signing up for by which tables they went to. It was a cool experience to build this community and feel like I was part of the University of Texas. I knew the people around me.

Enter Ed Tech

As tools came into place and replaced a lot of this, we went from the SIS, this one monolithic system that managed everything and knew everything that was going on, to dozens of fragmented systems. The SIS broke apart into things like dedicated enrollment tools or CRM tools to manage your prospects and students, risk management, event management, etc. The LMS became your homework component — you would go in there and participate in discussions. Then the LMS fractured to a certain degree and other homework systems came along, becoming the homework for the homework tool. I like to call this "the great fragmentation."

We ended up in this place where none of these systems were talking to each other. We had these great point solutions and all of them were better at their specific purpose than what came before them, but none of them really talked to each other and shared information. Not only that, students now had the responsibility for self service. They had to figure out which of these systems they needed to go to.

People started thinking about this concept of "we need a map" so students can find their way around all this technology. That's where higher ed came up with a portal. Your traditional student portal was a map to all of these systems. If you need to enroll in courses here's the link to go to the enrollment tool. Once you're enrolled, you need to go to the LMS and take your courses and actually do your work. Students would come to the portal, they would find the link to the LMS and they would go to the LMS. There's links to all these tools and many more like tutoring, advising, events, etc. But in researching early portals we found that students were really only using two tools — enrollment and the LMS. They weren't taking advantage of all the other tools available to them because we're in this self service world where they have to find these things themselves.

Why Student Portals Fail

We were giving students a really good map that showed them all the amazing tools that were available, but that map didn't have any way points. Students didn't know where they were supposed to go. A map without any waypoints or without a destination doesn't do you a whole lot of good. You don't get a lot of benefit from having this beautiful map if you don't know where that map is supposed to guide you.

I've been a lifelong video gamer and early video games that first came out with maps did exactly this. They'd give you this great world map and you could see everywhere you could go, but they wouldn't tell you where you were supposed to go or what you were supposed to do. In the video game world that's a lot of fun. You discover and you talk to people and you figure out what you're supposed to do. But in your higher education experience it's a little less fun.

I realized that a long time ago while I was in school I found out where I was supposed to go from interacting with other people. Whether it was other students, my peers, advisors or going to the administration building, those people were telling me where I needed to go and then I could use the map to get there. These days we've gotten so focused on self service that we've started using technology, and specifically ed tech, to replace interactions instead of facilitating the right kind of interaction.

That works really great for the right kind of student, if you're a very self service kind of person. If you're a person like me who goes through the self checkout everytime you go shopping then this self service is very beneficial to you and it does what you need it to. But if you go through the self checkout enough, every once and awhile you come up with an item that won't scan. If that person's not standing at the end of self checkout to help you, you've probably never felt more hopeless than that moment when all of this self service technology fails you and now you don't know where to go or what to do. Our students are ending up in this situation a lot.

> *The technology works great when it's working great and when it's doing everything it's supposed to do, but as soon as it fails, they need a community to fall back on, they need people to ask questions to.*

That could be peers, it could be advisors, staff, teachers, it could be anybody, but they need that help so that they don't get stuck.

Ed tech built cool tools that we've become dependent upon. We feel like they take care of our problems and we can solve problems with tools.

> *But tools don't solve problems. Tools HELP you solve problems.*

If you have a process problem, a tool is not going to solve that process problem. If you have a community problem, a tool is not going to solve that community problem. It can be a really important asset in how you solve it, but they aren't magic bullets. They're not silver bullets that you drop in and it fixes everything because you've installed this piece of software. We've come to rely on tools and moved away from community.

The Importance of Community

From recent research I worked on, the feeling of community and interactions in the classroom and outside of the classroom is one of the best success predictors that we found. We were doing machine learning and trying to let the machine deduce the top risk factors of student success. Typically you'd think of performance or mastery of concepts or attendance as the real key indicators of risk. But our machine kept saying that students who were engaging with each other or the instructor or with systems were the folks who were doing really well. When you saw engagement failing, that was a predictor that a student was going to drop a class or drop out of the institution.

We watched over the course of a semester and kept seeing patterns develop where a student would reach out through threaded discussions in the LMS or email or direct messaging to the instructor. They would reach out and no response would come back. And they would reach out and no response would come back. You'd see three or four of these outreaches with no responses and their engagement tracker would get smaller and smaller and move further away and that student would eventually just pop right out the door. They would disappear, they would fail the class, they would drop the class, they wouldn't come back the next semester. This became one of the best risk predictors. We saw remarkable retention lift by looking at those students, not just focusing on academics or attendance or those traditional factors.

I started doing exit interviews for students who were dropping. A common thread came up where they weren't struggling academically, they were attending their classes, they were doing the things that you expect them to do, so risk models weren't picking them up because those are your traditional risk factors. They looked like they were totally fine. They were high performing students, but they were dropping. When I interviewed them, I heard the same things over and over again:

- "I was struggling and I felt like I was alone."
- "Nobody was helping me."
- "I didn't know who to reach out to."
- "I didn't know where to go. I didn't know what to do."

And so they dropped.

If that student had someone who could help them get through a bad week or two, they could get over that hump. It would turn them around and keep them in that class and maybe they'd graduate from that university. That two weeks of having community support would have fundamentally changed that student's life.

We brought these students back by building community and by just having someone reach out to them and have a conversation.

What Community Looks Like

You have to think about community from day one and build community at the beginning because by the time a student needs that community it's too late. You may have services, you may have counselors, you may have advisors, you may have TAs who will reach out, you may have all of these people who can help in different ways, but when a student's in a time of crisis, they're going to lean on the support community they already know, the people they trust, the people they're aware of. Some students with a certain personality will reach out and look for assistance, but too many of them only reach out to people they trust. If you haven't fostered that community before the time when they need it, it's too late to build it.

During my research we ran a lot of experiments. We'd have the instructor reach out and try to pull them back in. We'd have a TA reach out and try to bring them back in. And we'd have one of the best students in the class reach out and try to bring them back into the conversation. The success rate was almost double if a student did it.

Students respond to students. They respond to their peers. They respond to somebody who's going through the same thing they're going through — they really understand and can help bring those students back in. When we're building community we always want to think about peers. Having peers in the community is very important.

If you think about that student who's struggling and how that sense of community helps them feel like they're part of the school, they become a more engaged alumni later. It also has the exact same effect on the person who's doing the helping. The person who's reaching out and responding and helping lift that person up, they feel like they're part of the institution as well. The tide raises all boats, everybody is highly engaged. There's lots of reasons to focus on building community.
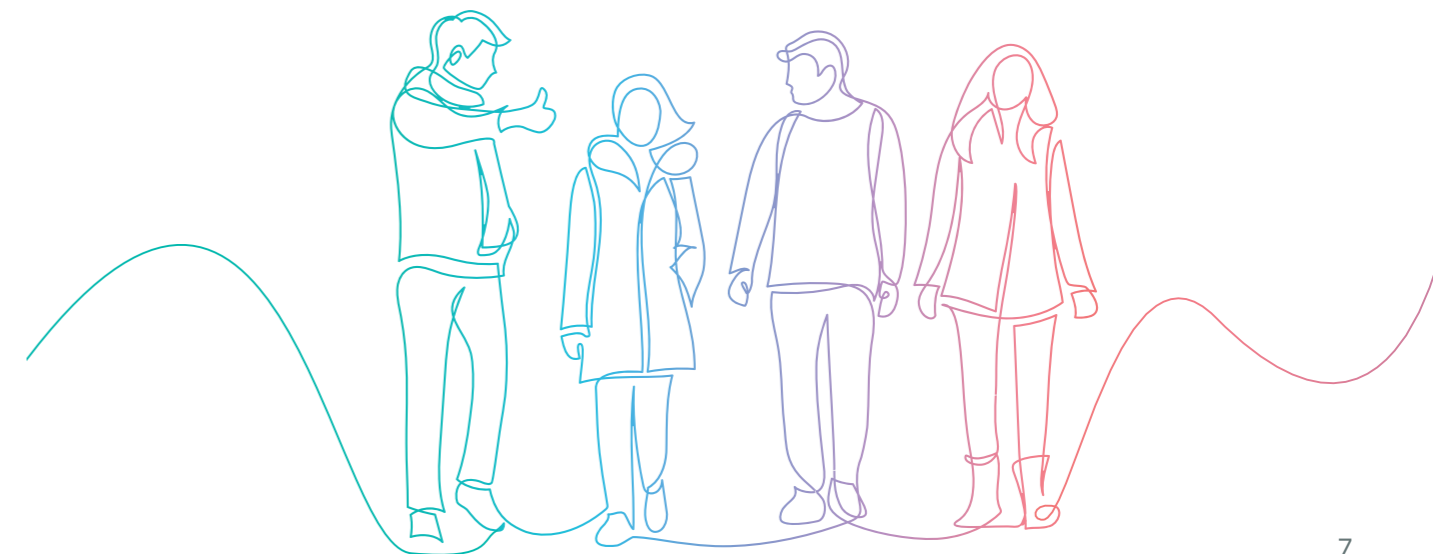
Tips on Building Digital Community

1. Start Early

Start fostering community when students are prospects, preferably using the same platform they'll use as students. Designate a group of current students to act as ambassadors to the prospect community. This way prospects can ask questions of current students (remember, peers have the most impact). Opening community to prospects helps them develop an early feeling of belonging — which goes a long way to encouraging them to choose your institution over the competition.

If they're admitted, they then bring that community with them. Other prospects they talked to on the prospect portal are their connections when they become freshman. Someone who just went through the same process, advisors who helped them, alumni who helped them, that community comes with them. In the really core first couple of semesters, they've got a prebuilt community because you started it when they were prospects.

2. Focus on Student Needs

Always focus on student needs. You have this community hub, it's a great place, it's the student union, everybody can come hang out and talk and collaborate with each other. But if students don't go there, you're not able to build a community there. Your first goal should be to get eyes on the platform, bring people in and have them engage in some way.

John Green's latest book "The Anthropocene Reviewed" talks about how since humans came to dominance, by far the highest predictor of a species' success is how useful they are to humans. If a species is useful to humans, that species is going to survive. If you can't be useful to humans, your second best survival mechanism is to be cute. If humans think you're cute, you're probably not going to go extinct either. These apply directly to the success of software in your institution as well. You need to either be useful to your students or you need to be really cute. If you can be both, all the better.

When asking students what's important, they often say, "My grades, my money and my food. Those are the things I care about the most." Being able to see upcoming assignments, recent grades, GPA, required classes for graduation — those things are critical and they need to be in your platform to drive adoption. These features don't build community inherently, but they bring people to the platform so you can leverage that platform for community. Dining menus is a popular and successful feature. If you're telling students what's in the cafeteria that day, they're going to go look everyday. If you can find things that deal with grades, money or food, you can bring people to your platform. Then once you get them to your platform you can leverage them as part of the community.

3. Keep it Novel

Another way to bring people back to the platform is thinking about novelty. There's a book called "Hooked" that talks about how to build products that people become addicted to. It's ideology and psychology you can use for evil or for good.

Fundamentally, there are three pieces to building the cycle to get someone hooked — a trigger, action and reward. Something happens that makes you want to take an action and when you take that action you get rewarded. As long as that happens over and over again, people are going to use the product over and over again.

In a lot of our cases with community, the trigger is a notification. You're notified that there's a new message, there's something new in this group you participate in, someone posted something new that you might want to see. Your action is to go to the platform and look at it and your reward is you're seeing something good. You get an endorphin release by going and looking. If your primary student platform only has things like current courses, transcript request, things that change once a semester, students aren't going to come back and engage in a platform. It may link to good tools or have stuff they need once a semester, but they're not getting that reward. One of the primary ways to deliver that reward is UGC — user generated content.

Don't be afraid to let students create content on the platform. If you're concerned about letted students generate content, choose a community solution with moderation tools. These let students create content but gives admins the ultimate authority to approve or reject the content. Letting students create content is a really important part of their ownership.

Another way to keep the community novel is supporting both synchronous and asynchronous communication. Many social media communities rely heavily on threaded discussions, which are very asynchronous — I post something today, you respond tomorrow, I respond next week. It's a conversation, but it's not in real time. There's a very different feel to a real time conversation versus an asynchronous conversation. They're both important and should be included in your digital community.

4. Nudge Them

You do all this work and get people on the platform, you even have groups and communities people can join. But students don't typically dig in and find those things on their own — which was the fundamental problem with traditional student portals. You need to budget them. Technology can help.

Ed tech solutions that support community can make automated suggested designed to drive adoption and engagement. Prompts like "People like you..." or "People in your community..." or "Tell us your likes" generate personalized recommendations within the community.

Malcom Gladwell's book "Tipping Point" talks about the law of the few. It states that once a product or service gets the right 20% of people engaged, the other 80% follow along. You need to find those trend setters and get them involved. Identify people at your institution (including students and alumni) to be advocates and evangelize the digital community. Once those people buy-in and are advocating for it, everybody joins the platform.
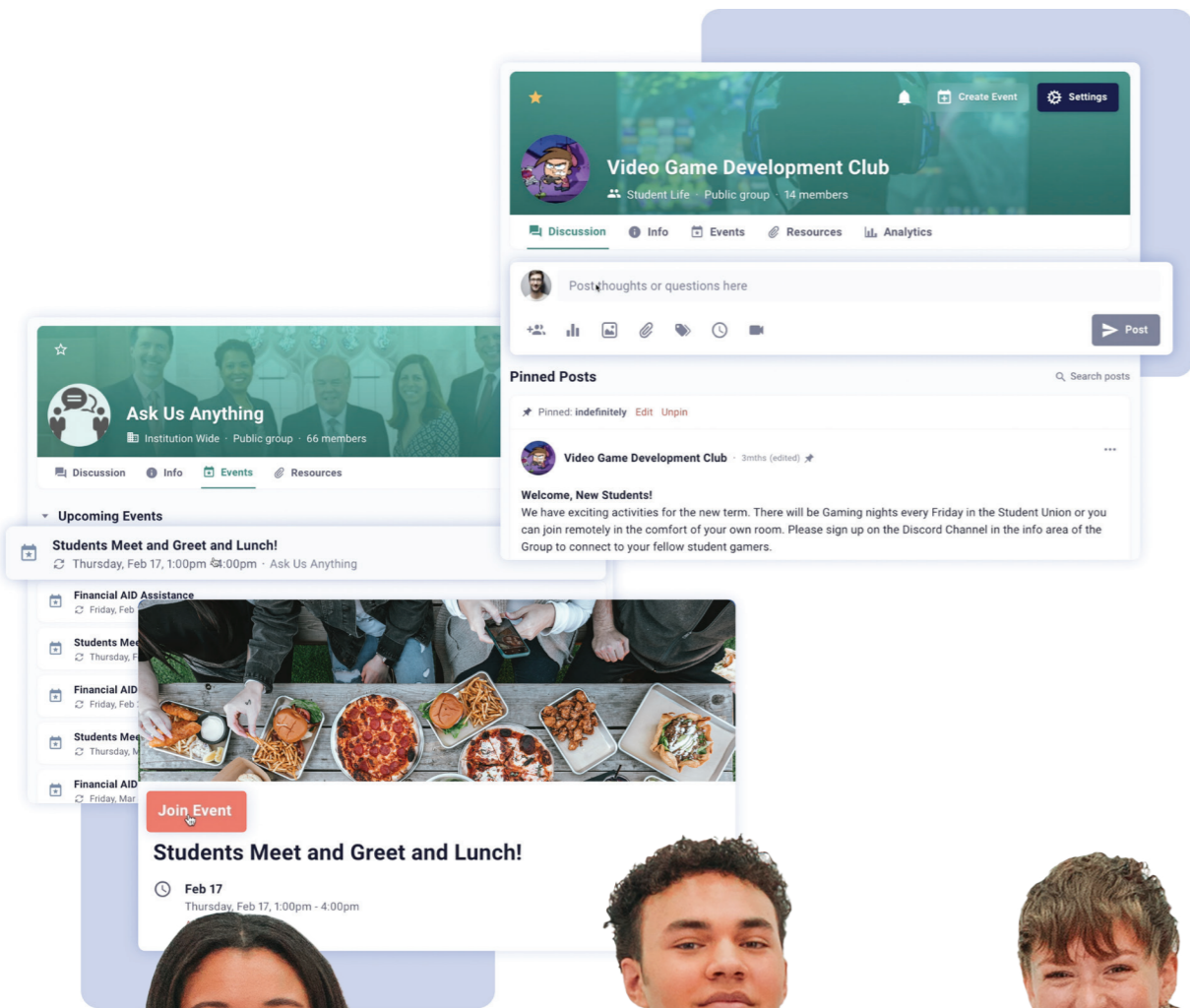
Solving the Virtual Connection Crisis

For years, studies have proven a sense of belonging increases student retention and academic success. Nothing confirmed this more than the pandemic, making investment in technology to digitally foster community not just a goal but an obligation for student well being. Unlock an entire world of digital community in the centralized Engagement Hub students already use (constantly).

The Digital Mosaic

Pathify Groups provide a digital forum where users chat, share resources, meet virtually, conduct polls — all the things folks do when they meet face-to-face. From academic peers, to hobby-lovers, to those sharing a life experience (like first generation students), Groups form micro-communities representing the rich tapestry of diversity that makes your institution unique.

How'd I Miss That!?

The biggest challenge most institutions face related to events is people simply not knowing they're happening, and therefore missing out. Pulling institutional events, large and small, to the center of the student experience solves that problem immediately. Whether promoting events in the context of a Group, hosting a virtual event straight from the platform, or organizing a large campus-wide gathering, managing events through Communities ensures no one's left out of opportunities to connect.

Communities