



Enhancing Online Learning to Include Every Learner, Every Day

by Tammy Carnevale, Kelly Clark, Stacey Curdie, Maria F. Minickiello, Julie A. Moser, and Danielle Philipson

In 2013, the Online Reflective Practice Group was formed at Plymouth State University (PSU) to explore questions about how faculty in higher education can cultivate student success in online course environments. The group is facilitated by an instructional designer/lecturer at PSU and all participants are instructors in higher education within the state of New Hampshire who primarily teach online courses, teach some online courses, or want to transition to online teaching environments. As practices and experiences were shared during our virtual monthly meetings, two common themes began to emerge. In order to better support one another and meet students' learning needs, the group agreed that it needed a better understanding of the unique nature of the student populations they were serving and what current literature revealed about student expectations in online learning environments. Both themes sparked a commitment within the group to discover and explore data and research in an effort to *include every learner, every day*.

Discovery and Exploration

Our Online Reflective Practice Group is a small, dynamic, diverse group of 10 instructors with varying levels of responsibility, ranging from adjunct instructor to full-time faculty. Regardless of level of responsibility, all members teach for at least one campus in New Hampshire and bring a wealth of education experience to the group. What makes this group powerful is that all members have an unbridled passion for making the online student experience meaningful and

engaging and have a high interest in battling the challenges that have historically and consistently plagued online learning, including high turnover, low persistence, and mediocre rates of student success.

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As group members began to learn more about one another and our approaches to online learning, we realized that despite the fact that we were teaching a variety of topics, our challenges were similar and consistent. Additionally, we came to realize many of the issues we discussed were common in the field of online education. It became clear that in order to address these challenges, we needed to better understand our learners. More specifically, we needed to get to know who our students were in the online classroom so that we could tailor our teaching practices to meet their needs and preferences. Kauffman (2015) underscores this point and offers that knowing learner attributes may assist faculty in designing quality online courses to meet students' needs.

The common challenges and questions we identified and posed to each other included the following:

- How does the demographic composition of our learners impact the online learning environment?
- What are the students' experiences and attitudes toward online learning and how might this impact their learning?
- What is/are the reason(s) students desire online learning?
- What are the expectations of both the students and the instructor? Are they the same?

Additional challenges discussed included differences between the online environment and the face-to-face classroom. We asked,

- What are our students' learning preferences?
- How can we use communication and collaboration tools to facilitate personal connections in the online environment?
- How do we relay clear assignment instructions so that students are encouraged to take creative liberties when appropriate and demonstrate good problem-solving skills?

Further conversations yielded questions ranging from student "technostress" and building community in the online learning environment to low student persistence rates. And we wondered how to create rationale, relevancy, and a relaxed learning environment to engage not only the millennials in our courses but all students.

Before we could begin to answer these questions, however, members of the Online Reflective Practice Group agreed that research was necessary. We embarked on a journey to discover more about who our online students are and what the recent literature says about students' expectations of online learning. Our research yielded data (provided below) that has since informed our monthly discussions as well as our teaching practices and continues to do so.

Who Are Our Online Students?

To get a demographic picture of online students and who they are, faculty from Granite State College (GSC) and PSU asked their institutions for index data on students enrolled in at least one online course in the spring 2015 term.

GSC, which is part of the University System of New Hampshire (USNH) and does not offer on-campus housing, is considered a leader in online education delivery. GSC has offered online courses for more than a decade, and more than 70 percent of course offerings in spring 2015 were online only. Of the 1,495 online registrants in spring 2015 at GSC, 94 were graduate students and 1,401 were undergraduate students. Among undergraduates, students considered juniors (34 percent) and seniors (35 percent) accounted for nearly 70 percent of online registrants, whereas first-year students and sophomores accounted for 22 percent and graduate students 9 percent (see Figure 1). Data shows online students are

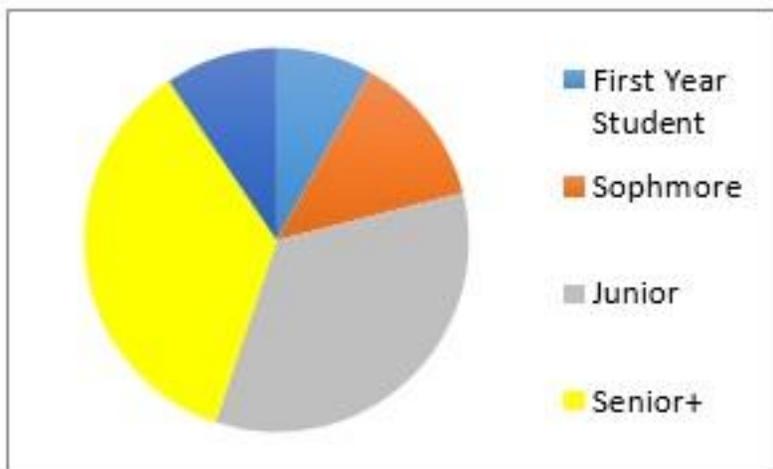


Figure 1. GSC online registrants

by class.

enrolled in diverse majors, with business management, psychology, nursing, applied studies, health-care fields, elementary education, and leadership comprising the top majors. In spring 2015, 63 percent of students enrolled in online courses identified as female (see Figure 2). While student age range at GSC is diverse, those aged 30–64 constituted the majority of online students (see Figure 3). Undergraduate students registered for a fully online course load at a rate of 37 percent in spring 2015, whereas 59 percent of graduate students registered for a fully online course load.

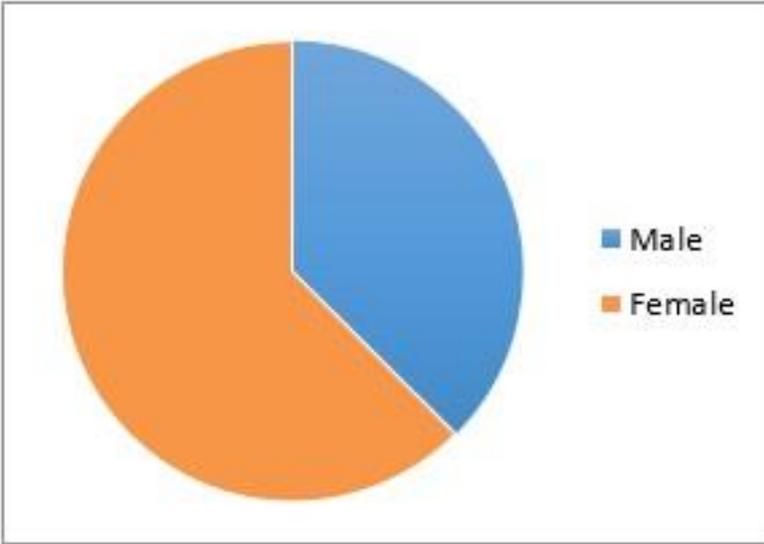


Figure 2. GSC online registrants

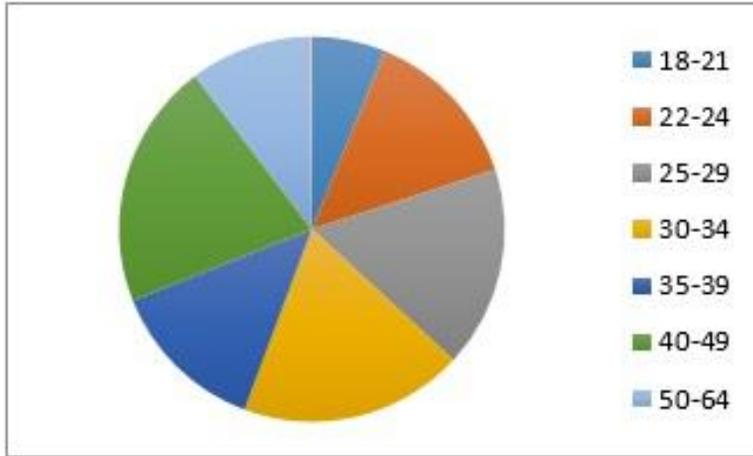


Figure 3. GSC online registrants by age.

by gender.
registrants by age.

At PSU, which is also part of USNH and does offer on-campus housing, a different picture emerges. Of the 1,480 online registrants in spring 2015, 470 were graduate students and 1,010 were undergraduate. Among undergraduates, students with senior status or greater were by far the largest contingent, with first-year students at only 2 percent (see Figure 4). The data also shows that a wide variety of students are taking online classes, with 79 different majors represented. At PSU, women enroll at slightly higher rates than men (57 percent female; see Figure 5), and students between the ages of 21 and 30 share the same majority proportion of registrants at 57 percent (see Figure 6; J. Larson, personal communication, September 18, 2015).

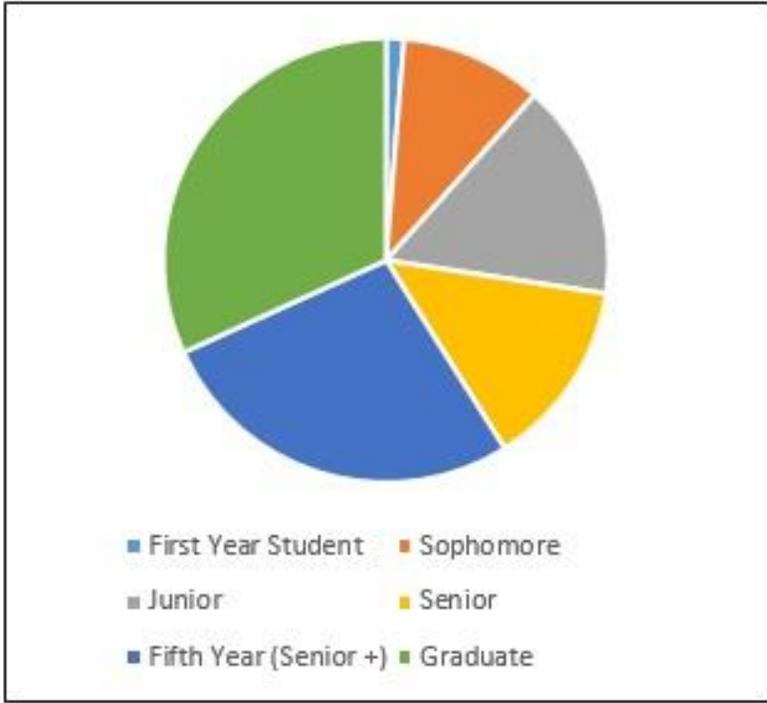
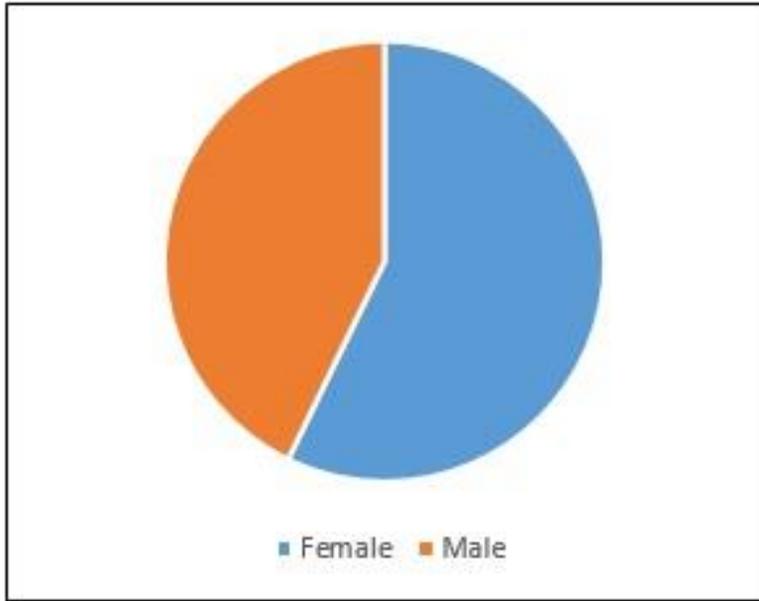


Figure 4. PSU online registrants



by class.

Figure 5. PSU online

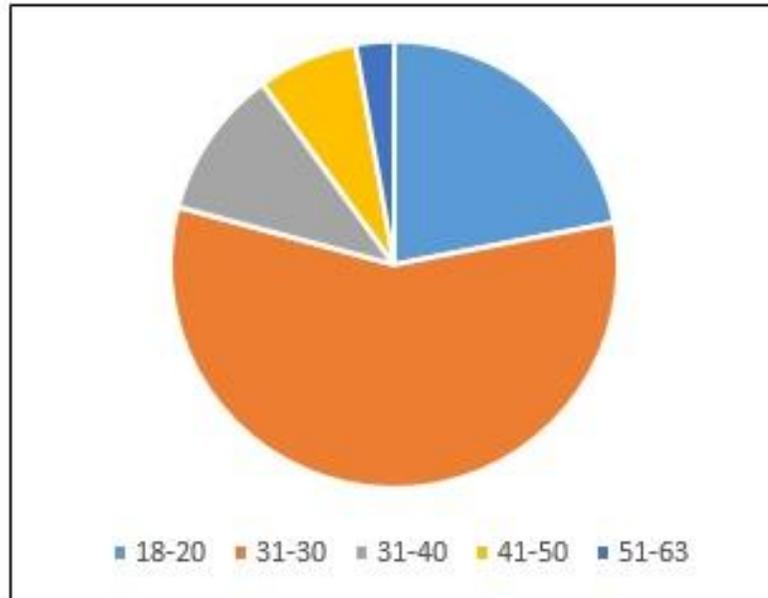


Figure 6.

registrants by gender.

PSU online registrants by age.

Perhaps the most revealing data, however, is the number of online credits students enrolled in. Graduate students largely registered for all of their credits online (84 percent) while undergraduates decidedly did not. Among the 1,010 undergraduate students, 75 percent were enrolled in only one online course (1–4 credits) while 89 percent were enrolled in a full-time schedule (12 credits or more; J. Larson, personal communication, September 18, 2105).

Literature Review

With local data in hand, we turned to the research literature about online students. What follows are highlights from a selection of current studies that looked at dropout rates, generational data, and student preferences and perceptions in regard to online learners and learning, followed by a discussion of promising practices.

Dropping Out

Park and Choi (2009) found that students who drop online courses do not differ in age, gender, or educational level from their colleagues who persist. Rather, they found that external factors of family support and/or organizational support accounted for the highest dropout rates. They also determined that students were less likely to drop if they were satisfied with the online course and if it was relevant to their own lives. Lee and Choi (2011) conducted a review of literature, which revealed three categories of dropout factors: student, course/program, and environment. Like the earlier study, they found that greater work demands led to higher dropout rates. In addition, students facing personal challenges or life events without sufficient support from family and others were more likely to drop. Findings in regard to course factors showed that well-designed courses with clear structure and relevant content decreased the inclination to drop. In terms of interaction in online classes, this review found that while studies found no relationship between peer interaction and dropout rates, interaction with the instructor and the content weighed heavily

in students' decisions to leave. In particular, students who viewed discussion posts and content pages more often and longer were significantly less likely to drop than those who did not participate as actively. Finally, Lee and Choi (2011) found that academically high-performing students tended to drop out of online courses less often, while students with less prior academic success were more likely to enroll in online courses yet less likely to persist in them.

What Students Want and Expect

In regard to what students are looking for in their online course experiences, Huss and Eastep (2013) surveyed 1,085 graduate and undergraduate students. Their results revealed that students

- expect email responses within 12–24 hours,
- want their instructor to communicate with them either weekly or several times per week,
- find audio and/or video messages help them feel connected to their instructor,
- prefer either written overall feedback or feedback on individual items, as well as a score on graded items,
- expect assignments to be graded within 1–3 days (46 percent) or 4–7 days (50 percent),
- believe new content should be made available at the start of the week rather than multiple times in a week,
- would like to have the option of working ahead, past the current week of material, and
- believe strongly that an instructor's ability and willingness to communicate online is “crucial” (pp. 8–14).

Ralston-Berg, Buckenmeyer, Barczyk, and Hixon (2015) recently published a study that asked students to rate the importance of the items in the industry-standard Quality Matters Rubric, which is designed to assess online courses. They surveyed 3,160 students from 31 institutions of higher education in 22 states. Quality Matters ranks each of the items in the rubric as 1 = Important, 2 = Very Important, 3 = Essential, and in this study students were asked to do the same.

Students agreed with Quality Matters (QM) in scoring a number of items as “Essential.” These included items related to course navigation, assessments, and grading. Students strongly value courses that are consistent and easy to navigate, include clear directions, evaluative criteria, and grading policies, and that contain well-aligned content and assessments. In fact, the students' highest ranking went to the item related to having clear instructions about how to get started and where to find various course components.

All other items ranked “3” by QM were ranked lower by students, including several items that students ranked a full point lower than QM. These items indicated that students do not value clearly stated learning objectives nor learning objectives that encourage interaction as highly as QM does. They also do not place nearly as much importance on interaction with their fellow students as does QM. In fact, students ranked one item about activities that encourage interaction with peers, nearly two full points lower than QM. Online instructors, including those in our Online Reflective Practice Group, often use discussion forums to encourage student-to-student interaction. Hawkes (2006) suggested that well-facilitated online discussions may allow for more

in-depth and thoughtful learning than is possible in face-to-face settings. Along these lines, Gao, Zhang, & Franklin (2013) articulated that well-facilitated online discussions use the following techniques:

- effective use of questioning, interpreting, elaborating, or relating information to prior knowledge;
- examining conflicting perspectives of students;
- offering students ample opportunities for interaction and collaboration with peer learners;
- engaging students as part of a community of learners where students embrace a sense of belonging and support each other;
- acknowledging all participants in some individualized way;
- knowing when to proactively guide the conversation and when to allow the student voice to lead.

Additionally, Maguire, Frith and Morris (as cited by Sousa, 2006) noted brain scans have shown that when new learning is readily comprehensible and can be connected to past experience (meaning), there is substantially more cerebral activity followed by dramatically improved retention. Creating meaning increases the probability that new information will be retained. So what practices do our group members utilize to create meaning and well-facilitated online learning?

Practices in Online Teaching and Learning

For Julie Moser, an online instructor and instructional designer at Granite State College, the data and research sparked a renewed commitment to online student success. “With more than a third of undergraduate students and more than half of graduate students classified as totally online students, I was reminded that for some of our students, the online education experience is their gateway to a sense of place and community at our college,” she says. Research demonstrates the importance of engagement in a variety of student success factors, and while Moser works to cultivate presence and collaborative engagement in online classes, the data and research have inspired a deeper commitment to these goals. “For some students in my class, the online environment I design, develop, and facilitate is their primary link to community at our college.”

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Reviewing and exploring the data about GSC’s students has also inspired Moser to incorporate a survey, which only she and the student see, during the first, fourth, and eighth weeks of Moser’s courses. “Seeing how diverse our age range is, I decided to include a series of ‘getting to know you’ surveys in my online classes so I could get a sense about any fears, passions, and prior learning experiences students had, as well as a brief check about their experience in online settings and access capacity,” she explains. For example, if Moser finds that some students have limited experience with—and, in some cases, limited access to—online technologies, she will share key resources and tips and coach them to build skills and confidence so they don’t feel left out of collaborative learning activities. “Research and best practices are essential to effective

teaching and learning strategies,” she says. “And yet, looking at this data reinforces the importance of continuously asking who our students are. Even when we design and develop what we believe are effective online learning environments, we miss out on essential opportunities to connect with students in an individualized way if we don’t know who our learners are.”

At PSU, the exploration into demographic data and research has provided essential information to Stacey Curdie, an instructional designer, teaching lecturer, and graduate program coordinator. “Given that graduate students are most often working professionals,” she says, “it makes sense to us that this population would actively seek out online experiences as a means of balancing coursework with life/work obligations.” On the other hand, says Curdie, PSU’s undergraduate students appear to do the opposite, preferring mostly on-campus courses with only one online course. While reasons for this choice are not known, one other study at a university with similar online enrollments found that students most often took online courses either because they were the only option or for the added flexibility in their schedule (Huss & Eastep, 2013).

“I try to ensure that students in my online classes remain engaged by working to provide and model high levels of my own engagement,” Curdie says. “This is a many-pronged approach, which begins with a weekly overview from me in each module. In the overview, I strive to use my own voice—whether it’s text or a video message—to demonstrate my own enthusiasm about and experience with the topic and to emphasize the relevance of the week’s work to students’ own lives and/or the larger projects we’re working on in class. At the start of the week, I also send out a brief email commenting on the class’s work from the previous week, cognitively preparing students for what we’ll be doing in the current week, and including any reminders of due dates or other responsibilities. Midweek, after students have posted their initial ideas in the weekly discussion forum, I make sure to jump in and comment on their work. Sometimes I respond to individual students, but most often I speak with them in small groups, complimenting their good work, making suggestions for improvement, and coaching them toward appropriate replies. At the end of the week, I strive to provide students with meaningful feedback and grades that let them know not only how they did but what they need to do differently next time. In addition, I work to respond to any and all student emails within 24 hours maximum. In my experience, students feel more committed to coursework when they know their instructor is too.”

Danielle Philipson, who teaches online at PSU, regularly records screencast videos to “speak” to students in an asynchronous manner about the content and assignments. “This helps students know who the person is behind the computer and generate a connection with the instructor,” she says. This practice is in keeping with research that shows online students feel more connected with instructors when they can see and/or hear them, even in asynchronous resources such as video or audio.

Tammy Carnevale, an adjunct faculty member at GSC and PSU, increases engagement in online courses by adapting the World Café to an online environment. “The setup can be time intensive but is worth the results of increased student engagement,” she says. The World Café is a collaborative approach to explore ideas and concepts through teaming and discussion. (More information about the traditional World Café is located at www.theworldcafe.com.) In order to prepare for the World Café in an online environment, the instructor and/or designer needs to

create an environment of safety and community. “The Café needs to be introduced, and I do this through a video to personalize the message,” Carnevale says. “The purpose, both academically and socially, needs to be stated up front. With this purpose in mind, one needs to devise questions that are meaningful and purposeful. If there are 20 students in the class, there will be 5 groups of 4. There will need to be five questions; the questions remain with the table and the groups rotate to answer each of the five questions. Each group has one week to discuss their question. At the end of each week, the group collaborates on a summary of their discussion. There is a harvest time at the end of the five weeks, where all the discussions are harvested and one large group discussion ensues on the topic at hand.”

Maria Minickiello, who teaches online courses at PSU and at other institutions, includes an icebreaker that asks eight questions related to the students’ personal experiences, such as where they would like to travel, what they do to pay it forward, how they would describe their life in a six-word sentence, etc. “This helps the students get to know each other in a way that is unrelated to the course content, and it is a step towards building community by making connections to each other. I also post my responses to the questions to initiate the conversation and to help my students learn about me as an individual, not just as an instructor,” she says. Minickiello also offers timely and specific feedback to her students, responds to emails within 24 hours, and sends regular email announcements to her students. She also posts examples for each assignment. She finds this essential for the visual learner and helps guide the student to a better understanding of what is expected, thereby alleviating some anxiety.

Kelly Clark, who teaches graduate and undergraduate students online at PSU and GSC, places particular emphasis on creating meaning for students by drawing upon the rich professional backgrounds and experiences of the students. When students are engaged with the content in a way that is relevant to them, Clark notices an increase in overall engagement in the online discussion forums and shared learning. Practices Clark utilizes include getting to know the students early on in the course so that she has an understanding of their interests and professional backgrounds. With this information in hand, Clark crafts discussion questions in a way that relates to the backgrounds of the students and invites them to bring their experiences into the learning environment. In addition, Clark encourages students to examine and challenge the viewpoints of others, especially when there are conflicting perspectives. Additional approaches utilized by Clark to increase student interaction and collaboration include creating open-ended opportunities for engagement that are not overly structured and teasing out opinions based on students’ experiences. Through these approaches, Clark seeks to increase the chances that new information will be retained and put into practice.

Conclusion

In aligning our best practices with the demographics of our students and the evidence of the literature, it became clear how important it is to share practices and challenges with one another in this reflective group. We seek to understand what the data and research tell us about best practices, as well as specific data about who our online students are and how best to meet their unique needs. This process of sharing, exploration, and implementation of best practices is essential as our Online Reflective Practice Group continues to regularly meet and collaborate for

student success and to ensure we strive to include *every learner, every day*. Our work together has sparked additional topics for exploration in the future, such as exploring and shaping a common understanding of the term “adult learner” or refining our group’s practices as we evolve together in an effort to enhance practice for students’ success and contribute to the field of online teaching and learning.

Tammy Carnevale teaches at Granite State College. Kelly Clark, Stacey L. Curdie, and Danielle Philipson teach at Plymouth State University. Maria F. Minickiello teaches at Lesley University, Husson University, Endicott College, and Plymouth State University. Julie A. Moser teaches at both Granite State College and Plymouth State University.

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