Building Student Community in a Virtual Classroom

In living through an isolating global pandemic, undergraduate students at UNC experienced a rapid shift to online classes and as a result, experienced a decreased sense of student community in their classes. In this study, I used principles of improvement science to develop a working theory of strategies that could be implemented to build students’ sense of community in online classes. I analyzed existing scholarship, interviewed eight undergraduate students from three classes in a pre-professional minor, and interviewed two experts from the field of education. Using a semi-structured interview protocol, I asked participants about their perceptions of community in online classes, student motivation for engagement, faculty preparation, and course development. My results highlight three strategies that could be central to change efforts, including: improving student motivation for peer engagement, enhancing faculty practice to assist students in fostering community, and creating a classroom environment that optimizes time and space for student connection.

My analysis of these primary drivers suggests that efforts to foster student community in online classes can be complex and that student motivation, faculty practice, and the online classroom environment are tightly interconnected in how they shape community. The next step for this project would be to survey a wider sample of students and faculty to see if my initial results are generalizable to a wider population. Then an improvement team could work with faculty to clearly define and implement a specific change idea into classes and monitor their progress.