HANOVER RESEARCH

# BENCHMARKING ANALYSIS

## Building Community in the Time of COVID-19

March 2020

In the following report, Hanover Research presents the results of a benchmarking analysis of community building activities and strategies among 22 small liberal arts institutions in the United States.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## RECOMMENDATIONS

*Based on an analysis of community building initiatives and strategies at 22 small liberal arts institutions in the United States, Hanover recommends:*

### CONTINUE TO PROMOTE COMMUNITY BUILDING THROUGH RESOURCE SHARING AND MESSAGES FROM LEADERSHIP.

These common forms of community building reinforce the importance of keeping students, faculty, staff, and alumni engaged by sending messages of, and providing channels for, mutual support. As time goes on, it will be important not to neglect these strategies.

### PROVIDE ADDITIONAL COUNSELING AND OTHER WELLNESS RESOURCES.

In addition to standard resources, additional offerings important for community building such as yoga instruction or meditation videos, messages about dealing with anxiety, and other wellness tips may also be important tools for helping students and community members cope.

### COLLECT AND SHARE EXPERIENCES ABOUT ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING.

Several benchmarked institutions provide links or include on social media tips and guidance for online learning. As campus-based faculty begin to accumulate online teaching experience, and students become more comfortable with online learning, facilitating an exchange of these experiences could strengthen community building efforts.

## KEY FINDINGS

**Messages from the president or other administrative leaders represent the most common form of community building among benchmarked institutions.**

Almost all benchmarked institutions include on their COVID-19 webpage a reassuring letter or video message to students about the actions the institution is taking. Some institutions also direct messages specifically at sub-populations, like graduating seniors who will not be able to participate in their commencement ceremonies. Other common forms of community engagement include providing links to wellness tips and counseling resources.

**Benchmarked institutions use their online presence to facilitate exchange of encouraging messages, particularly related to online learning.**

Several institutions use their websites and social media platforms to invite community members to exchange photos or other resources related to remote learning. Several institutions also connect community members through videos recorded by faculty and staff that send students encouraging messages as they transition to studying online.

**Benchmarked institutions promote community building among faculty and staff by starting support funds, providing resources for online teaching, and drawing on their expertise to inform community members about the COVID-19 pandemic.**

Among benchmarked institutions, the most common form of community building among faculty and staff is listing resources related to online learning. Several institutions also highlight articles or recordings by faculty with expertise related to the pandemic or insights about teaching online.

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

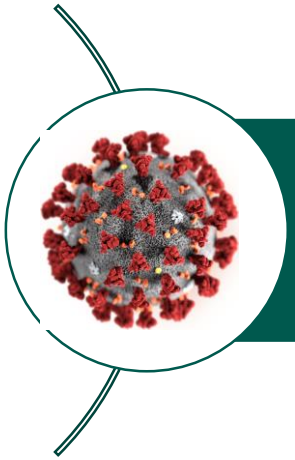
## METHODOLOGY

To assist the college as the realities of COVID-19 force students and faculty to continue their semester off-campus, Hanover conducted a benchmarking study to identify community building activities and strategies among small liberal arts institutions.

All institutions reviewed for this report immediately direct visitors to their website to updates and other resources related to COVID-19. Beyond these basic resources, the institutions reviewed here also use their online presence to engage in "virtual community building," examples of which are described in the following pages.

The following analysis is based on a review of information drawn from institutional websites and social media platforms.

## RESEARCH QUESTION



How are higher education institutions building and maintaining community spirit and collaboration among students, faculty, and staff impacted by COVID-19?

## SELECTED INSTITUTIONS

| Institutions | |
|---|---|
| Allegheny College | Muhlenberg College |
| Bates College | Ohio Wesleyan University |
| Christopher Newport University | Quinnipiac University |
| College of William & Mary | Randolph-Macon College |
| Connecticut College | Rhodes College |
| Dickinson College | Shenandoah University |
| Elon University | Trinity College |
| Furman University | University of Richmond |
| Gettysburg College | University of the South/Sewanee |
| High Point University | University of Lynchburg |
| Hobart and William Smith Colleges | University of Puget Sound |

# TRENDS ANALYSIS: DELIVERING REASSURANCE AND COMFORT

## SUPPORT AND WELLNESS ADVICE

**All benchmarked institutions use their online presence to deliver at least one message to their communities from the president or another member of the administrative leadership.** For example, in a video message posted on its website, the president of the **University of Lynchburg** discusses how the university is responding to the pandemic and how community members can stay encouraged. He reminds viewers at the end: "it's a great day to be a Hornet!" Several other institutions post letters. Elon University posts one specifically to seniors regarding commencement.

**Sharing wellness advice represents another common community building strategy.** Posts by institutions such as the College of William & Mary; Connecticut College; Gettysburg College; and others share guidance on coping and taking care of oneself during a difficult time.

Source: College of William & Mary Alumni Association

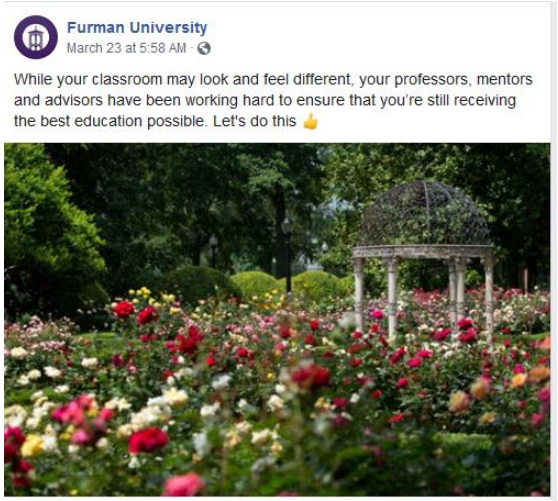
## STUDENT EMERGENCY FUNDS

Several benchmarked institutions promote on their websites and social media pages a fund to which others can donate to help students in need:

- The Student Emergency Fund at **Gettysburg College** responds to the needs of students and families "dealing with unexpected costs" as the institution moves to remote instruction.
- The Emergency Grant Fund at **Muhlenberg College** "provides relief to students who have incurred financial hardship as a result of their travel home during the COVID-19 quarantine.
- A Student Care Fund at **Quinnipiac University** provides "much-needed" support to help students address unexpected expenses as the university responds to COVID-19.

## GENERAL ENCOURAGEMENT

*Several institutions use social media to post words of general encouragement, like the example from Furman University below:*

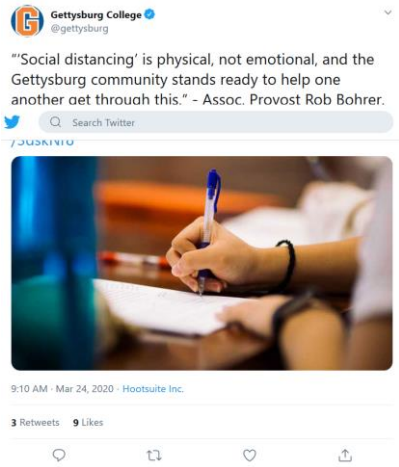



Source: Furman University

# TRENDS ANALYSIS: FORMS OF VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT

## "WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER" MESSAGING

**Benchmarked institutions use a variety of means to develop a sense of mutual support among members of their community.** In one example, a graduate student at **Shenandoah University** writes about her experience with remote learning. Several institutions offer tips on remote learning, such as Rhodes College; University of Richmond; Ohio Wesleyan University; and others.




Source: University of Puget Sound; Hobart and William Smith Colleges; Gettysburg College

## KEEPING COMMUNITIES ENGAGED

**Institutions make collective efforts to foster virtual engagement.** For example, the College of William & Mary and the University of Puget Sound collect resources for virtual engagement. **Allegheny College** invites spirit-building photos of pets and work-at-home setups, and **Christopher Newport University** makes a call on its Facebook for photos and comments to give admitted freshmen a virtual experience. Several institutions including Trinity College and Connecticut College demonstrate how alumni are contributing to the global COVID-19 response.

### SPOTLIGHT: RANDOLPH-MACON COLLEGE

A Virtual Student Engagement Center organized by **Randolph-Macon College's** Chaplain's Office, Office of Student Life, Office of Residence Life, Office of Diversity & Multicultural Affairs, eSports club, and Show Choir allows students to join a "watch club" for movies, take a virtual museum tour, visit the aquarium through live streams, attend a virtual leadership lecture series, or participate in several other activities.

The Center is "committed to creating and facilitating experiences that encourage an inclusive community and total student development" and "to fostering an environment conducive to personal, ethical, cultural, spiritual, and organization development through co-curricular involvement and exploration."

The College's Chaplain and Director of Church Relations also discusses in a YouTube video how students and community members can continue to live by principles of doing good, allowing them to stay connected as a community.

Source: Randolph Macon College

# TRENDS ANALYSIS: COMMUNITY BUILDING AMONG FACULTY/STAFF

## RESOURCES FOR FACULTY AND STAFF

**The two main sources of community building for faculty and staff among benchmarked institutions are fundraising efforts and offering tips on remote teaching.** Some institutions, such as Shenandoah University, have started funds meant to help faculty and staff in need as they transition to an online environment. **High Point University** offers an HPU Cares Fund to "meet the University's most pressing needs," including those of faculty, staff, and students.

**Several benchmarked institutions provide resources for teaching remotely.** The **College of William & Mary,** for instance, offers resources for "instructional resilience," including ideas on everything from fostering student collaboration to running lab activities. The University of Puget Sound collects strategies for online instruction from various sources, including "competitors" such as Connecticut College.

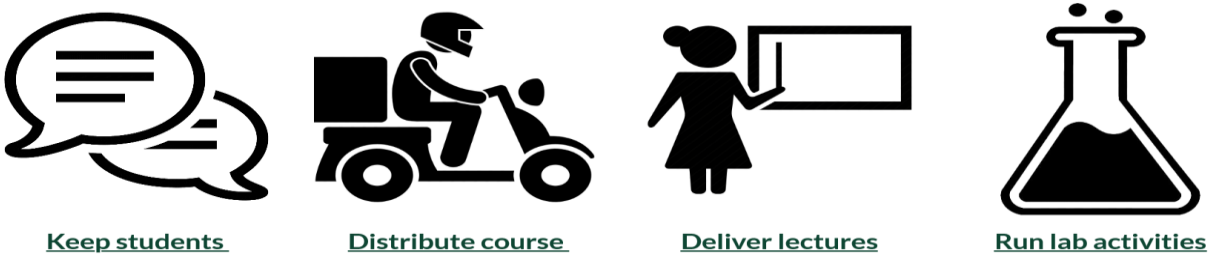
**Benchmarked institutions also draw on faculty expertise to develop resources for community members.** Exercise science professors at **Elon University** discuss in a YouTube video how community members can "stay physically fit during a period of social distancing." Some institutions even have high-level leadership draw on their academic expertise to contribute, such as the president of **Hobart and William Smith Colleges** – an expert on labor economics and the economics of gender – responding to questions about the effects of the pandemic on the economy.

## VIRTUAL CONCERTS

*Two institutions, University of the South/Sewanee and Rhodes College, use their social media pages and websites to broadcast virtual concerts, providing entertainment for the entire community.*

Source: Rhodes College

**Concepts and Tools to:**




Source: College of William & Mary

# PEER INSTITUTIONS BENCHMARKING SUMMARY

## OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITY BUILDING IN THE TIME OF COVID-19 AT SELECTED INSTITUTIONS

*Benchmarked institutions include a range of small liberal arts institutions across the United States. The table below is meant to be illustrative rather than comprehensive .*

| Institution | Website Community Building | Social Media Community Building |
|---|---|---|
| Allegheny College | • n/a | • Facebook Post about transitioning to remote instruction |
| Bates College | • Wellness advice<br>• Resources for engaging with campus life remotely | • Encouraging facebook message from athletics director |
| Christopher Newport University | • n/a | • Facebook call for photos and messages to contribute to virtual admitted freshman day |
| College of William & Mary | • Links for self care<br>• Other wellness resources | • Wellness advice provided through alumni association |
| Connecticut College | • Counseling resources | • Post about alumni work on COVID |
| Dickinson College | • n/a | • Video tweet allowing students to enjoy springtime on campus virtually |
| Elon University | • Online mental health resources<br>• Message to graduating seniors | • Faculty tips on staying fit |
| Furman University | • Tips for keeping healthy | • Twitter Post about alumni work on COVID<br>• Facebook Post about general encouragement |
| Gettysburg College | • Student emergency fund<br>• Counseling and wellness<br>• President's message about COVID and its effects | • Tweet with tips for remote learning<br>• Suggestions for emotional wellness |
| High Point University | • Student impact fund | • "We Miss You" video |
| Hobart and William Smith Colleges | • Presidential analysis on economic fallout<br>• President's message about COVID and its effects | • Tweet calling for photos and other ways to stay connected |
| Muhlenberg College | • Student emergency fund<br>• Resources on learning from home<br>• Resources on teaching and working from home | • Tweet about a "humanistic approach" to online learning |

Source: Institutional websites and social media accounts (see embedded hyperlinks)

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## OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITY BUILDING IN THE TIME OF COVID-19 AT SELECTED INSTITUTIONS

*Benchmarked institutions include a range of small liberal arts institutions across the United States. The table below is meant to be illustrative rather than comprehensive .*

| Institution | Website Community Building | Social Media Community Building |
|---|---|---|
| Ohio Wesleyan University | • Essays related to COVID-19<br>• Remote academic support | • Video by faculty encouraging students for online learning |
| Quinnipiac University | • Communication about moving to online courses<br>• Student Care Fund | • Collection on facebook of thanks to doctors and healthcare workers |
| Randolph-Macon College | • Virtual Student Engagement Center | • YouTube video by Chaplain and Director of Church Relations |
| Rhodes College | • "Remote--but Close" learning article by English professor<br>• Tips for remote learning | • @CurbCreativeQuarantine video concert |
| Shenandoah University | • Fundraising for students and faculty<br>• Graduate student tips on remote life<br>• Article about dealing with anxiety | • Facebook post about counseling resources<br>• Tweet offering general encouragement |
| Trinity College | • n/a | • Facebook Post about alumni op-ed on COVID-19 |
| University of Richmond | • Article about university donation of safety gloves | • Facebook post of professor reflections on online learning |
| University of the South/Sewanee | • Faculty contribution to series on reflections on COVID-19 | • Post about virtual concert |
| University of Lynchburg | • Video messages to students and faculty and staff by administrative leaders | • Tweet about online learning |
| University of Puget Sound | • Resources for teaching remotely | • Twitter posts to encourage remote living |

Source: Institutional websites and social media accounts (see embedded hyperlinks)

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