

Project Title: Project GCC Discord: Uniting Tutoring Across the College
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Category most strongly aligned to the project: Student Services and Activities
Criteria that best apply to the innovation: Efficiency, cost effectiveness, replication, creativity, and timeliness

Project summary: At the start of COVID-19 pandemic, the GCC Center for Learning was forced to rapidly move its services online and hastily patch together an online tutoring system. With time, weaknesses in this first system became evident, so the department began searching for and testing alternative online tutoring systems. Ultimately, the department chose Discord as its new online tutoring “home.” Discord fulfilled several requirements: It was (1) centralized to encompass all tutoring subjects, (2) malleable to adapt to the varied needs among tutors, (3) accessible to students regardless of the device, and (4) user-friendly for staff and students. The implementation of Discord as the new tutoring server united the previously siloed tutoring at GCC, leading to the centralized Tutoring Across the College. Since its creation, the tutoring Discord server has seamlessly and effectively connected students and tutors in thousands of tutoring sessions.

Project Description:

COVID-19 prompted large-scale changes throughout higher education. Life as we knew it changed substantially, and collectively, we shifted ever deeper into digital spaces to

protect our learning communities. It's in this way that the Center for Learning staff was spurred to innovation: our team wanted to faithfully recreate the formerly in-person tutoring experience in a way that it would be easily accessible online, to everyone, for free. More than that, we wanted the user experience for both staff and students to be seamless and intuitive, and we did not want to lose the face-to-face connections that we form in these unique, interpersonal moments we share together in higher education.

Our vision was to unite the campus in this pursuit by connecting different departments and grounding ourselves in a new digital community—and to that end, we were successful. Glendale Community College now utilizes Discord to host tutoring across the campus. To say that moving tutoring services online and improving the online tutoring system was a challenge would be an understatement. In March of 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic began, the Center for Learning had to, as swiftly as possible, make its in-person services available online. The transition to virtual tutoring happened ad hoc, and this hasty transition resulted in the use of a variety of platforms to provide different tutoring services. In other words, online tutoring services were disconnected by department/subject, and most certainly not centralized.

After some time, it became clear that this disconnect impaired the accessibility and quality of tutoring services. Thus, we began testing and evaluating many different types of software and platforms available, iterating on them in the ways we could. None perfectly met our needs until we came across Discord, which we learned was being used successfully by Brian Bird's math tutors at GCC North when the pandemic hit. Discord is a free voice, video, and text chat platform that allows the creation of what are called "servers." These servers are home to chat rooms and voice chat channels via which users can communicate and share screens, files, and information.

The project to adopt Discord as our new tutoring platform involved an extensive research and development process that included discussions with various stakeholders and concluded with the approval of district legal (the latter which was necessary to ensure the Discord server would abide by FERPA Regulations). We were able to uniquely customize our Discord server to align with our goals and roll out in January of 2021 to the GCC community.

Our new digital community, in accordance with our needs, could do all of the following:

1. Host and seamlessly connect all members of the tutoring community (including all staff, students, and tutors) in a centralized online space.
2. Fulfill our diverse needs. We needed to be able to communicate with each other, post information and resources, and share our screens and work. In other words, we needed

a platform that could lend itself to our diverse ways of work and allow us to collaborate to our fullest potential—and Discord did that.

3. Offer widespread accessibility across multiple different devices. We wanted tutoring to be accessible to students regardless of the device they owned because we believe every student deserves access to tutoring.

4. Offer an intuitive, easy-to-learn design. For our team, having a user-friendly tutoring platform for staff and students was a non-negotiable requirement, especially since levels of experience with technology differ among staff and students.

After the public introduction of our new Discord server, we provided training to staff, faculty, and students, thus welcoming them into this new digital tutoring system. Constructing a Discord server to meet these needs has improved the quality of the online learning environment we offer, as it has actively improved education and engagement. Since we started using Discord for tutoring in January of 2021, we have held 4,477 tutoring sessions on this platform. As such, students who were struggling now have a useful and accessible space to find academic help. Further, implementing Discord has been extremely cost effective for the college, as Discord is not only available for free, but it also has allowed us to neatly streamline tutoring across the campus. As a result, we do not have different departments paying for different services or for technical support.

From an efficiency standpoint, this streamlining of our tutoring services is also a huge win, as the student experience is smooth—students do not have to learn multiple different programs to access different types of tutoring online. Lastly, with effort, intention, and cooperation, this is a replicable process for other higher education institutions. Ultimately, our team achieved the goal we set when pandemic disruptions first uprooted and impacted academia: that of replicating our in-person tutoring services in an accessible, thriving online environment. Because of our department's Discord server, every student has access to free, convenient, and quality tutoring services online.