Enhancing First-Year Course Student Experience with Virtual Team Support from Senior Marketing Majors

Brian A. Vander Schee, Demetra Andrews, and Tony Stovall

Purpose of the Study: The Virtual Team Support System (VTSS) was designed to ease the transition to student online learning caused by the global pandemic. The initiative, based on first-year experience programming, connects teams of senior students in an online marketing capstone course with teams of students in an online first-year introduction to business administration course. The VTSS assists virtual learning for first-year students and fosters perceived collaborative skills development for senior students.

Method/Design and Sample: The VTSS was used in two sections of the introduction to business administration course (n = 139) paired with two sections of the marketing capstone course (n = 63) at a public regional university. All four sections were taught online. Students were surveyed at the end of the semester to assess their perceptions regarding their personal experience and the overall effectiveness of the VTSS.

Results: Survey results indicate both introductory and senior students rated the VTSS as effective and recommend it for future use for virtual learning. Moreover, senior students expressed an improvement in perceived collaborative skills and noted personal growth and satisfaction from the experience.

Value to Marketing Educators: The VTSS provides an opportunity for social engagement with an academic purpose within the context of a required element of a first-year course. The results of this study provide evidence that the VTSS offers benefits for both introductory and senior students. The VTSS can readily be used in a variety of senior-level marketing courses paired with a first-year business or marketing course.

Keywords: Online Learning; Virtual Teams; Student Support; Peer Mentoring; Collaborative Skills

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Introduction

In fall 2018, at least one-third of all college students took an online course (Lederman, 2019). That number grew to nearly 100% in spring 2020 as the global pandemic forced faculty and students to discontinue in-person instruction. In many respects, the transition to online learning was challenging for faculty and students alike. Even before the pandemic, Holcomb et al. (2018) suggested that students need programmatic support to adjust to online learning. Prior research showed that students taking courses online are provided support services, however the degree to which online learners take advantage of institutional initiatives is not readily understood (Buck, 2016). Moreover, academic success in an online setting requires intentional and meaningful student engagement (Korstange et al., 2020). Some pedagogical approaches were readily adaptable to online instruction; however, all instructors faced the challenge of providing adequate support for academic success.

Although access to digital resources was not affected, face-to-face interactions, campus facilities (e.g., labs, library, athletic complex, etc.), and student services were restricted temporarily. It was assumed that students could quickly transition to a more autonomous approach to the college experience, negotiating classes remotely, and operating as a student from a distance. Some undergraduate students, who may have been hesitant at first, responded positively. In fact, many students preferred the synchronized online format citing convenience and time savings as advantages over in-person instruction (Khalil et al., 2020).

At the same time, limited support for learning and the virtual classroom negatively impact persistence and retention (Shah & Cheng, 2019). However, students who experience connection and belonging online are more engaged and find greater value in their education (Jorgenson et al., 2018). Smailes and Gannon-Leary (2011) suggested that peer mentoring in an online environment can augment institutional support services designed to increase student engagement. Involving experienced students as peer mentors broadens the scope of academic delivery to individuals by fostering personal connections (Fedesco et al., 2019).

Students serving as peer mentors experience positive outcomes. Benefits for students serving as leaders in an online first-year experience program include relational knowledge, self-awareness, and collaborative skills development (Marshall et al., 2021). The collaborative skills element is of great value to develop career readiness, particularly related to teamwork, interpersonal, and relationship building skills (Raymond et al., 2021). Written reflection can further enhance transfer of knowledge and experience to practice (Chan & Wong, 2021).

The virtual team support system (VTSS) addresses the lack of student support in online marketing education. The results of this study show benefits for students in the first-year course and perceived collaborative skills development for senior students with both groups recommending the VTSS for future use. The remainder of this manuscript is organized as follows. First, we provide a review of the relevant literature related to first-year experience, virtual student teams, and peer mentoring. Second, we outline the steps involved in executing the VTSS. Third, we discuss the method used in this study, followed by a presentation of the data analysis and results. Lastly, we include a discussion based on the findings and address the limitations of the study and directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

First-year Experience

In this study, first-year experience is defined as curricular programming that intentionally supports students in one of their initial online university courses (Korstange et al., 2020). First-year experience programming was designed to address the transition from high school to the challenges of life and learning in college (Feldman, 2017). Part of the transition is developing institutional knowledge and social integration (Cuseo et al., 2020). Based on social integration theory, students who feel more engaged in their program and classes are more likely to graduate (Tinto, 1993). Taking online courses adds the complexity of underestimating workload, the need to be self-directed, and lack of motivation (Muljana & Luo, 2019). Moreover, independent learning attributed to virtual instruction may have stemmed from the rapid implementation of online learning with limited preparation.

Carrie et al. (2017) utilized a team-based approach in an in-person first-year experience program for marketing students showing improvement in academic and professional skills including project management, teamwork, and problem solving. A study by Yomtov et al. (2017) also found first-year students engaged in peer mentoring felt more supported and integrated in the program. Krasilnikov and Smirnova (2017) showed that integration in the middle of the semester enhanced academic performance more so than socialization at the outset. A semester-long informal peer mentoring program also showed initial gains in academic achievement followed by enhanced socialization later on (Tsang, 2020).

Virtual Student Teams

In this study, a virtual team is defined as a group of people who are geographically dispersed that use technology for communication and project collaboration (Ford et al., 2017). Virtual teams are routinely used among colleagues in different locations to maximize expertise and collaboration (Alsharo et al., 2017) and to minimize travel time and expenses, office space maintenance, and time zone limitations (Handke et al., 2020). Students are also encouraged to work in virtual teams to develop skills needed for a professional setting in the future (Pineda, 2015). Moreover, students develop leadership in a virtual team setting when their team is encouraged to work independently, resulting in higher team performance (Carter et al., 2019). Feedback and interdependence also contribute positively to virtual team effectiveness (Carter et al., 2019).

Virtual Student Teams

Peer mentoring in this study is defined as senior students providing support and practical recommendations to students who have less academic experience (Yomtov et al., 2017). Although online peer mentoring from a student-to-student perspective is understudied (Boyle et al., 2010), research by Etzel et al. (2018) found benefits for the peer mentees in acclimating to the collegiate academic environment. Other benefits include increased confidence and motivation (Fayram et al., 2018), student engagement (Culpeper & Kan, 2020), and student retention (Cree-Green et al., 2020). Peer mentoring in groups is unique in that mentors need skills to offer guidance to a number of mentees (Huizing, 2012). More specifically, peer mentors should possess adequate knowledge, personal skills, and a positive attitude to effectively provide guidance to other students (Stoszkowski et al., 2017).

The benefits of peer mentoring have also been examined from the perspective of the mentors (Gunn et al., 2017). Mentoring in academia is likened to consulting in a professional setting. Senior students who serve in a leadership or consulting role are better prepared to meet the expectations of future employers (Fried, 2020), particularly outside of the academy (Taylor & Haras, 2020). Developing career relevant collaborative skills predicts employability (Hirschi, 2012) and can be achieved with high-impact practices, such as peer mentoring (Hauhart & Grahe, 2015). Moreover, employers expect students to possess collaborative skills as they enter the workforce (Everhart et al., 2016).

Virtual Team Support System

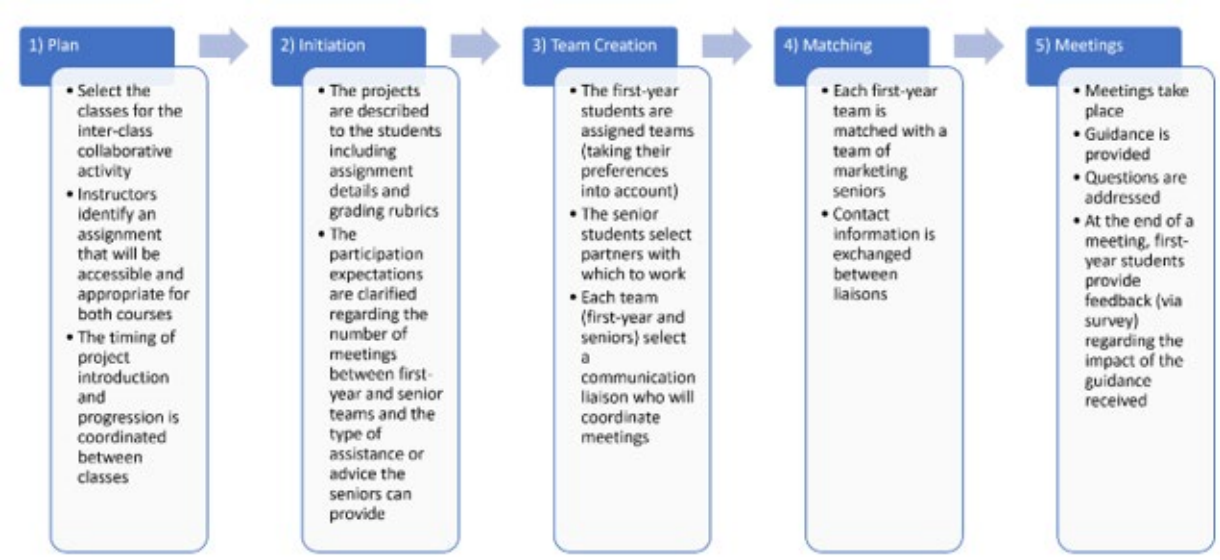
The VTSS is premised on prior research utilizing more experienced students to assist students in a first-year course in an online setting (Boyle et al., 2010; Fayram et al., 2018; Korstange et al., 2020). Prior research has also considered peer mentoring or assessment in

groups (Huizing, 2012; Vander Schee & Birrittella, 2021), however no studies to date have examined experienced support teams working with first-year teams in an online setting. Although students in any year of college can serve in a peer mentoring role (Yomtov et al., 2017), students in their final year of undergraduate education bring a greater wealth of institutional and discipline-specific knowledge to the relationship (Gunn et al., 2017). Therefore, senior students were selected to provide support and guidance for students completing a team-based project in the first-year course.

The instructors of the senior capstone course and the introductory business course collaborate on the VTSS. Students in the first-year course are given an assignment that should be appropriate in length to be completed in four weeks as a team written submission. Examples include a case analysis, new product plan, new business plan, environmental scan, or situation analysis. The senior students are instructed to focus their advising efforts on the discipline-specific content of the assignment, in this case, the marketing portion. They are also encouraged to utilize the time they spend meeting with students in the first-year course to discuss other topics that arise. The VTSS should take place in the second half of the semester (i.e., weeks 9 through 15 of a 16-week semester) to allow for sufficient instructional time to address concepts that might be utilized in the introductory course assignment. Instructions are provided to students in the introductory course and the capstone course in week 9. See Figure 1.

Figure 1

Virtual Team Support System Steps



In week 10, the senior students select a partner to form a support team, just as marketing professionals would self-select a business partner. The senior students are provided with the instructions for the assignment given to the first-year course student teams to set the context for the first meeting. In week 10, the instructor of the first-year course also assigns students to project teams of 4 to 8 members. Project teams are given guidance regarding the purpose, expectations, preparation, and how to effectively use the VTSS. Once teams are formed, the capstone and introductory course instructors match each support team with a project team from the first-year course. Contact information for each project team can be provided via a learning management system, or by email, to one member of each support team (selected as the liaison).

The support team liaison schedules two, 30 to 60-minute virtual meetings with the project teams from the first-year course. Students can use one of many free video conferencing platforms such as Zoom, Cisco Webex, Skype, or Microsoft Teams. The first meeting is scheduled within one week of the introduction (week 11) and the second meeting during the week before the written assignment is due (week 13). This provides students in the first-year course with initial direction and adequate time for revision. The objective of the first meeting is for the support team to establish credibility and rapport with the project team. It is advisable to provide project team students with time to talk about other academic issues such as course selection and available resources. During the second meeting, the support team reflects on the work product that has been completed to date. Time is also allocated for continued discussion on adjusting to college life, particularly in a virtual learning environment. The support team also keeps detailed notes of the meeting to submit with their written reflection later in the course.

Project teams from the first-year course may provide feedback after the first online meeting to highlight how the support team performed. This gives each of the seniors an opportunity to adjust for the second meeting. Feedback provided by the project team after the second meeting can also be used in the written reflection outlined below. The purpose of the feedback is for the

seniors to become aware of how effective they were perceived and how they can revise their approach in future to further develop career competencies.

Each senior student is assigned to write a two to three-page, double-spaced reflection on the experience, due in week 15. The senior students answer the following questions, (1) What did you learn from the VTSS experience? (2) What competencies did you gain? (3) How did your support team help your first-year student team improve its output? (4) If given the opportunity, what would you do differently next time? Students are instructed to also submit their VTSS meeting notes along with the written reflection. Completion of the VTSS experience was weighted as 10% of the total grade in the capstone course. Students in the first-year course also had the opportunity to provide written feedback to the instructor.

METHOD

Sample

The VTSS was used in two sections of the introduction to business administration course paired with two sections of the marketing capstone course at a public regional university. One section of the intro class was taught online asynchronously, and the other was taught in a virtual synchronous format. Both sections were taught by the same instructor. One section of the capstone course was taught by the same instructor as the intro classes while the other section of the capstone course was taught by a different instructor, however both sections of the capstone course were taught in a synchronous virtual environment. The two instructors worked closely throughout the semester to ensure that they were following the same procedures across the sections.

Measures

The intro and capstone students were surveyed at the end of the semester to assess their perceptions regarding their personal experience and the overall effectiveness of the VTSS. Students were asked to rate their level of agreement to survey items on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Items for perceived effectiveness concerning their experience with the VTSS were adapted from a scale (α = .95) by Syrdal et al. (2021). Scale items included I recommend using the VTSS in the future, I highly rate using the VTSS in the course, and I rate using the VTSS in the course as effective. Similar scale items have been utilized in other studies in marketing education including sales (Jones et al., 2016), digital badging (Laverie, Humphrey, et al., 2020), and simulations (Laverie, Hass, et al., 2020). The items for collaborative skills were adapted from Hodges and Burchell (2003).

RESULTS

Of the 139 student survey respondents in the first-year course, 60 (43%) were female, 54 (39%) were non-White, and 20 (14%) were Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish. The average age of respondents was 20.2 (*SD* = 3.456). Of the 63 senior student survey respondents, 36 (57%) were female, 7 (11%) were non-White, and 1 (2%) was Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish. The average age of respondents was 22.4 (*SD* = 1.529). A one-sample t test for the perceived effectiveness scale (*M* = 5.45, *SD* = 1.242, test value = 5, $p < .001$) provides evidence that students in the first-year course found the VTSS to be effective and recommend it for future. Furthermore, the first-year course students expressed agreement (test value = 5, $p < .001$) that the support team understood and addressed their questions and concerns, as intended.

Table 1

First-year Course Student Perceptions of the Virtual Team Support System

Survey Item	*M* (*N* = 139)	*SD*
Our support team understood our questions and concerns.	6.06	0.986
Our support team addressed our questions and concerns.	5.98	1.027

Note. Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Students in the first-year course also provided written feedback regarding their experience. Representative comments below indicate that students benefited from academic support and enhanced socialization, in line with the last two survey items in Table 1.

"The support team has been very helpful with getting things situated for me."

"I like that I got to work with the team. Now, I actually know some of my classmates."

"Can we keep in touch with the support team? I only ask because they were a big help."

A one-sample t test for the perceived effectiveness scale (*M* = 5.33, *SD* = 1.811, test value = 5, $p < .001$) provides evidence that senior students also found the experience to be effective and thought it should be used again. The senior student survey also included measures that represent perceived collaborative skills development. One-sample t tests for each of the survey items in Table 2 (test value = 5, $p < .001$) provide evidence that students perceived the VTSS improved their skills in teamwork, interpersonal communication, and relationship building.

Table 2

Senior Student Perceived Collaborative Skills Development of the Virtual Team Support System

Survey Item	*M* (*N* = 63)	*SD*
I improved my teamwork skills from the VTSS.	5.77	1.123
I improved my interpersonal skills from the VTSS.	5.56	1.220
I improved my relationship building skills from the VTSS.	5.66	1.057

Note. Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

In addition, insights shared in written reflections by senior students highlighted the benefits they gleaned from the experience as noted in the representative comments below.

> "It felt great giving advice to students on their assignment, but the best part was just talking about the entire college experience. We would always end our meetings with a discussion on how to survive and excel in college."
>
> "There is a certain feeling of pride when a group that you mentored turns in really nice work because we had a little part in that, even if it was just giving them advice and walking them through a few things."
>
> "This experience was like no other I have had in college. I am always the educated, not the educator. This put me in a position to really demonstrate what I have learned through my time here. The students had some questions that a senior marketing student might find laughable, but they were some of the same questions I would have had in my first year. I feel like having peers to ask these questions would have made me more confident and comfortable if I had this opportunity at that stage."

DISCUSSION

The combination of first-year and online coursework was mandatory during the global health transition and will continue to be commonplace in the future (Kim, 2020). The VTSS provides an opportunity for social engagement with an academic purpose within the context of a required element of a first-year course. The results of this study show that the VTSS offers benefits for students completing first-year and capstone courses. This study builds on prior research involving group peer mentoring (Etzel et al., 2018), first-year experience (Yomtov et al., 2017), and socialization (Tsang, 2020). However, unlike virtual team collaboration (Carter et al., 2019), this study focused on online peer group mentoring to address engagement within the context of an academic assignment.

The VTSS can be used in a variety of senior-level marketing courses that can be paired with a first-year business or marketing course. The academic context can focus on quantitative analysis, promotional design, pricing strategies or communication skills to name a few. Pairing groups of students in a senior-level course with student groups in a first-year course provides the mechanism for online peer group mentoring. Although the academic skills development is important, it is almost secondary to the virtual support, transfer of institutional knowledge, and perceived collaborative skills gleaned in the process.

One of the challenges associated with the VTSS was conflicting student schedules. One way to overcome this is to set certain days and times in the course calendar for team meetings so students know of their obligations at the outset of the course. Another challenge was having second-year students enrolled in the first-year course. However, first-year experience routinely extends to the third semester of college (Korstange et al., 2020). Some students were hesitant to engage in the VTSS given their lack of experience with the virtual academic setting. However, introverted students may feel more comfortable engaging with a small group and at a distance where visual cues and attention are minimized (Appana, 2008).

The VTSS requires coordination among faculty, but also affords instructors the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues at any institution. The benefits are worth the time invested, as demonstrated by the results of this study. Moreover, the marketing program can document how it is meeting an accreditation-related initiative. The VTSS meets the criteria listed in the AACSB Standard 4: Curriculum regarding innovation, experiential learning, and meeting competency goals (AACSB International, 2020).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The results of the analysis show the VTSS to be effective at easing the independent learning experienced in online course delivery. However, some things should be kept in mind when making an application to other settings. The VTSS was employed at one institution by two faculty who taught four sections of online courses due to the transition in instruction caused by the global pandemic. Students may not have chosen online learning if they had been provided with other options. Furthermore, unique instructor and institutional characteristics may have influenced the experience. The study was limited to one semester, therefore first-year student retention data was not collected or examined.

Future research could include more than one institution or multiple online sections of courses to enhance generalizability. Future research should utilize a measure for student engagement for both first-year and senior students. This would add to the body of knowledge regarding online peer group mentoring. Active learning has been assessed to show positive outcomes beyond the activity in question (Vander Schee, 2007). Similarly, retention data could be examined to discern if there are long term benefits beyond the course.

Another line of inquiry could investigate the influence of online group peer mentoring for instructors who are new to teaching online courses (Parkes et al., 2015). This would help shed light on whether pedagogical approaches designed for students can be extended to benefit faculty as well. Utilizing second or third-year students in the support team role could assess the effectiveness of the VTSS beyond senior year participants. Finally, utilizing the VTSS across borders could examine cultural dimensions and reflect the globalization of professional collaboration (Zhu, 2012).

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