Research Brief: Experiences of Microaffirmations in an Online Degree Program

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ABSTRACT

Background: Microaffirmations are brief statements of support and inclusion that can have a powerful influence on students, particularly those who feel disconnected.

Aim: The aim of this pilot study was to explore self-reports of microaffirmations from adult students in a nursing degree program offered in an online format at a large public institution of higher education.

Methods: Responses from online students, collected as part of a larger study on microaffirmations among undergraduate students across all instructional modalities, were gathered and framed as a pilot study to appreciate experiences of virtual microaffirmations and to determine if a study focused specifically on microaffirmations among online learners would be feasible and fruitful.

Results: Results indicated that students who received microaffirmations reported higher levels of connectedness and belonging as well as positive mood and self-efficacy.

Conclusions: Implications for practice include infusing microaffirmations as part of discussion boards, feedback on assignments, and routine check-ins with students. Rich insights from analysis suggest that a large-scale study of microaffirmations in online learning environments would be productive and worthwhile.

BACKGROUND

Building healthy academic communities necessitates understanding student experiences. As the availability of online degree programs increases, colleges and universities must understand factors influencing the student experience in virtual learning environments. Specifically, research has identified a need for evidence-based activities for enhancing online student well-being (Arulkadacham et al., 2021). Given that student engagement in online degree program coursework is influenced by psychosocial factors including, communications with peers and online instructors (Farrell & Brunton, 2020), we propose intentional communication as a key part of promoting online student success. To this end, the study described in this article examined online student experiences with a specific form of communication called *microaffirmations*.

Microaffirmations, which come in the form of *microcompliments*, *microsupports*, or *microvalidations*, are brief communications expressing support, care, listening, and inclusion (Ellis et al., 2019; Rowe, 2008). These communications can be public, such as a compliment said in front of class, or private, such as validation communicated in a private email. Microaffirmations can be particularly powerful for students who sense that they are unwanted or unseen. These statements communicate admiration and respect, provide feedback in a manner meant to help an individual feel welcome in a learning environment, and affirm a student's perspectives, emotions, and beliefs.

Prior research has described the beneficial influence of in-person microaffirmations on student belonging and engagement (Ellis et al., 2019). However, a significant and growing segment of college populations comprises adult learners pursuing degrees online. Adult learners contribute to the diverse landscape of higher education institutions, and they constitute a growing percentage of enrollment in the United States. The National Center for Education Statistics (2023) reported that the enrollment of students aged 25–34 years in degree-granting postsecondary institutions increased 35% between 2001 and 2015 and is projected to increase 11% from 2015 to 2026. As the size of the adult learner population grows, it is important for institutions to understand their challenges and to provide support systems that address adult learner needs (Yamini et al., 2023). Although accommodating adult learner populations requires specialized support, the perspectives and experience adult learners bring to academia are valuable and contribute to the richness and diversity of universities.

Online programs are especially important for meeting critical workforce demands for health care, including nursing. Students attracted to online degree programs are often working professionals, such as nurses, entering programs to advance their careers. Adult learners are frequently transfer students aged older than 25 years and negotiating multiple, complex personal and professional responsibilities beyond their degree programs (Yamini et al., 2023). These students may find it challenging to connect to their universities and to feel as though they belong in academia. As such, microaffirmations, with their potential to build connections and foster belonging, can be a potent tool for supporting adult learner success. The pilot study described in this article builds on previous research demonstrating that in-person microaffirmations are beneficial to student success (Ellis et al., 2019) by identifying and describing microaffirmations experienced in a virtual learning environment. As more degree programs are offered online, identifying and promoting strategies for building healthy academic communities online is necessary.

The purpose of this study was to examine whether microaffirmations were identifiable and described as beneficial by adult learners in an online degree program. Study objectives included (a) describing experiences of microaffirmations in an online degree program, (b) identifying tangible takeaways for educators building and teaching online degree programs, and (c) determining feasibility of a larger study focused on this unique student group.

METHODS

An anonymous, online, cross-sectional survey of 35 questions was distributed to a random sample of 3,000 undergraduates at a large public university. Participants received a $10 gift card for completing the survey. In total, 350 completed surveys were collected from students in both in-person and online degree programs. The survey collected quantitative and qualitative data about student motivations and experiences. Through four open-ended responses, participants were asked to describe microaffirmations they received and if these acts were meaningful. Descriptive statistics and content analysis (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) were the primary forms of analysis. Using Text iQ (Qualtrics, 2023) software, we organized, chunked, and systematically coded the qualitative data. This

approach resulted in the development of categories, patterns, and relationships that led to the emergence of themes from the data.

Analysis revealed that the data collected from 73 students in an online degree program provided unique insights. To better understand the phenomenon of microaffirmations among online learning, we isolated these 73 responses from the rest of the data set. The 73 student responses were identified as coming from students in the Bachelor of Science in Nursing program for licensed register nurses (RN-BSN) offered in an online learning format. We decided to frame this subgroup of responses as a pilot study to see what we might learn about the students' unique experiences and to determine if a future large-scale study about microaffirmations among online students would be feasible and worthwhile.

All participants in the subgroup had associate degrees and were licensed nurses with a broad range of clinical experiences. The program is accelerated, with students taking a maximum of two courses in 7-week sessions. As such, there is limited time to form relationships with instructors or classmates, as unlike traditional nursing programs, students' progress through the RN-BSN program at an individual pace (not as a cohort). Of the 73 respondents, 100% reported living off-campus, and 90% indicated that they were working while enrolled in school an average of 35.6 hours per week; 97% of those working were working off-campus. As is typical of undergraduate nursing programs, most respondents were female, with 70% aged older than 25 years. Half were first-generation college students, and 33% indicated that they were from a racially or ethnically underrepresented group in higher education.

RESULTS

The majority of respondents (73%) reported having experienced a microaffirmation as part of their online learning. These included brief exchanges in which a faculty member individually checked in with students through email, a direct message in the learning management system, or a virtual meeting. At these check-ins, asking students if they needed support when negotiating a challenging assignment was identified as a form of care and concern. Students also noted that brief weekly messages to the entire class posted in the announcements section of the learning management system were impactful, especially when they acknowledged the time and effort students were devoting to the course. Students also noted having flexibility on due dates when life events occurred as a form of microaffirmation. Starting a message board response or an email with a student's name and remembering details about a student's life experiences outside of the classroom were also called out as microaffirmations. Taking time to explain acronyms and university jargon were also noted as brief yet helpful communications that resulted in students feeling more comfortable and knowledgeable. Finally, expressing enthusiasm and gratitude when students participated in class activities and providing short yet inspirational or encouraging messages before a quiz or exam were described as beneficial.

In the study, 80% of students who experienced a microaffirmation agreed with the statement "I feel a sense of belonging," whereas only 60% of students who did not experience a microaffirmation agreed with this statement. Additionally, students who experienced a microaffirmation reported a more positive mood on an average school day. Students who reported having a microaffirmation were more likely to also report that they have a person at the university to whom they can turn in a time of need and to report a higher sense of self-efficacy. One student clearly articulated that receiving a microaffirmation "meant the teacher actually cared how I felt," and another student shared, "It lets me know someone else is thinking of me." Students who reported having no experiences of microaffirmations (27%) were more likely to report that they feel invisible at the university. On average, students who experienced a

microaffirmation reported feeling welcome at an 8.9 level on a 10-point scale, with 10 indicating feeling the most welcome. Students who experienced no microaffirmation felt, on average, welcome at a 7.7 level on a 10-point scale.

Online discussion boards were described as an important venue for both instructors and peers to communicate microaffirmations. One student noted, "I almost always received microaffirmation from classmates during weekly discussion boards. I can also remember regular microaffirmation from my population and community health instructor Dr. R—. She was very encouraging." Another student shared, "In most of my classes my teacher would take time to personally respond to a discussion board or an assignment. They always seemed interested and engaged." Microaffirmations were also described as part of effective academic feedback. These communications appreciated students' effort and time spent on tasks and provided specific ways in which a student could improve their work. Many students indicated that microaffirmations encouraged them to continue with their degree programs. For example, "From the very beginning of starting my enrollment with [the university] I have had many staff reach out to check on how I was doing, if I had any questions, and if I needed any help. This has all been very helpful and gave me comfort and helped my enthusiasm to pursue my RN-BSN degree at this university." Students also expressed that microaffirmations helped them navigate personal challenges, including hurricane damage to a home, pregnancy, health issues, working full time, parenting children, and serving as a caregiver for older or ill family members. One working adult shared that the microaffirmation was meaningful "because going back to school and working full time can be a little scary so encouragement is helpful to keep going."

DISCUSSION

Looking at the 73 responses from online students proved to be fruitful, and we believe that a large-scale study focusing specifically on experiences of microaffirmations among online learners should be conducted. Furthermore, our small pilot study resulted in at least three tangible applications to online instructional practice. First, it is beneficial for online instructors to use discussion boards to intentionally communicate microaffirmations. Second, incorporating microaffirmations into critical academic feedback can positively impact how students receive and respond to feedback. Finally, employing an intentional practice of virtual check-ins with students is recommended to demonstrate awareness of individual circumstances.

Instructors can implement these applications to online teaching immediately. For example, before responding to a student question, an instructor might say to a student, "I am glad you are here" or "Thank you for raising that point." When giving feedback, instead of a simple "Needs proofreading," an instructor could say, "Maria, you have some really good ideas here, and they will come through stronger with thorough proofreading." Instead of "Nice job," an instructor can be specific: "Alex, the way you connect the discussion post to the reading in the prior module is impressive." Finally, taking the time to explain acronyms and confusing university jargon could communicate to someone that they belong.

CONCLUSION

This research brief provides insights into the experiences of online and adult learners. Students who participated in the study described the positive benefits of microaffirmations. These results advance our understanding of microaffirmations among students and can be used to enhance online adult education. Intentionally considering and

delivering microaffirmations is a tangible, no-cost tool for online educators to employ as part of efforts to build healthy academic communities where students succeed.

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