FAKE AMERICAN COLLEGE

Virtual Programming: Gather & Play

Olivia Copeland, Emma Hage, and Brian Stover

Overview

- Introducing the Institution & Team
- Exploring Engagement
- Introducing the Problem - Disengagement
- What is Virtual Engagement?
- Considerations for Solution Development
- Proposing a Solution - Gather (Trivia Night)
  - Plan
  - Outcomes
  - Resources
  - Marketing
- Widening Implications

Overview of Institution

Fake American College (FAC)

FAC is a private, liberal arts, 4-year residential college located in Dimmsdale, California.

Mascot:
Francis Falcon

Demographics

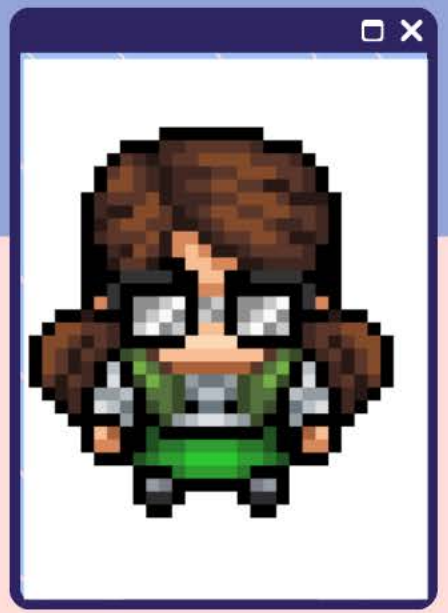
2,500 Total Students

52% Female
44% Male
4% Nonbinary/Other

35% White
30% Hispanic
19% Asian
10% Black
6% Other

Gather the Team

Emma "Sarah" Hage
Director,
Student Activities



Olivia Copeland
Director,
First-Year Experience

Brian Stover
Program Coordinator,
Residence Life

Our committee will work together to leverage our respective department's resources to create a socially engaging environment—virtually.

What do we define as engagement?

A complex idea with many definitions....
(Fulford, 2017)

Astin's (1993) Theory of Student Involvement

Engagement is developed in the relations between the institution and the student. Student involvement is a **continuous process** and requires an **investment of psychosocial and physical energy**, the *level of which varies depending on the student*. What is gained from involvement is also directly related to the **(*quantity AND quality of*) depth of involvement**.

Other Theories of Engagement

Wenger (1998) also argued that **self-motivated agency** and **deepened participation** in a well-defined community signify strong engagement.

Trowler (2016) identified three domains of engagement: ***behavioral***, ***cognitive***, and ***emotional***. Furthermore, Trowler argued that engagement occurs on **a continuum from positive to negative**, with disengagement falling into the neutral element of the continuum.

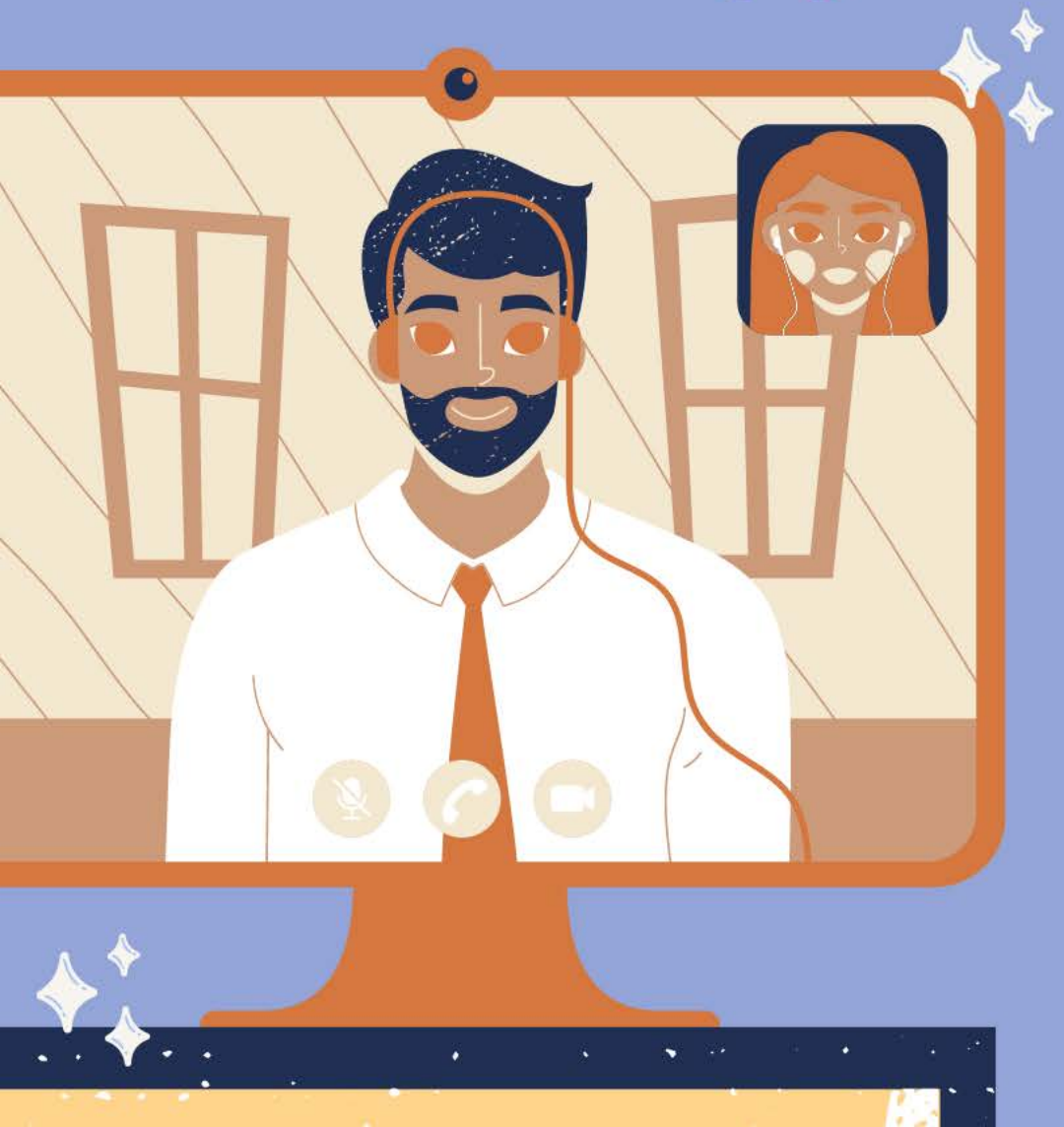
Outcomes of engagement

Astin (1993) argued that successful involvement is associated with academic achievement.

Students who are/feel particularly engaged are more likely to view social relations as vital to their educational experience (Coates, 2007).

Continued engagement over a long period contributes to stronger sense of belonging and identity (Korhonen, 2012; Korhonen et al., 2017).

What happens when students don't engage?



Tinto's (1993, 2000) Theory of Departure

A variety of factors contribute to student departure, particularly low integration into or disengagement with university life. Critical elements of integration include **formal** (e.g., planned activities) and **informal** (e.g., spontaneous interaction) **social systems**.

Other Conceptualizations of Disengagement

Mann (2001) describes disengagement as alienation, from the definition given by the Oxford Dictionary: "the state or experience of **being isolated from a group or an activity to which one should belong or in which one should be involved.**"

Trowler (2015) conceptualized disengagement as "non-engagement," a less normative indication of student involvement in college. Students who are non-engaged experience bordem, non-attendance, withdrawl, and apathy.

Outcomes of disengagement

Students who experience an uninviting campus culture will feel as though they are in consistent conflict with their university (Krause, 2005).

The indicators of disengagement are also its outcomes: "not engaging, participating or interacting in learning activities, and not engaging with the institution or their peers" (Chipchase et al., 2017). Thus, students who are disengaged are **unlikely to reach their full academic or social potential**.

Why is engagement critical in the first year?

The first year is when students learn their **role in the community** and the **practices** that are important to **their success in that community** (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Attrition is most likely to happen in the first year (Krause et al., 2005), indicating that intentional community building is critical in the first year.

Nelson and Creagh (2013) suggested that **intervention in the first year** for students who may be at risk of disengagement can decrease the chances/effects of disengaging.

Understanding first year students' engagement process:

Korhonen, Mattsson, Inkinen, & Toom (2019) Multidimensional Model of First Year Student Engagement

Internal factors—personal skills and meaning-making—contribute to one's sense of *identity*, while **external factors**—participation in a community and adoption of community practices—contribute to a *sense of belonging*. The interaction of these individual and collective processes are where engagement is continuously negotiated.

Nuance to Student Engagement Discourse

"Engagement is more than involvement or participation—it requires ***feelings*** and ***sense-making*** as well as activity" (Harper & Quaye, 2009).

"Tyranny of Participation" (Gourlay, 2015)

Gourlay (2015) noted that, while "mainstream conceptions of student engagement have placed great emphasis on individual motivation, determination, agency and observable 'participation,'" such definitions "**fail to acknowledge the centrality of meaning-making and textuality to higher education student practices and subjectivities.**" Additionally, relying on these definitions "may lead to practices which are quiet, private, non-verbal and non-observable becoming bracketed as essentially deviant and in need of remediation."

Fulford (2017) Critique

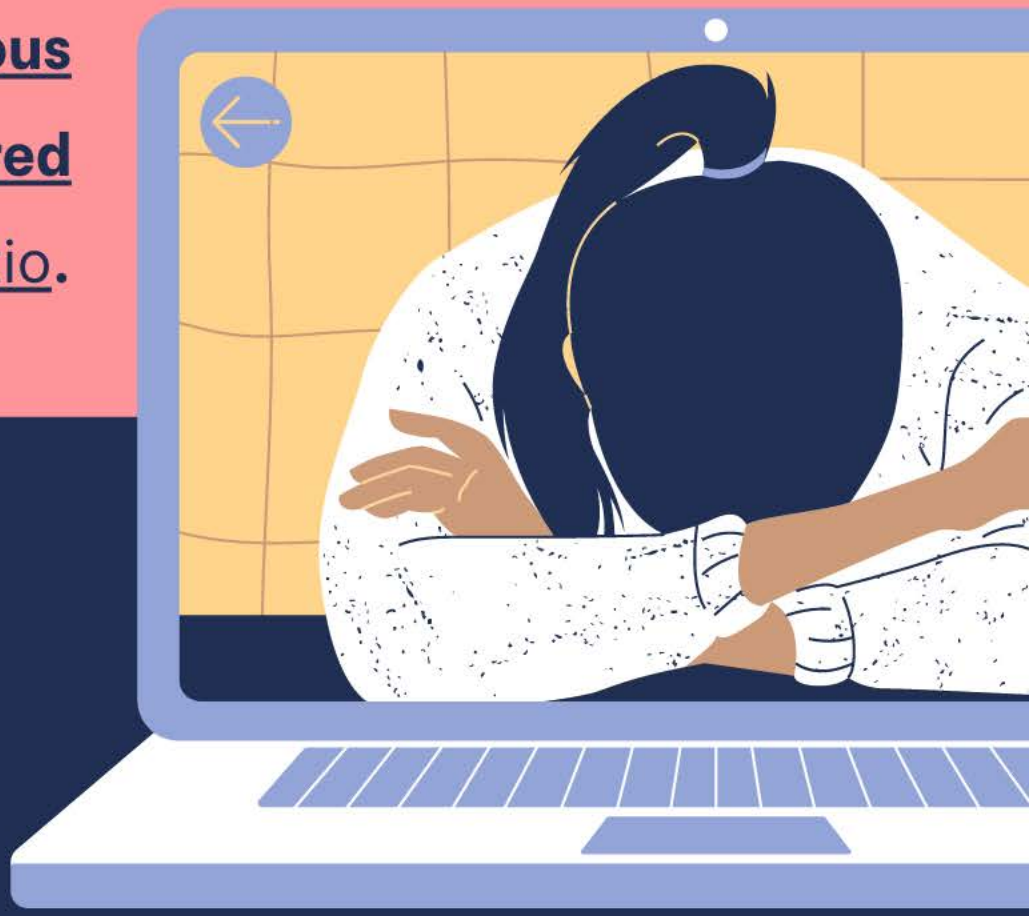
"There is an important distinction to be drawn between **forms of disengagement that suggest the existence of serious issues related to a student's experience of university life and study,** and those **forms that. . . signal a student's active engagement,** and so are educative in themselves. . . But there is an increasing tendency to characterize **all behavior that does not conform to what is expected (or even required) as evidence of disengagement that is need of rectifying** to get the student 'back on course.'"

FAC staff and leaders need to remain committed to the idea that (dis)engagement is complex and therefore ***participation should not be our only measure* or goal for success** in our student programming.

Why are students disengaging now?

Professionals are attempting to create **spontaneous** student social interactions using **over-structured** methods that require a high energy-to-output ratio.

Forward-thinking professionals need to consider how theories of ***engagement* in technology** have developed to build a bridge for student engagement.



Institutions have successfully created programs that emphasize community-building in virtual settings, such as for distance-learning students to find academic community (Foley & Marr, 2019) as well as interactive mindfulness communities (Morr, Maule, Ashfaq, Ritvo, & Ahmad, 2020).

Virtual engagement is not impossible; we simply must match our strategies to our aims—student socialization and engagement in the FAC community.

Research has indicated that digital behavior is strongly associated to behaviors offline (e.g., Bayraktar & Amca, 2012; Wohn & Wash, 2013). This can include how students form relationships.

What virtual environment can we provide that simulates "normal" socialization conditions?

Studies suggest that engagement with a socially-focused **virtual world** can promote *immersion* (re: engagement) in a virtual setting (Grinberg, Careaga, Mehl, & O'Connor, 2014).

How do we connect virtual and "normal" engagement?

Considering our strategy in light of the

Stages of Technology Engagement

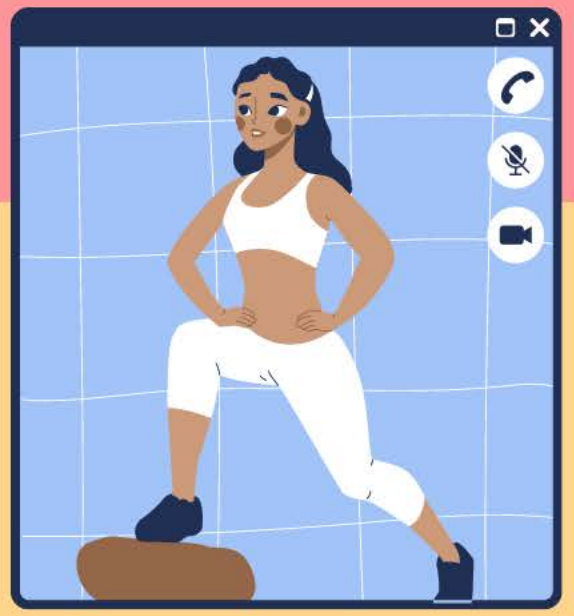
(O'Brien & Toms, 2008)

"Engagement is a quality of user experiences with technology. . . characterized by":

- challenge
- feedback
- interactivity
- awareness
- aesthetic and sensory appeal
- perceived control and time
- novelty
- motivation
- interest
- affect

Point of Engagement

The *aesthetic and structural composition* of technology captures the attention and interest of person.



Period of Engagement

Attention and interest maintenance occurs through *novel interactions* with *consistent feedback*, as well as a balance of *user control and challenge*.

Disengagement

People disengage due to *predictability* or issues with *usability* leading to loss of interest, as well as attention loss from *interruption* or *external commitments*.

Re-engagement

(O'Brien & Toms, 2008)

"Returning to an application in the future was the result of positive past experience with that application. These motivations were about **having fun, being rewarded with convenience and incentives, and learning or discovering something new.**"

We want to empower our students with **the *control* to re-engage** and ***the ability to remain connected*** in unstable and isolating times.

Our goal?

Engage user-centered technology...

...to develop student-driven programming.

Important Considerations

Institutional Demographics

The residential requirement of our institution means that students are having prolonged campus engagement. **How can we replicate the variety of spaces available to our students?**

The economic impact of the pandemic makes cost efficiency essential. **What technology will maximize usability while minimizing cost?**

Individual Constraints

Technology (and WiFi) is a luxury that not every student has. **What technology can we utilize that requires the least amount of resources?**

Digital spaces are sometimes spaces where bullying occurs. **How can we center student safety in designing/selecting our technology?**

Considering New Tools

Students are tired of Zoom, and so are we. It's time for something different.

Gather.town is a website that allows users to move an avatar around a customizable world and interact with other users via video, audio, and text. Users can walk up to another person or small group to start a *spontaneous conversation*, and they can enter specialized spaces to have private conversations *without interruption*.

Higher education has a history of using massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), such as Second Life in the early 2000s, to create **engaging virtual academic spaces** for students (de Nood & Attema, 2006).

Virtual spaces can become "third places" because of the way they lend themselves to creating social networks outside of an individual's home and academic or work environment (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006), and people who participate in virtual worlds find value in their online friendships (Taylor, 2006).

How can Gather promote engagement?

Simulates novelty of in-person interactions

- Freedom of movement and control of engagement
- Designed to feature intimate interactions with options for 1:1 or group conversations

Simple to use and aesthetically pleasing

- No additional technology required beyond computer or smart phone
- Controls are game-like and students can customize avatars (with inclusive options)

Creates independent social community

- Structured activities to align with personal interest
- Spaces for discussion and non-structured engagement

Our Proposal

FAC Trivia & Social Hour

Using Gather, members of the FAC community will convene for a **1-hour trivia event, with additional time before and after for informal socializing**. The chosen date for the event aligns with one of FAC's "wellness days" in order to promote well-deserved relaxation for students who have been working hard this semester!

The event, officially hosted by Student Senate, is open to all students, faculty, and staff. Student leaders from our respective departments will help with recruiting their students to participate and will play a role in facilitating the event.

Students can sign up in advance to be on a trivia team with their friends, or they can indicate that they want to meet someone new and be part of a randomized team.

Friday, March 12th
7:00-10:00 PM

bit.ly/FACgathers

Outline

7:00 PM - Gather room opens

7:30 PM - Real and Alternative FACts submissions close

8:00 PM - FAC Trivia starts

9:00 PM - Rooms remain open

Trivia Emcee:

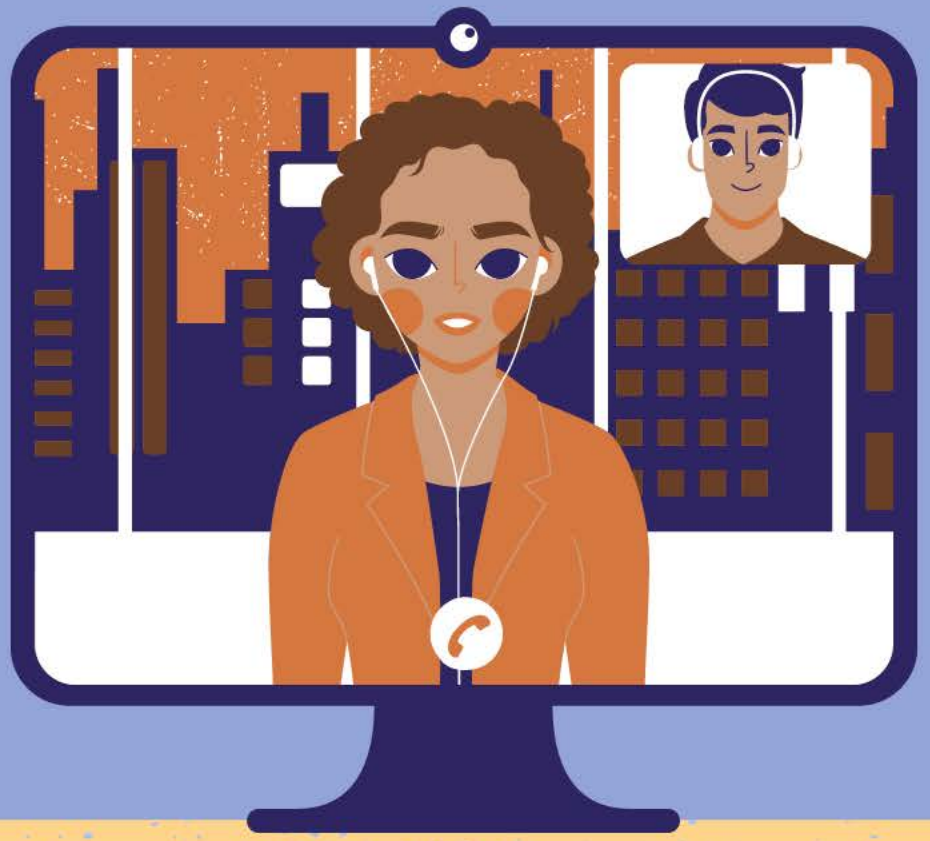
Francis Falcon,
FAC Mascot

FAC Trivia Night

How does this event take institutional demographics and individual constraints into account?

Customizable spaces can **simulate familiar campus environments**.

The cost of hosting large-scale events in Gather is only $1/student, **cheaper than in-person programs**.



All students are participating in online learning and already have access to **appropriate technology.**

Staff are able to **moderate the virtual space** and remove individuals who disrupt the event.

Program Outcomes

1) Virtual social integration

Provide a medium for formalized and spontaneous peer to peer engagement that helps define their identity and sense of belonging at FAC.

2) Independent social skills

Support development of vital social skills through organic, student-controlled interactions in a virtual simulation.

3) Campus culture connection

Promote institutional connection and identity through university-sponsored programming, in partnership with campus organizations and offices.

Resources Needed

Staffing

To ensure proper moderation of the Gather site, at least one student leader will be placed in each unique area (~20 RAs needed) with 5-6 professional staff also monitoring across large spaces.

Staff in various departments will be involved in advertisement distribution.

Financial

Gather: $1/Student/hour

Based on FAC's student population, this could cost up to $7500 if every student participated for the entire duration. A more expected cost for the event is roughly $300 -$600, with an additional $100 dedicated to prizes for trivia game winners.

Advertising

Work with campus printing services for physical flyers and banners to be put up in "The Capitol," the FAC student union.

Various facilities representatives will be contacted to ensure that physical advertising follows university guidelines.

Task Breakdown

ALL OFFICES

- Advertise event on social media and in office space
- Attend the event!
- Assist in post-program debrief for future implementation

RESIDENCE LIFE

- Advertise the event within the residence halls via flyers and word-of-mouth
- Sign up Resident Assistants for shifts during event for moderation of chat and rooms

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

- Develop and launch event landing page
- Create Trivia and Alternative FACts submission form
- Create Early-Falcon sign up for trivia teams
- Coordinate the implementation of outcomes for the program

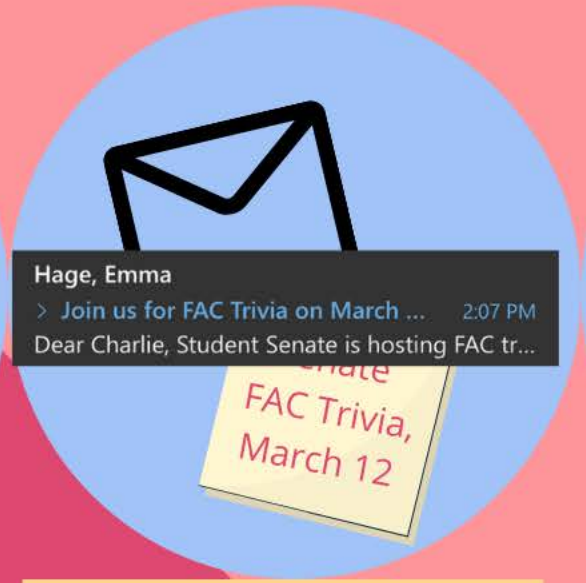
STUDENT SENATE

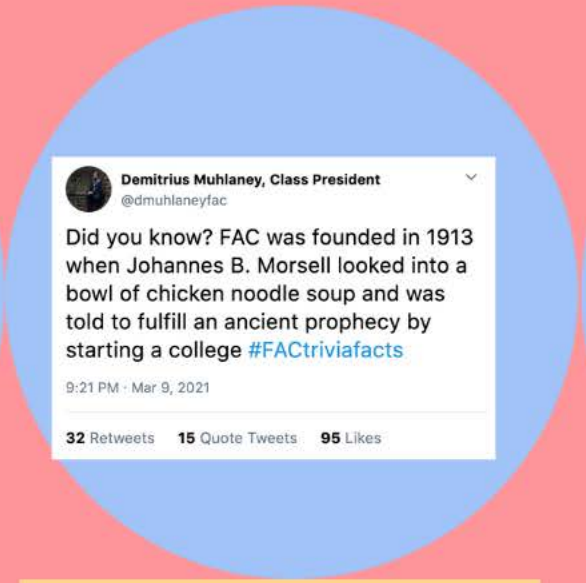
- Create social media plan for event and trivia fact gathering
- Collect and canvas trivia facts for appropriateness
- Train Francis Falcon on how to run a trivia game online

FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE

- Set up and customize the online space for Gather
- Contact Gather to set up payment for program
- Track attendance during program to ensure accurate payment

Social Media & Marketing Plan





March 1
Develop an event landing page with information on how to register, participate, and use Gather. Release and distribute promo video.

March 2
Distribute initial invitation via email and social media, and begin posting student-made advertisements across campus.

March 5
Begin collecting FAC-themed trivia facts from the community, including some viral "alternative facts," with #FACtriviafacts.

March 2-12
Encourage student organizations and student leaders to advertise throughout the days leading up to the event.

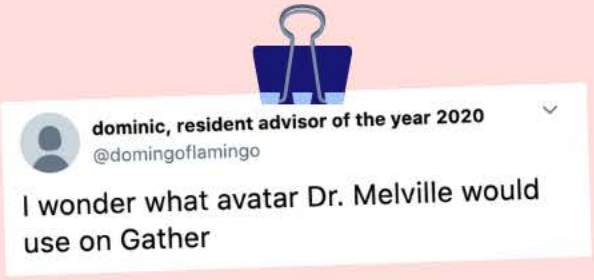
Social Media Strategy

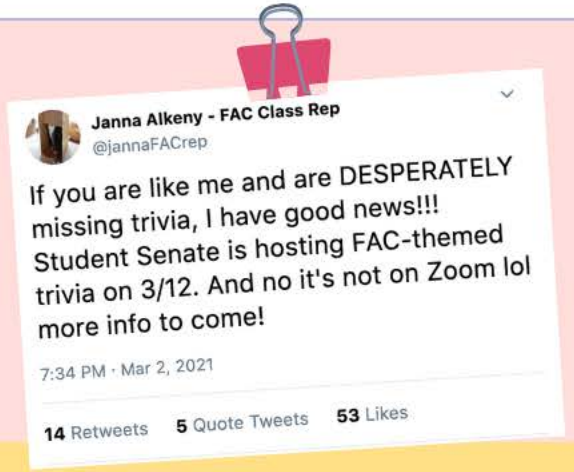
Initial Marketing

Student Senate, First-Year Experience (FYE), and Residence Life will share information about the event via email and on their official social media accounts (Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok) starting March 2nd. Beginning one week before the event, students, faculty, staff, and alumni will be invited to submit their own trivia facts using #FACtriviafacts. However, our actual goal is to get people to submit blatantly false and ridiculous "alternative FACts" that go viral among students, thereby drawing more attention to the event on March 12th.

Leveraging Student Leaders & Organizations

Student Activities, FYE, and Residence Life will host staff and organization meetings for student leaders using Gather in the two weeks leading up to the trivia event. These meetings will include time to collaboratively build the virtual FAC space and become familiar with Gather. We anticipate that these meetings will inspire student leaders to share screenshots or other musings about Gather via social media, thus creating some buzz around the platform and event.





Future Applications

Once students are introduced to the platform, they can independently use the free version of Gather to create their own spaces for future events, such as:

- Floor meetings within residential communities
- Student organization meetings and events
- Informal social events with new friends
- Study sessions with students from their classes

Faculty and staff could also be introduced to this platform in order to encourage them to use Gather for activities such as:

- Class meetings
- Office hours
- Student meetings
- Other campus-wide events

The FAC Gather room represents a socially engaging environment, and the FAC Trivia event sets the stage for a semester of continued engagement through both structured and unstructured interactions.

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