

Online Cohorts at Volunteer University

Volunteer University sets online opportunities up using cohorts. Why? The cohort model is popular in adult education programs that are accelerated for the flexibility of the participants. Graduate programs often follow a cohort model. Cohorts are groups that share an experience during a time span. Another word for a cohort is a learning community. Cohorts are normally 10-25 people.

Cohorts have some distinct advantages including

- Cohorts generate a feeling of community in online programs and strengthen bonds between students.
- Cohorts tend to have higher success rates.
- Cohorts tend to have higher retention rates.
- Greater collaboration is possible using cohorts.
- Exposure to a variety of viewpoints/experiences is more likely in a cohort.
- Faculty like the pattern and ability to plan for cohort activities.
- Students like flexibility on a defined timeline that cohorts provide.
- Leaders like that cohort starts can be on a predictable schedule.

Opponents of cohorts share some negative outcomes including

- Students can be pigeonholed into roles.
- Some students can dominate the discussion in cohorts.
- Some students do not contribute actively to a cohort.
- Some students tire of the predictability of other students and a tendency for the conversation to follow the same path in a cohort.

How do we maximize the advantages and minimize the disadvantages of cohorts?

- We start on a predictable schedule of once a month. Students don't have to wait more than 30 days to start and can work on automated modules while waiting for the moderated ones to begin. We build cohorts throughout the month as students sign up for a Level. Sign up for cohorts ends the last Wednesday of each month. We launch new cohorts on the first Tuesday of each month. Please note that your name disappears from the cohort request list when we have assigned you to a cohort.
- Having office hours or other optional, synchronous support available regularly helps students be successful.
- We allow students to work together on some projects if they wish.
- Students who wish to work ahead of the cohort are allowed to do so.
- Students who are only there to work on a few lessons are allowed to do so.
- Students can mix it up and take an onsite course any time they wish to do so.
- Students who fall behind can still finish the level on their timeline.
- We manage the forums and monitor for issues.