



CASE STUDY

How Marshall University Reimagined Online Student Engagement

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

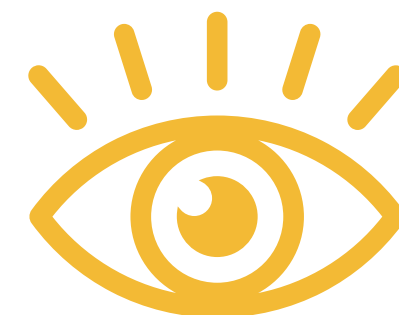
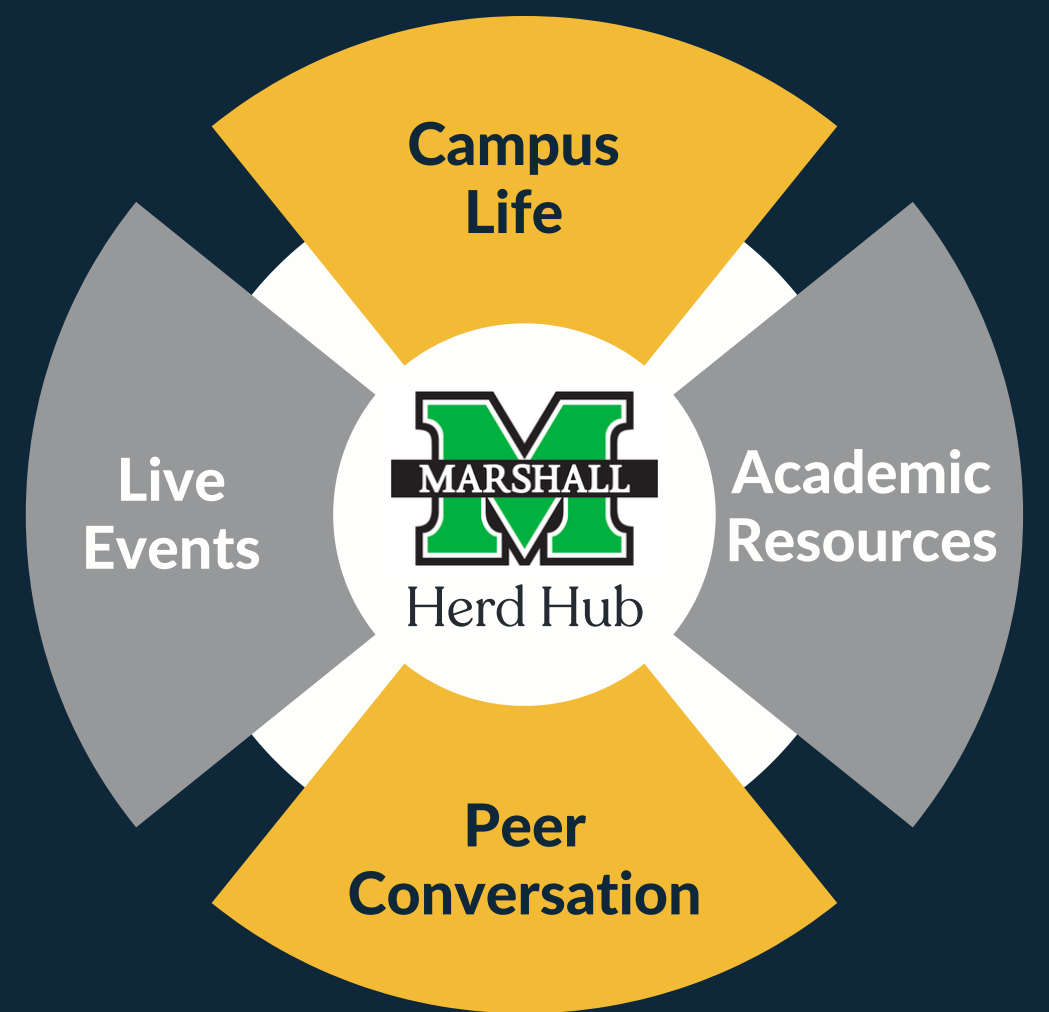
Marshall University's Online students don't experience college the way their on-campus peers do. They log in after the kids are in bed, complete assignments between shifts, and navigate milestones like registration and financial aid without ever setting foot in an office. For many, the university exists almost entirely on a screen. When questions come up at 10 p.m. on a Tuesday night, there is no hallway to walk down, no peer to ask, and no guarantee that a message sent after hours will be answered before the deadline passes.

Michelle Morrison, Senior Director of Student Engagement at Marshall Online, had a clear vision for what was missing: a central space where students could connect with each other and with resources, without having to work through a maze to get there. Marshall Online partnered with InScribe to launch the Herd Hub, a branded digital community designed to meet students where they are.

From the start, Marshall Online made a deliberate choice: the community would be shaped by students, not just administered by staff. Graduate assistants who are online students serve as moderators, bringing a perspective that no administrator can replicate. That decision gave the Herd Hub something most institutional communities lack from the start: an authentic student voice at its center.

In its first full academic year, the Herd Hub generated 18,159 total views and averaged more than 300 active members per month. Every view represents a question answered, a resource found, or a connection made without a single email sent. The community also hosted 30 live sessions, bringing campus programming directly to online learners. For those who couldn't attend in real time, recordings meant the experience didn't have a deadline.

Student and faculty response was immediately positive, and demand from other campus departments quickly followed. What began as a community for roughly 400 undergraduate students now reaches nearly 2,000 undergraduate and graduate students, with expanded student leadership roles in development.



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30

live sessions hosted



"Most schools have a student center, that central place on campus where students can get a quick answer, find out what's happening, and run into someone who shares their current life journey. That's what I imagined the Herd Hub to be, but for students who might never set foot on campus."

Michelle Morrison, Senior Director of Student Engagement, Marshall Online

ABOUT MARSHALL UNIVERSITY

Marshall University is a public research university founded in 1837 in Huntington, West Virginia, serving more than 13,000 students across undergraduate, graduate, doctorate and professional programs. Marshall Online, a centralized unit within Academic Affairs established in 2023, manages the university's growing portfolio of online offerings, supporting students nationwide while partnering with academic colleges to deliver high-quality online education.



THE CHALLENGE

By Spring 2026, Marshall Online had grown steadily, approaching 2,000 students and expanding its online enrollment by 15% in a single year. For a regional institution with a high-touch support model and a lean staff, that kind of growth doesn't just mean more students. It means more questions, more touchpoints, and more pressure on a team that was already doing a lot with a little.

Online students are busy by nature. They squeeze in coursework from a parking lot between errands and carry questions they aren't always sure how to ask or where to send. By the time some students found the right support, they were already frustrated. Others stopped looking.

"Sometimes they don't even make it to us," Morrison said. "And it's easy to lose momentum when you're balancing everything else."

The challenge wasn't a lack of support. Marshall Online had advisors, resources, and staff who cared. What it lacked was a single, centralized place where students could find all of it without having to know exactly where to look. Morrison had tried to build that space inside Blackboard, but it functioned more like a filing cabinet than a community. "Every time I'd go in there, I'd be like, I don't know if I'd even want to come into this space," she said.

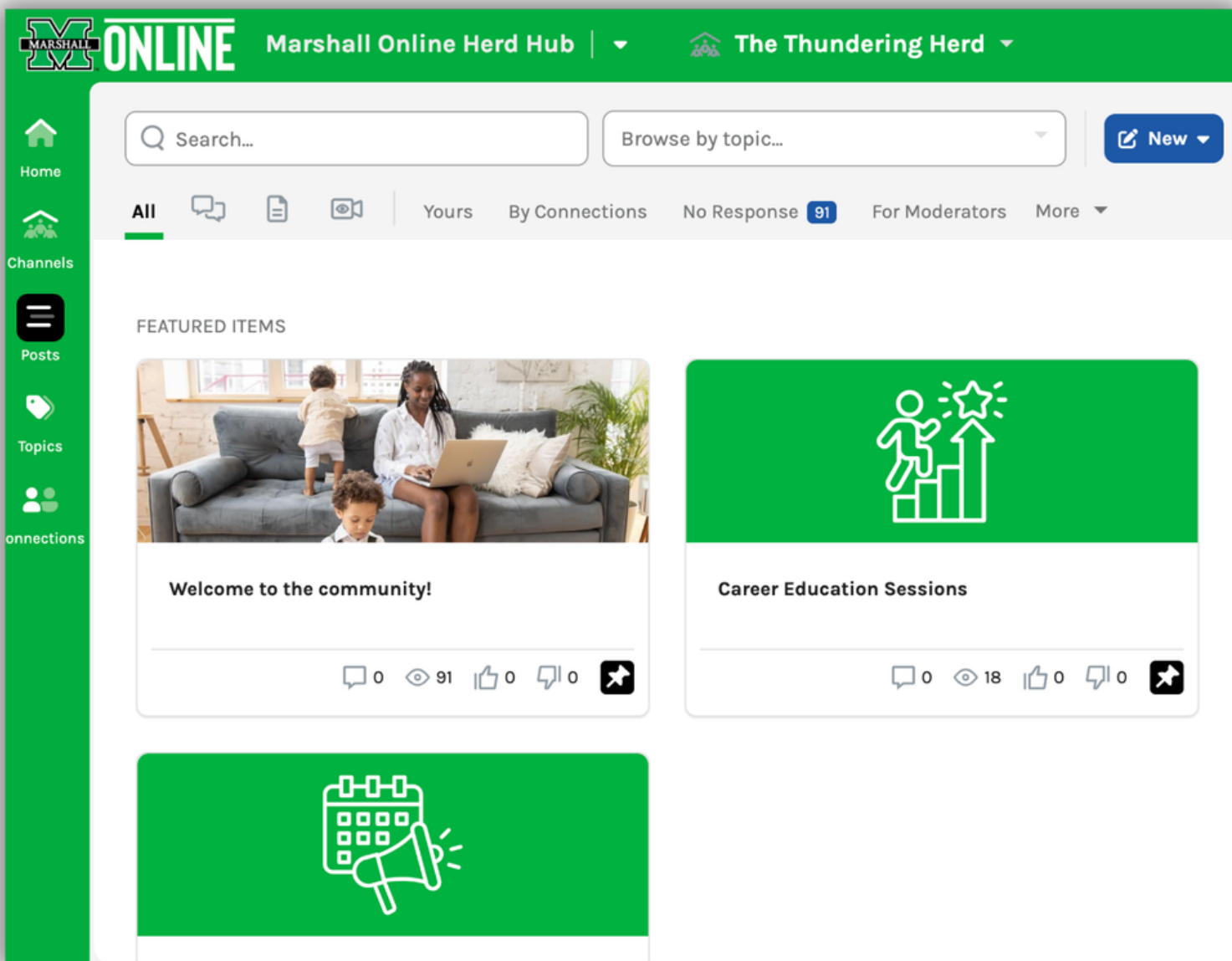
The students Morrison was trying to reach weren't struggling because they lacked ability or commitment. They were navigating their education largely in isolation, carrying questions about registration deadlines, course expectations, and campus resources with no clear place to take them and no way of knowing whether anyone else was asking the same thing.

THE SOLUTION

For Morrison, the question was how to build something they would actually use. The answer needed to feel like it belonged to them, not like another institutional system they had to navigate.

She found that in InScribe's community platform. Marshall Online partnered with InScribe to build a digital community that could live where students already were, inside Blackboard, with no additional login or detour required.

Marshall Online branded its community the Herd Hub, a name that ties directly to the university's Thundering Herd identity and signals to online students that this space is theirs. Students are automatically enrolled upon registration, with single sign-on access built in.



The implementation moved quickly. From contract signing in July to a first day of fall 2025 term community ready launch, the Herd Hub went live without any technical issues. "It is probably the easiest platform I've ever launched," Morrison said. "I've launched a couple, and those were doozies. Not this one."

The InScribe team worked alongside Marshall Online's staff to migrate existing content from the prior community, refining and reorganizing it into something worth returning to. The result was a space that felt polished on day one, with topics for campus happenings, academic resources, counseling center sessions, and open peer conversation.

One of Marshall Online's most deliberate decisions was who would run it. Rather than assigning the community to a staff administrator, Morrison tapped graduate assistants who were online students to serve as moderators. A graduate assistant moderator is a student employee who serves as the connective tissue between the institution and its online community. They welcome new members, respond to questions, create and post, host and facilitate live sessions, surface campus events, and flag posts that need staff attention. They also monitor what students are asking and struggling with, surfacing

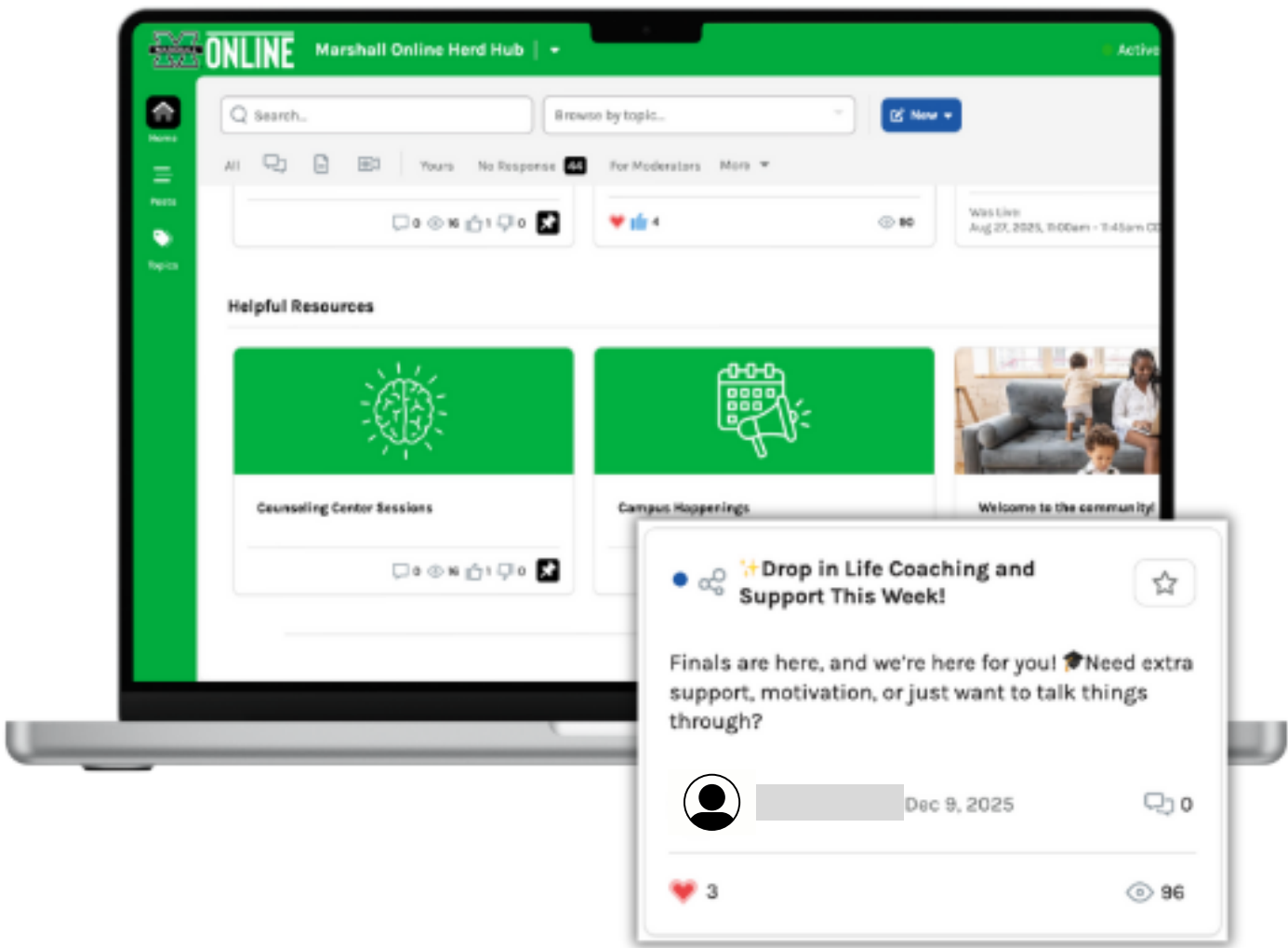
patterns to Morrison so the team can get ahead of emerging needs. It is a role that requires both institutional knowledge and student empathy, and that is exactly why Morrison chose students to fill it.

Ashley Ferguson, the community's current graduate assistant moderator, brings a perspective that no staff member could offer. "I know what it feels like to wonder if anyone sees you as an online student," Ashley said. "I want to make sure no one in this community feels that way."

Her approach to the role reflects that instinct. "I'm not just posting announcements," she said. "I'm thinking about where students are in the semester, what they're worried about, what they need to hear right now." She shapes the community with content timed to the academic calendar, surfaced campus events so online learners could feel the pulse of a campus they might rarely visit, and built an environment low-pressure enough that students felt comfortable asking for help.

What launched in the fall of 2025 was more than a platform.

It was the first time Marshall's online students had a space designed around their lives rather than the institution's systems. A place where a student logging in at 9 p.m. could find a relevant announcement, see that someone else had the same question, and know that a peer who understood their experience was tending to the community on their behalf.



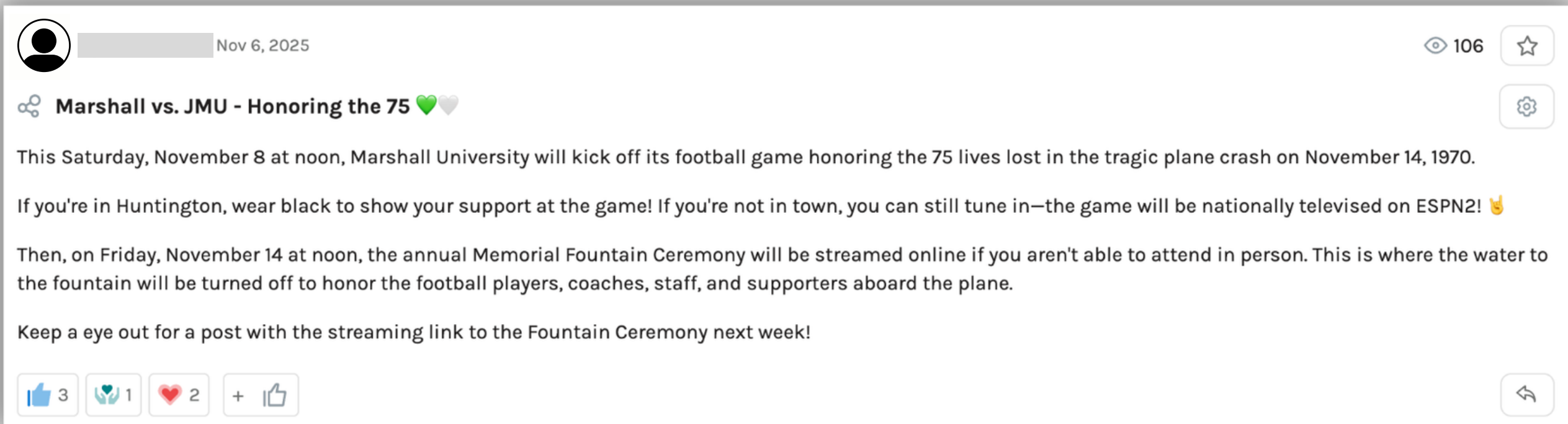
THE OUTCOME

The Herd Hub delivered exactly what Morrison had envisioned, and then some.

The community hosted 30 live sessions, bringing campus programming directly to online learners who might otherwise never know it existed. Homecoming events, counseling center sessions, and campus happenings were posted in the Herd Hub so students studying from afar could see what was happening and, in some cases, join. For those who couldn't attend in real time, recordings meant the experience didn't have a deadline.

One session captured what the Herd Hub was built to do. On November 14, 2025—the 55th anniversary of the plane crash that killed 75 members of the Marshall community—the Herd Hub hosted a live stream of the Memorial Fountain ceremony. Online students watching from across the country could see the water turned off in remembrance alongside their on-campus peers. The dreams of the 75 were cut short, but their legacy continues to inspire generations of the Marshall family.

A community post ahead of the event invited students to share who had inspired them to keep going, with a goal of 75 responses; one for each life lost. For students who had never set foot on campus, it was the first time they felt the full weight of what it means to be a member of the Marshall family.



Students use the space to ask academic questions, share goals, and help each other, including one who had taken a course and jumped in to advise a peer on navigating it, sharing their contact information to connect directly. Many students are quiet participants: not posting, but checking in daily. One student called Morrison after seeing a priority registration announcement in the Herd Hub. He navigated the process, registered on time, and told her he reads the community every day before turning to his coursework. He just wasn't ready to post yet.

"He saw the message. It was relevant, he had questions, and it prompted him to take action," Morrison said. "Ideally, I would have loved him to put his question in there, but it's okay. He reached out, got connected, and actually completed priority registration. That was our goal."

Ashley recognized that dynamic from her own experience. As a graduate student navigating her own coursework while moderating the community, she understood that showing up didn't always mean speaking up. The students reading without posting weren't disengaged. They were present in the only way they could manage that day. Behind the scenes, she was doing the work that kept the



community coming back: welcoming new members so no one joined in silence, responding to questions before frustration set in, posting reminders ahead of registration deadlines and finals, and flagging conversations that needed Morrison's attention. "I go in there every day," she said. "Sometimes I'm the one with questions, too. That's what makes this feel real, not like a to-do." That perspective shaped everything about how she tended to the space: low pressure, consistent, and always stocked with something worth reading.

When Marshall surveyed students on how they preferred to receive information, the Herd Hub ranked as the second most preferred channel overall, outranking other options the university offered. "That kind of feedback is huge," Morrison said. "Our online students want to access information this way."

The question of whether engagement translates to persistence and retention is one Marshall is actively measuring. Early indications are promising.

The response from campus went well beyond the students. After other leaders saw a demo, the question wasn't whether the Herd Hub was working. It was whether it could be extended campus-wide. Faculty began requesting something similar for their own programs. Other departments started paying attention. The community built to serve a few hundred online undergraduates had earned institutional credibility in a single semester, not through a campaign, but through the kind of organic momentum that administrators recognize immediately: students choosing to use it and colleagues asking how they can have one too.

"The future of online education is not just about access—it is about connection. Through the Herd Hub, we are creating opportunities for students to engage, support one another, and fully participate in the life of the university. This work is helping us redefine what student success looks like in a digital learning environment."
- Dr. Julia Spears, Assistant Provost of Online Education and Certification, Marshall Online

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

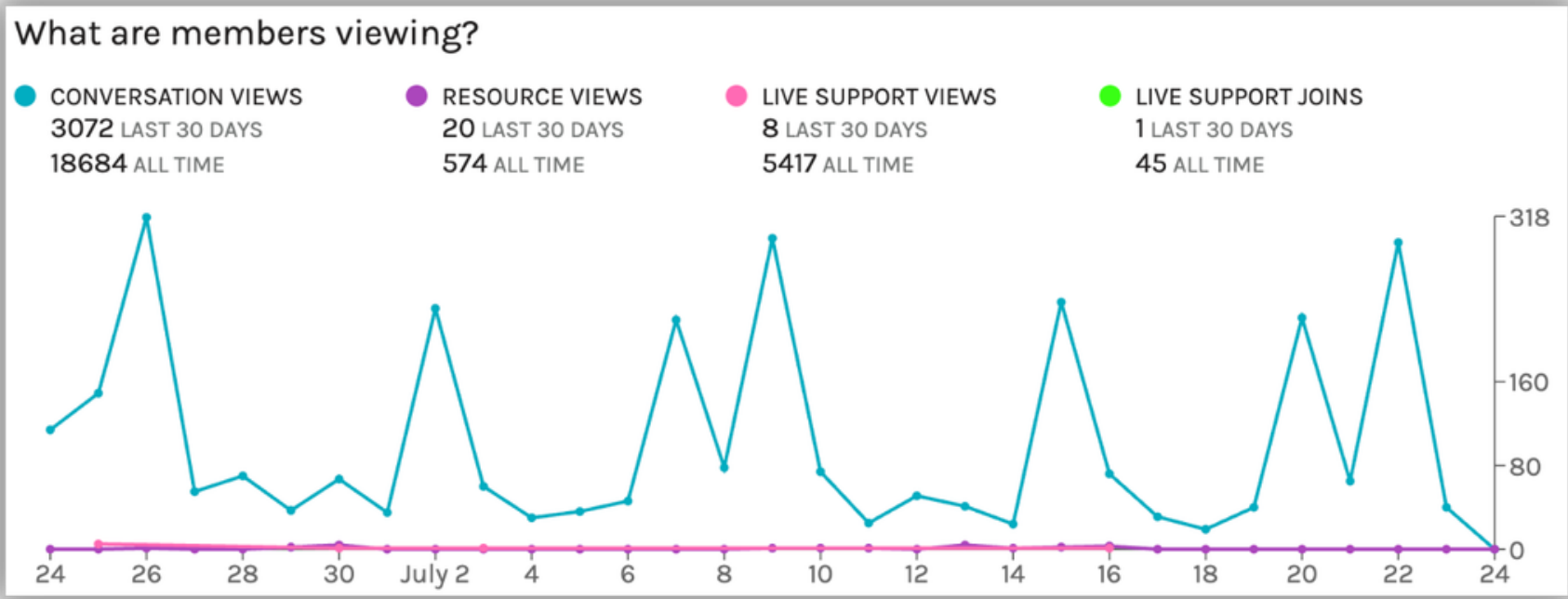
Marshall Online isn't treating the Herd Hub as a finished product. It's treating it as a foundation.

What began as a community for roughly 400 undergraduate students now reaches nearly 2,000 undergraduate and graduate students, and Marshall Online is just getting started. Each new cohort brings a different set of needs, and Marshall Online is building the flexibility to meet them.

Student leadership is also growing within the space. The Online Student Advisory Council is taking a more active role in shaping the community's direction, which means the Herd Hub will continue to evolve based on what students actually need rather than what administrators assume they need. That distinction matters, and Marshall Online is committed to keeping it.

Marshall Online is also tracking fall-to-spring persistence rates for Herd Hub members and expects the data to reflect what the early signals already suggest: that students who are connected are more likely to stay.

The Herd Hub generates, views, engagement patterns, conversations started, is also beginning to inform how Marshall Online refines its support strategy each semester. For an administrator, that means visibility into the questions students are actually asking, the moments where confusion spikes, and the resources that aren't getting found. Every signal the community produces is a piece of information that helps the team get ahead of student needs before they become retention problems.



CONCLUSION

The Herd Hub didn't solve an abstract problem. It addressed something Michelle Morrison had been watching for some time: online students who were capable, committed, and quietly wondering whether anyone knew they were there.

For a regional institution with a lean team and a growing enrollment, that question could have gone unanswered. Instead, Marshall Online built something that met students where they were, on their schedule, in a space that felt like it belonged to them. The early signals are clear. Students are showing up, checking in, asking questions, and helping each other. The ones who aren't posting yet are still reading. Still present. Still part of something.

That's what Morrison set out to build. And for the graduate assistants like Ashley who tend to the community every day, it has become personal proof that the right space changes the experience of being an online student entirely.