NIU: IMPACT ANALYSIS REPORT

Key findings

Many communities at NIU appear to have Yellowdig configured as a weekly discussion assignment. This assignment-style setup shapes participation and engagement.

This weekly framing reduces peer interaction and collaboration, and it is associated with lower NPS scores. This increases "once-per-week" participation and lowers instructor presence.

By "instructor presence," we mean actions that visibly "show up" for all students. In practice, comments have the strongest effect, followed by accolades, and then reactions.

At NIU and elsewhere, higher instructor presence is associated with improvements in the most important outcomes, including Total Health Score and Conversation Ratio.

Overall, increasing instructor presence is a large-impact, low-effort lever to improve community outcomes.

See supporting tables and figures in the following section.

	NIU	All Other Orgs
Percent of Instructors w/ Some Certification	13.7%	16.3%
Avg. Certifications per Community	0.05	0.05
Global Conversation Ratio (Comments per Post)	3.5	3.4
Average Engagements (Per Learner)		
Contributions (Posts + Comments)	57.5	61.5
Reactions	14.5	11.8
Views (Posts Only)	99.8	128.1
Average Instructor Actions (Per Instructor)		
Accolades	32.8	76.3
Posts	16.07	29.8
Comments	48.2	85.3
Reactions	101.9	106.2
Post Views	159.5	237.6
Positive point edits	13.6	4.4
Negative point edits	0.10	1.5
Net Promoter Scores		
NPS Rating*	-12**	36
NPS - Average Rating (0-10)	5.4**	7.6

∗Data from 07/01/22 - 10/14/25 except NPS from 7/1/23 - 10/14/25.
∗∗Our 2nd largest client has NPS score of 61

Instructor activity
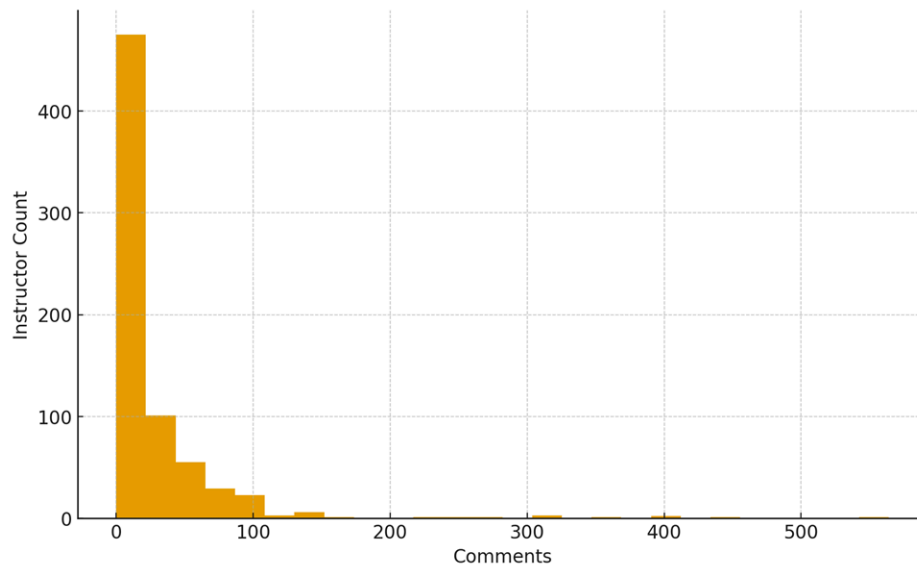
Metric	Min	Q1 (25%)	Median	Q3 (75%)	Max
comments	0.00	0.00	7.00	31.00	564.00
reactions	0.00	0.00	6.00	45.00	2834.00
accolades	0.00	0.00	0.00	9.00	597.00
posts	0.00	2.00	4.00	9.00	64.00

Communities with higher levels of instructor presence consistently show stronger outcomes. These include higher overall Health Scores, more conversation, and greater student interaction. The data suggests a correlation between visible instructor engagement and students participating more frequently, voluntarily, and beyond point requirements.

However, there is a noticeable lack of instructor presence across many communities. In several cases, instructors appear to have little or no visible activity. While instructors may be reviewing data or monitoring participation, these actions are not seen by students and therefore do not contribute to the sense of presence within the community.

Instructor presence refers to visible actions that students can see and recognize as instructor engagement. These include:

- Comments within the community
- Accolades awarded to student posts
- Reactions to student contributions

Activities such as post views, although useful for monitoring, do not create a visible presence for learners. When instructors are not visibly active, students often assume that the instructor is disengaged or unaware of what happens in the community. This perception can decrease motivation and diminish the perceived value of participation.

Data supports this connection. In many of your communities, 50% of instructors give no accolades at all, and only the top quartile of instructors show regular posting and commenting activity. This low level of visible engagement likely contributes to average student interaction metrics and moderate NPS scores.
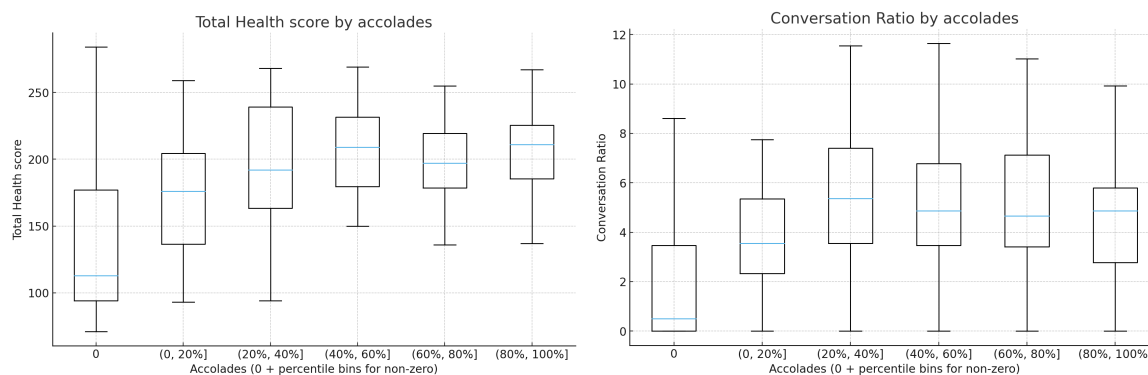
Comments

Instructor comments are the most impactful form of visible presence. Communities where instructors comment more frequently tend to have stronger discussion depth and higher overall health scores.
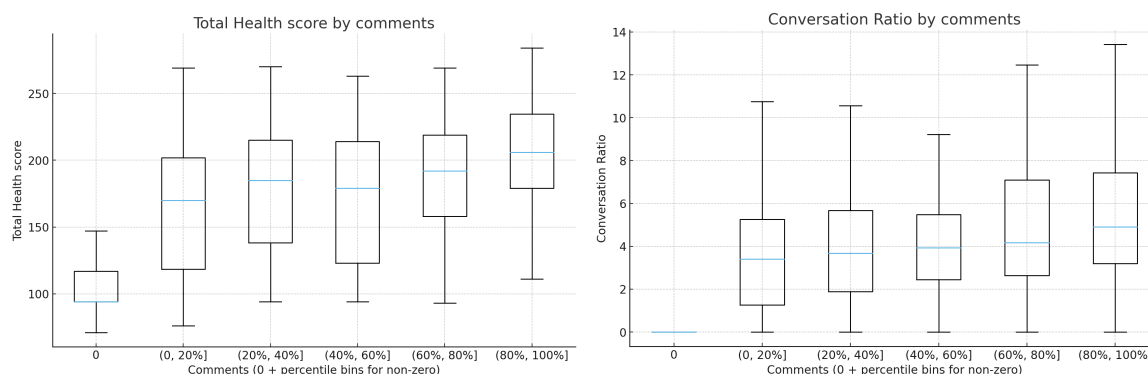

Accolades

Accolades are a simple but underused way to reinforce positive student contributions. Many instructors give few or no accolades, suggesting an opportunity to recognize and encourage quality participation more consistently.

Reactions

Reactions require minimal effort but still help signal instructor awareness and presence. While less influential than comments or accolades, consistent use of reactions contributes to a more active and responsive community environment.
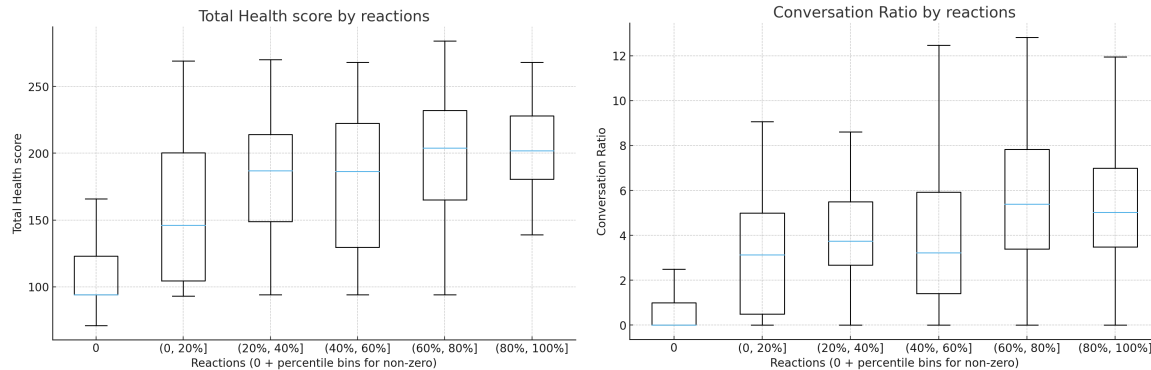
Weekly Participation Patterns

Participation is clustered mid-week and at week's end, with visible peaks on Wednesdays and Sundays. This pattern is consistent with weekly, assignment-style use. By contrast, communities that operate as ongoing discussions typically show higher activity early in the week with a gradual taper and minimal weekend concentration.
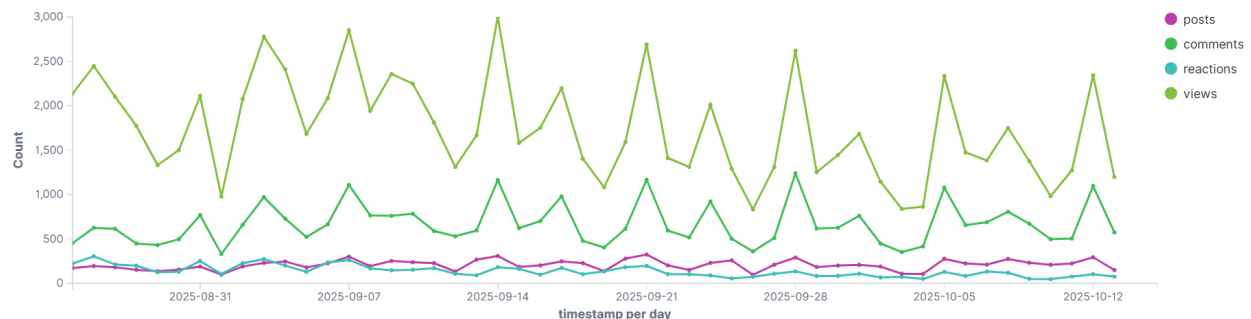
Participation by Day of Week (Aug 25–Oct 14, 2025). Term to date; students only.

Example Communities and Engagement Patterns

High-Presence and Organic Engagement

The following communities illustrate how consistent, visible instructor participation supports ongoing, student-driven engagement. In these examples, instructors maintain presence through comments, accolades, and reactions that connect students' ideas and keep discussions active throughout the term. Participation is steady across the week, and conversations develop organically rather than in response to fixed prompts. These communities represent what we consider healthy engagement patterns, learners interact voluntarily, discussions flow naturally, and instructor time is spent meaningfully rather than on repetitive management tasks.

Example 1: [Fall 2024 PHHE 408 - Y01 Mental and Emotional Health](#)

Fall 2024 PHHE 408 - Y01 Mental and Emotional Health	
Community Data	
Conversation ratio	8.22
Total Score	211
Listening score	78
Interacting score	76
Sharing score	57
Instructor activity	
Total posts	13
Total comments	42
Total reactions	76
Total accolades	72

Example 2: [Fall 2024 PHHE 404 - Y01 Drugs in Society](#)

Fall 2024 PHHE 404 - Y01 Drugs in Society	
Community Data	
Conversation ratio	6.37
Total Score	198
Listening score	84
Interacting score	67
Sharing score	48
Instructor activity	
Total posts	14
Total comments	30
Total reactions	46
Total accolades	46

Example 3: [Fall 2024 PSYC 324 - Y01 Develpmnl Child Psyc](#)

Fall 2024 PSYC 324 - Y01 Develpmnl Child Psyc	
Community Data	
Conversation ratio	5.26
Total Score	229
Listening score	78
Interacting score	84
Sharing score	67
Instructor activity	
Total posts	16
Total comments	27
Total reactions	269
Total accolades	597

Prompted and Instructor-Driven Engagement

While the previous examples show what happens when communities evolve organically, the following examples represent more structured, prompt-based setups. These communities often show high levels of instructor effort: frequent commenting, accolades, and active moderation to sustain participation. The results can appear positive in the short term, but the underlying pattern depends heavily on ongoing instructor management.

With Yellowdig introduced as a continuous, course-long social learning community rather than weekly assignments, instructors would likely achieve stronger outcomes with less effort. Redesigning the setup to encourage earlier, more natural participation could make the experience both more impactful for students and more enjoyable for instructors.

Example 1: Summer 2024 MGMT 647 - Y01 International Management

Summer 2024 MGMT 647 - Y01 International Management	
Community Data	
Conversation ratio	4.61
Total Score	259
Listening score	89
Interacting score	90
Sharing score	80
Instructor activity	
Total posts	4
Total comments	36
Total reactions	26
Total accolades	3

Example 2: Spring 2024 MGMT 627 - Y01 Entrepreneur Creat & Innovat

Spring 2024 MGMT 627 - Y01 Entrepreneur Creat & Innovat	
Community Data	
Conversation ratio	6.1
Total Score	236
Listening score	87
Interacting score	81
Sharing score	68
Instructor activity	
Total posts	6
Total comments	58
Total reactions	161
Total accolades	41

Together, these examples show that the most sustainable engagement happens when Yellowdig runs as an ongoing community, not a weekly assignment. Visible instructor presence still matters, but it's most effective and less effortful when the setup encourages organic interaction.

Next Steps and Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussion, several key actions can help strengthen instructor presence, improve community outcomes, and streamline Yellowdig use across NIU courses.

1. Yellowdig Training Sessions (Designers and Instructors)

Set up short, practical sessions for both instructional designers and instructors that focus on:

- Creating community-focused course designs rather than weekly discussion assignments.
- Understanding the points system as a motivational tool, not an assessment mechanism.
- Managing grade passback and communicating expectations clearly to students.
- Modeling instructor behaviors that foster early, organic participation.

The goal is to make it easier for instructors to get better results in less time—helping them spend their effort on meaningful engagement rather than repetitive management tasks.

2. Increase Visible Instructor Presence

Encourage instructors to engage through short, conversational follow-ups that keep discussions moving. Comments and accolades should focus on linking student ideas and prompting further inquiry rather than evaluating or controlling conversation. Even minimal, consistent presence can meaningfully improve outcomes.

3. Leverage the Action Center

Promote consistent use of the Action Center as a tool to boost engagement. Instructors can use it to:

- Identify and reply to 0-comment posts.
- Give accolades to recognize valuable contributions.
- Highlight "worthy" posts and comments to guide attention and build interaction threads.

This approach makes presence efficient, targeted, and visible to students.

4. Learn from and Scale "Bright Spots"

Identify existing NIU communities that demonstrate strong engagement patterns and use them as internal model courses. Analyzing what works such as instructor presence, topic framing, or timing patterns will help replicate success across programs.
 Converting one or two successful courses into single, community-focused Yellowdig assignments can serve as internal case studies and help establish faculty champions for best practices.

<u>5. Focus on Design and Management for Interaction</u>

Support instructors in designing and managing communities that encourage inquiry and collaboration rather than simple task completion.

- Encourage interaction that leads to conversation ratios averaging 2–8.
- Aim for Listening and Interacting scores that lead Sharing scores.
- Keep 0-reply posts low by modeling and encouraging peer response behaviors.

These design and management improvements help signal progress clearly and make instructor time both more enjoyable and impactful.