

How Can Online Instructors Better Support Their Students?

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As director of a graduate online program taught 100% online, determining how to better support our students is important. It entails not only being very familiar with the support services available on campus and via a distance, as well as seeking ways to inform and connect students with those supports, but also learning from our students and others about what we can do to foster a more positive learning experience. There is considerable research about how to support online students, such as offering orientation (Ali & Leeds, 2009), having a strong instructor presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001), designing engaging learning activities (Ma, Han, Yang, & Cheng, 2015), among many more factors (Hart, 2012). However, there are some things that one does not typically find in articles, books, or professional development for teaching online. Below are a few tips that I have found useful to my online teaching and student support.

1. **Help students recognize and address conflict and disagreements.** In most of my courses, I require some type of collaborative work. Yet, I am not always made aware when group mem-

bers have disagreements or simply do not get along. Although I am not an expert in conflict resolution, it is critical to touch base with students working collaboratively to ensure that they are getting along, being supportive, and also working through any challenges. It is also critical to make oneself available to talk to group members. Although this may be challenging considering everyone's work schedules and different time zones, if it is at all possible, communication in real time can help address challenges students experience.

2. **Seek ways to connect with and motivate students.** It can be challenging to connect with and motivate students one never meets or sees. However, there are many ways to connect with and motivate students, ranging from direct e-mail communications and phone/conference calls to simple, short, and casual videos of the instructor giving students a pep talk. Some instructors hold regular office hours. In our program, we have found it best to schedule calls or meetings when it is convenient for our students, as well as to reach out to them to remind them

we are available. Occasionally we have students who feel like they are imposing on our time. It is important to emphasize that this is our job: to support our students! Questions are always welcome!

3. **Provide specific, constructive, yet critical feedback for improvement.** We know that providing feedback is very important to the learning process. However, broad comments, even positive ones such as "Great job!," do not help students understand their strengths or weaknesses. It is important to provide specific feedback in addition to recommending they seek help from others (e.g., a writing center) if/when needed.
4. **Show students you care.** There are many ways in which an instructor can demonstrate that s/he cares. One can contact students who are ill (or who have an ill family member) to inquire how they are doing. If a student experiences a loss or has/adopts a child or is married, one can send a card or e-greeting.
5. **Ask students to communicate.** Asking students to communicate with you if/when anything impedes their ability to complete work is very important. I always emphasize the importance of communicating before something happens (if feasible) rather than after the fact. This does not mean that students will receive a "pass" to turn in work late. However, as I emphasize to my students, it shows that one cares and takes one's education seriously.
6. **Spell out and model your expectations.** This is a recommendation you will find in nearly any resource for online instructors. However, it cannot be emphasized enough. Not only does providing clear expectations help ensure students know what to expect/produce, but it should also result in fewer questions about an assignment. For instance, if you are unclear about

the expectations for an assignment—you may receive an e-mail from most of the students in your course—that can create a lot of unnecessary work, as well as create student confusion and frustration! Modeling one's expectations helps, too. For instance, if I expect students to participate in a certain way in online discussions, I ensure that I do the same.

7. **Ask for students' feedback to improve instructions/assignments/etc.** Occasionally my instructions need further explanation and assignments need revision (or to be eliminated). There are both formal and informal ways to solicit feedback from students, including course evaluations at the end of the term. When students ask questions about assignments, I often ask them how I might better describe the expectations and/or instructions. I also like to ask how students their thoughts about the benefits and challenges of assignments.
8. **Put yourself in their shoes.** As instructors, it is easy to forget what it was like to be a new learner years after completing a program, participating in a course with people one has never met, using technology tools one has never used before, and/or juggling the demands of work, family, and school. Yet, this is often what our students are experiencing when they participate in online learning.

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