

Discretion in a Distance Learning Environment

Ethical Considerations in a Virtual Classroom

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In all facets of life education is used to express one's opinions, thoughts, and to carry on conversations with others. There are many delivery methods for learning. One delivery method that is common is the instruction of material in a live classroom audience. In a live classroom, students are expected to engage in conversation with the instructor and provide feedback throughout the session of the course. The second delivery method that is

a new and emerging trend in academia is the use of the Internet. Virtual classrooms allow students and instructors to engage in an asynchronous environment that allows students to work at their own pace while enjoying the privacy to enjoy freedom of speech in discussions. The instructor takes on the most important role in developing the coursework materials, syllabus, and the opportunities to allow students to communicate in an effective and efficient manner. Discretion in administering distance education courses is a combination of college policies and decision making on behalf of the instructor. Both the rules and policies of the college and instructor expectations are necessary for the development of a distance education course. This article examines ITT Technical Institute's discretionary policies, how discretion is defined and granted to instructors, and the implications of discretion over ethical considerations in the virtual classroom.

There are many policies and instructor expectations that are required to be met by the online program at ITT Technical Institute. All of these expectations require that the instructor can apply discretion to their development of the course, grading of student assignments, and granting students opportunities for extra credit or submitting late assignments due to demanding situations in their personal lives. Upon the hir-

ing of a distance education instructor, colleges often provide a manual on how to implement classroom instruction, how to improve communication with students, instructions on how to operate their current operating platform, and issues that deal with discretion. Discretion in the distance education realm provides instructors with the ability to make wise decisions on how students' performance will affect them in a current course and in future courses. ITT Technical Institutes policy on discretion provides the basic foundation on announcing to students the requirements for relevant course participation. Although ITT Technical Institute does not explicitly define discretion in administering an online virtual classroom, it is expected that instructors will include a Microsoft Word document outlining academic honesty and its application to the virtual classroom experience, attendance of students that is monitored through the use of the Questa learning platform, grading of submitted assignments, discussion board postings, late policy, feedback, office hours and support, and additional resources to help students succeed in writing assignments and incorporating extra resources. All of these help define expectations for instructors on behalf of ITT Technical Institute as well as help students understand the necessary components to succeed academically and in the future professionally.

Grading of assignments and discussion board postings are the most important components of the distance education environment. ITT Technical Institute's policy on grading assignments requires assignments submitted to be graded within 3 days of receipt. The quick turnaround time allows students to focus on problems that are noted in their submitted assignments and to communicate their problems, questions, and concerns over their grades and progress in the class. It is also required that stu-

dents must turn in assignments the following Sunday during the course week by 11:59 P.M. Eastern Standard Time. Papers submitted 1 week late are subject to a 10% penalty, assignments submitted 2 weeks late are subject to a 20% penalty, and any assignment submitted after 2 weeks will be handled at the discretion of the instructor. Late papers are often caused by the malfunction of computers, personal disruptions in a student's life, and a lack of interest in the virtual classroom. Often there are many situations in which discretion must be applied in the distance learning environment that are not covered by the ITT Tech instructor manual. Discussion board postings are also an integral part of the distance education learning experience. They allow students to engage in conversations about specific topics and to express their opinions and present facts. Students normally are required to submit an initial response to the discussion board question and to respond to two other students. Although this serves as a mandatory rule for conversation, students are normally encouraged to engage in continuous conversation throughout the term of the course.

Although ethical concerns are not covered by the ITT Technical Institute manual, there are issues in which ethical concerns are apparent. Some of these examples include: the attitude of students toward classroom instruction, harassment on discussion board postings, the easy access to third-party sources for references, meeting the needs of the mentally or physically disabled, and the ability of distance educators to base student grades without providing a checklist to determine accuracy. In order to adhere to the rules more closely an instructor must employ rational decision making and apply ethical theories in consideration of a student's grades and progress throughout the course.