

ADVANCING ONLINE TEACHING

Creating Equity-Based Digital Learning
Environments

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SUPPORTING ONLINE LEARNERS

ADDRESSING LEARNER NEEDS IS a challenging aspect of being a faculty member. Students come to our courses with very different individual life experiences that often put their academic abilities to the test, and even students who are very successful academically and appear to be model students face difficult circumstances from time to time. Unfortunately, as online teachers, there are times we don't realize when our students are struggling. One advantage face-to-face instructors have is the ability to see students regularly, and potentially pick up on subtle cues, such as looking fatigued, appearing lost during class, or even coming late and leaving early. In this situation, faculty members can address learners' needs as they arise and, on occasion, may walk a student to the counseling center or other campus office designed to assist students in need. Online faculty members have fewer interpersonal cues to notice when students struggle and must be proactive in meeting the needs of learners who may live far away or may be unable to get to campus for in-person support. In this chapter, we will consider common policies for an online course syllabus that you may modify and help you to outline student support services—both academic and nonacademic—that are relevant to your courses and your students. We will also outline how to help learners assess their readiness for an online course and prepare to be an online learner. Finally, we will describe how to use discussions to foster community and social belonging to create a more inclusive online environment for your students.

IDENTIFYING AND SHARING RELEVANT POLICIES

Online course design rubrics such as the QM rubric for higher education and the course design rubric by California Virtual Campus—Online

Education Initiative (see Table 1.1.3 for a list) typically include multiple criteria related to clearly outlining the course or institutional policies that affect online students (K. Kelly, 2019b). In this chapter you will find examples of online course policies that you may modify and use in your own online course syllabus. It is essential to look up the information for your campus to make sure our examples do not contradict the campus-specific policies at your institution and to note when you have resources at your campus that we have not indicated!

At the end of this chapter (Appendix 2.1) we share a few sample syllabus polices for online courses. We use bold text and square brackets (e.g., [sample text]) to show which information you may adapt to include your own campus or course information. If you use any of our policies as templates, remember to change the sample text and remove the brackets. Again, these policies are provided as examples, with the intention that you will adapt them to your specific institution and your preferred instructional approach. Note that we have included policies that might seem unrelated to online courses, like basic needs security. Too many students—as many as 58% during the spring 2020 term (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020)—face food insecurity, housing insecurity, homelessness, or a combination of these challenges. These challenges affect online learners' success, too.

IDENTIFYING AND SHARING RELEVANT STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

Student support is available for anyone taking credit-bearing courses throughout the entire campus community, but getting that support can be challenging for online students who do not, or cannot, attend classes on campus. It is also challenging to point students to campus-based resources for student success when the entire campus must close unexpectedly (e.g., due to earthquakes, hurricanes, wildfires, or a pandemic). If your campus is closed, be sure to contact each appropriate office to identify how student support will be provided remotely. That will give you the information needed to pass on to your students. To help facilitate student success, point students to resources that are (a) relevant to completing your online course or online course activities and (b) valuable to online students. These resources include, but are not limited to, academic services like academic advising or counseling, tutoring, writing support, library services, and accessibility accommodations and services for students with disabilities and nonacademic services like technical support, health and wellness services, psychological counseling, and financial aid. If you do not know which services exist on campus and how an online student might best

utilize those resources, start with the office of the dean of students or the student affairs office. There are often many more resources than both on-campus and online faculty realize.

In your course shell or on the syllabus, post course-level instructions to explain how each of the appropriate resources will help students succeed in your class. Also, provide ways for students to connect with each support unit or office without visiting campus—for example, by phone, email, text, chat service, and videoconference. Next, use content or activity instructions to remind students about specific support options that relate to that course content or activity. Here are some examples for you to modify:

- In your instructions for writing assignments, mention the writing center and how students might use it: “Contact the campus writing center to get help planning or proofreading your essay. The center in [**Campus Building A-235**] is open [**Monday to Thursday, 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. and Friday, 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.**]. If you cannot get to campus, submit a support request via their online form ([**yourcampus.edu/learning-resource-center**]) or email ([**writinghelp@yourcampus.edu**]) or call ([**555-765-4321**]) during the hours of operation.”
- Similarly, tell students about online tutoring options for other types of assignments: “If you need help completing this assignment, our campus provides a free online tutoring option through [**name of tutoring service**]. Visit the campus web page at [**yourcampus.edu/online-tutoring**] to schedule an appointment.”
- In your outline of a research project, direct students to contact librarians and to take advantage of library services. Libraries at some institutions aggregate and advertise services for online learners. If your institution does not have a page like this, you can use the examples in the following list (also included in Appendix C) to identify what you could put together for your students.
 - Broward College (Florida)—Online Library: libguides.broward.edu/bconlinelibrary
 - Coastline College (California)—Online Library: www.coastline.edu/student-life/online-library/index.php
 - Skyline College (California)—Library Online Services: skylinecollege.edu/library/libraryinfo/onlineservices.php
 - Tri-County Community College (North Carolina)—Library Resources for Online Students: tricountycc.libguides.com/c.php?g=74586&p=1115199
 - Rasmussen College (multiple locations)—Online Library: guides.rasmussen.edu/library

SUPPORTING ONLINE LEARNERS BY PREPARING FOR THE FIRST DAY

One thing that is consistent about teaching any portion of the course online is that preparation typically takes place much earlier than for face-to-face courses. Hybrid and online instructors must be ready for the first day of class well before the first day, especially if it's your first time teaching in this format. Stakes are high for online classes, and although an increasing number of students register for online classes every year, studies show that they pass online courses 6% to 10% less often than in-person courses (Hart et al., 2015; Kaupp, 2012; Xu & Jaggars, 2011). You can prepare students for successful online learning by creating an orientation module, fostering a sense of belonging and community, and humanizing the course experience.

Technique: Create an Orientation Module

Many students enroll in online courses for flexibility and convenience (Allen & Seaman, 2011; Shay & Rees, 2004). Although some students recognize the time management and other learning challenges often associated with online courses (Bozarth et al., 2004), students taking online courses frequently underestimate the time and effort required to succeed in this format (Bawa, 2016). Factors such as reading rate and typing speed, important in classrooms, are critical in the online format due to the extensive amount of independent reading and posting required (Geiger et al., 2014). Therefore, when establishing learner expectations for your course, it's essential to include clear expectations regarding what it will take to be successful in the online format. It is also helpful to build in mechanisms that will help to alert you and your students within the first few weeks if they begin to fall behind.

Studies show increased success when institutions require students to review critical aspects of online learning through a course- or module-based introduction to online learning (Cintrón & Lang, 2012; Lorenzi et al., 2004; Lynch, 2001). If your institution does not offer a centralized course or module about online learning, create your own orientation module to convey your expectations and prepare online learners. At least 1 week before the first day of class, send a message that lists all expectations for the course and direct students to the orientation module for additional information on how to be successful in the online course. The following five steps describe how to create potential components of an orientation module:

1. *Overview video*: Use a free screencast tool like Screencast-o-Matic or Jing to create a 3-to-5 minute course overview video that outlines

- (a) the work students need to complete to succeed and how you will grade that work; (b) how students should communicate with you and what your expected response time will be; (c) when key assignments are due, and how you will manage the class flow of information; (d) the importance of regular interaction with a community of learners, rather than completing the course alone; and (e) how to navigate the online environment and where students can go for technical help.
2. *Syllabus activity*: Create an activity that requires students to review and reflect on the course syllabus, such as a discussion forum for students to post questions or a “Learning Agreement” quiz for students to show they understand how to complete the course successfully and commit to doing so. Here are some example “Learning Agreement” quiz questions:
- Multiple-answer question: According to the syllabus, student responsibilities in the online environment include (mark all that are true):
 - Students are only responsible for making sure that their email is correct at the beginning of the semester, but not after that. (Incorrect)
 - The instructor will use the LMS as the primary method to communicate class-related messages. In addition to reading emails, students must read the messages posted each week in the Announcements forum. (Correct)
 - Students do not have to worry about their email. (Incorrect)
 - Students are responsible for making sure that their email is correct throughout the semester. (Correct)
 - Students who forward emails sent to campus accounts are responsible for maintaining their off-campus email boxes so that class-related messages do not bounce. (Correct)
 - Students in the class will follow the suggested netiquette guidelines. (Correct)
 - Students are responsible for completing the assignments on time. (Correct)
 - Final, multiple-answer question: Carefully read each of the following statements. Checking each box means you understand and agree to that statement:
 - I agree to make time for this class—an average of 5 hours per week.
 - I understand that I must keep track of my own progress.

- I agree to keep track of important deadlines, including class deadlines (e.g., assignment due dates) and campus deadlines (e.g., switching to credit/no credit, withdrawal).
 - I agree to ask questions as soon as I do not understand something. I will not wait.
 - I agree to take responsibility for my own learning.
3. *Advice from former students:* Post student comments in the online course shell from previous semesters, such as anonymous feedback from student evaluations of teaching effectiveness or online student testimonial videos that you have solicited. Following are examples of written comments from former students:
- “At the beginning of this online class, my goal was to complete the course activities before they were due. Unfortunately, I did not fulfill those goals. Instead, I ended up cramming everything right before it was due. I regret putting off all of these assignments because I did not do a good job on them.”
 - “This online class challenged my accountability. There was no face-to-face instructor to whom I had to answer. Perhaps the most substantial outcome of this is that it forced me to take charge of my own learning, instead of depending on someone else to dispense it to me.”
4. *Open forum:* Start an open forum for general questions about the class and require students to participate in this first forum over the first 2 to 3 days of the semester. For this forum, you may need to provide more prompting and participation than you will for later discussions. The goal here is to get students comfortable communicating with one another through the forum format and begin to build the online community of learning. Some instructors call this first forum the Student Lounge or Virtual Class Café. Topics may include (a) prior experience in online and hybrid courses and tips for success, (b) content areas students are particularly interested in learning about, or (c) concerns about taking this course online and suggestions for the instructor to consider to help everyone to be successful. Note that you don't have to act on every student's suggestion. Point out that each student's comment will be read and given consideration.
5. *Readiness survey:* Assign students to take an online learning readiness survey like the Online Learning Readiness Questionnaire from Penn State, accessible at <http://tutorials.istudy.psu.edu/learningonline/learningonline2.html>) or Wichita State University's (n.d.) Online Readiness Assessment (www.wichita.edu/services/mrc/elearning/online)

_orientation/online_self_assessment.php). Create an activity that requires students to reflect and take action on their results from the online learning readiness survey. Link to resources to address common needs, such as the California Community College (n.d.; apps.3cmediasolutions.org/oei/modules/study-time/story/) system's tutorial about online study skills and managing time or Western Governors University's (2018; <https://www.wgu.edu/blog/time-management-strategies-online-college-students1810.html>) list of time management strategies.

6. *Time allocation activity*: Students put in-person class meetings in their calendars but often do not set aside time to work on online or hybrid courses. Require students to submit an image of a paper or digital calendar, highlighting that they have scheduled the required amount of time each week to work on your class.
7. *Synchronous chats or meetings*: Find a few times the first week of the semester for students to log in and chat in real time. This is an ideal time for students to get to know one another. A way to make this fun for many students is to suggest to students that they introduce a pet during these open discussion times. Students often enjoy seeing animals, and for some shy students, it is a way to talk to the group more comfortably. Use different titles to show the purpose of these synchronous events—“meetups” emphasize community and human connectedness, “study groups” focus on collaborative knowledge sharing toward academic goals, and “group question and answer (office hours) sessions” offer opportunities to ask questions in a group setting.

SUPPORTING ONLINE LEARNERS THROUGH UDL AND DESIGN FOR LEARNING EQUITY

If we are not careful, online and hybrid courses have the potential to exclude different types of learners from participating. Learners with disabilities are one of the most notable groups, but not the only one by any means! With careful planning, courses can be designed to be more inclusive and structured so that everyone is supported.

Creating a More Inclusive Online Learning Environment

There is a wide range of inclusion strategies, and although there is no “one size fits all” way to address inclusivity, there are commonalities from which everyone can draw ideas. Some tasks are the same regardless of the course format.

- *Create a diversity statement in your syllabus.* Set an inclusive tone for your class from the very start by adding a diversity statement to your syllabus. See Vanderbilt University’s Center for Teaching guide “Developing and Writing a Diversity Statement” for ideas on creating a diversity statement (Beck, 2018; cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/developing-and-writing-a-diversity-statement/). Also see Appendix 2.1 for a sample diversity statement.
- *Choose (or create) inclusive course content.* Saunders and Kardia (1997) provide guidelines for choosing course content that increases inclusion. Those guidelines are including multiple perspectives on course topics, including materials written by people of different backgrounds, including materials that address underrepresented groups’ experiences, and being aware of how various groups are portrayed or represented. Use image galleries dedicated to accurate and equitable representation to ensure that the students in your class see themselves in the course content. Burst and Women of Color in Tech are free, while galleries like Lean In, Representation Matters, and Toni are fee-based. See “Image Galleries That Address Image and Representation Bias” by Kevin Kelly (n.d.; drive.google.com/open?id=123F5RnQ_vP_QDNzoJAV-EoBlwadTvhWK).

For online and hybrid teachers, creating inclusive course environments and activities takes on another dimension.

- *Make adjustments to your course and approach to students:* Jones and Sneed (2016) provided five strategies to foster inclusivity in your online course: (a) getting to know your students, (b) reviewing course activities for cultural awareness, (c) drawing from your students’ backgrounds and experiences, (d) using technology to bridge cultural and socioeconomic gaps, and (e) working to create a safe and positive course environment. They also suggest a specific “Name Stories” activity—one of Paul Gorski’s (n.d., www.edchange.org/multicultural/activityarch.html) Awareness Activities—that would work well as an online icebreaker discussion. In the Name Stories activity, students “write and share stories about their names and nicknames, what they mean, why they were given to them, and how they relate to them” (Gorski, n.d., para. 4).

Apply UDL and Universal Design for Instruction Principles to Increase Inclusion

Clemson University (2016) provided a rationale for applying UDL to distance education: “When designing your online courses consider UDL as a foundation for establishing a learning environment that not only supports your students with disabilities, but also fosters an environment where all students can thrive” (para. 3). K. Kelly (2014) suggested specific strategies to foster inclusion by applying UDL principles related to assessment, ranging from simple to complex. A simple strategy might entail allowing students to choose one of several questions you provide for each concept you assess through an essay test. A more complex strategy involves letting students submit their work in one of several formats, such as “an essay, an infographic, an audio presentation or podcast episode, a screencast or online presentation, a video, or a project of another media type that might be appropriate to the course” (K. Kelly, 2014, para. 8).

Brandon and Nemeroff (2016) provided a number of examples of how to meet universal design for instruction (UDI) principles. For example, to meet the principle related to “instructional climate,” include a statement in your syllabus “affirming the need for class members to respect diversity” (Brandon & Nemeroff, 2016, para. 10). Their work is an adaptation of efforts by the UDI Online Project (2009), a project that has received grants totally over \$3 million to develop UDI principles and applications throughout higher education.

Technique: Use Discussions to Foster Community and Belonging

Although technological factors, students’ study habits, and personal behaviors all affect students’ ability to complete an online course, social and psychological factors, such as community and belonging, also play an important role in online student persistence. This is just one reason of many that community and belonging are core elements of the design for learning equity framework.

Building a sense of community has been proven to counteract online learners’ feelings of alienation and isolation (Croft et al., 2010; Rovai & Wighting, 2005). Sadera et al. (2009) found that “a positive relationship exists between students’ sense of community and their learning success in online courses” (p. 282). Therefore, providing opportunities for student-to-student interaction early and often—starting the first day of class, if not before—is critical to student persistence and success.

Building on earlier research in the K–12 classroom (Dweck et al., 2014; Kizilcec et al., 2017) showed that social belonging and values affirmation activities closed achievement gaps for students facing stereotype threats in online courses. Thomas et al. (2014) found that nontraditional students in online courses highly valued a sense of belonging and persisted in those courses that fostered it.

To foster belonging, use one or more of the following discussion activities.

Facilitate a values affirmation discussion by asking students to take the following four steps:

1. List the three values that currently are most important to them.
2. Describe why those values are important to them at this point in their lives.
3. Describe how taking your course reflects or serves one or more of those values.
4. Validate the values described by two or more classmates.

Facilitate a social belonging discussion by asking students to take the following three steps:

1. Review quotes attributed to a diverse set of former students who successfully completed the class (e.g., first generation to attend college, nontraditional/returning students, different ethnicities and gender identities) that let the readers know they are not alone in any anxiety related to taking an online course for the first time and that they can complete the course successfully.
2. Reflect on their own experiences of learning in new environments and feelings about taking your online course based on reading the quotes.
3. Review and reply to other classmates' reflections with encouragement.

To foster community, use one or more of the following three discussion activities. Structure a discussion that encourages students to find commonalities with their peers.

1. In response to your prompt, ask students to share their academic goals and challenges, either in general or for your specific online or hybrid class, as well as personal facts such as their favorite food.
2. Ask students to find and reply to at least one student who has a common goal, another student who has a common perceived challenge, and a third student who has a common personal fact.

3. If the discussion tool in your LMS has social media functionality, allow students to “like” other students’ posts or replies.

In a large class, use the group functionality in your LMS to keep discussions more approachable with 5 to 10 students per group. Be sure to participate in each discussion yourself to join the new community of learners.

NEXT STEPS

Now that you’ve reviewed a variety of methods to support online learners, reflect on how well you do the following:

- Incorporate appropriate policies in your online course syllabus
- Outline both academic and nonacademic support services available through your campus that are relevant to your class and your students
- Help learners assess their readiness for your online course and prepare to be an online learner
- Create a more inclusive online environment for your students
- Use discussions to foster community and social belonging

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Students come to our courses with individual life experiences that often create academic challenges, and many students struggle more in online environments than they do in face-to-face courses. There are many ways for online teachers to be proactive in meeting the needs of learners who may live far away or may be unable to get to campus for in-person support. This chapter includes many templates and suggestions for addressing the wide variety of ways an online instructor can help students to be successful: common policies for an online course syllabus that you may modify and use, examples of both academic and nonacademic student support services that are relevant to your class and your students, suggestions to help learners assess their readiness for an online course and prepare to be an online learner, descriptions of how to use discussions to foster community and social belonging, and ideas to help you to create a more inclusive online environment for your students.

Reflection and Discussion Questions

1. Describe how students may contact campus units or find campus resources designed to assist them if they need learning accommodations. To what extent do you know what services are offered through each office?

2. Are there differences in the level of support throughout your college or university with respect to on-site students and online students? Are the writing center, counseling center, disability services, and other resource centers used by online students? If so, how do they make this possible? If not, how might these resources be adapted to make it easier for online students to use them?
3. What would you see as the most critical component of an orientation module of a selected course you teach online? Describe a specific example that you feel would work well for students throughout your institution.
4. Describe how you build community in your online courses. What do you require of or offer students the opportunity to do that helps them feel like they are unique individuals within a caring course community?

