Five Expectations Students Should Have of an Online Instructor

By Sabrina Ely / October 2011

In recent years, online degree programs have become a widely accepted modality for many learners who seek a college degree. Most often, students who choose the flexibility of online college courses have family or work obligations that inhibit their ability to be placed in a traditional classroom. Online learning is a great choice for a student who is a self-motivated, and who is an independent learner.

As a higher education instructor, you should recognize the temperament of the learning environment in which you teach as well as what students expect from you. For instance, if you're preparing for a traditional setting, you will get to know your students and their goals for the semester through dialogue and face-to-face interaction. However, in a virtual setting, you may be unsure of what is expected, especially if you have never taught an online course before.

It is important to take the time to set realistic expectations for your online learning environment. By the same token, having realistic expectations does not mean that you should lower your expectations. Instead, it's a matter of figuring out the dynamics of the online learning experience and establishing a sense of what your standards as an online instructor will be. Learn more about how you can best help your online students succeed, take some tips below.

Availability

As an online instructor, you should be responsive to your students' inquires. Indeed, many colleges and degree programs require online instructors to respond to all student questions within 48 hours. However, it is wise to relay that you may need a longer window of response time during holidays and weekends. You should also publish your office and calling hours in your class syllabus.

Further, students' grades should be returned in a timely matter to ensure that your feedback helps with their future coursework. Generally, you should try to return grades on the previous week's work prior to students submitting the current week's assignments—although, of course, with proper notification there can always be some leeway.

Professionalism

Communication in the online environment requires a degree of "netiquette." In a text-heavy setting, you should pay extra time and attention to the tone you relay to your students. This, in turn, will cultivate respect for you and your position. If you are an instructor that is training students for a specific career, it's also important that you convey the power of well-thought out, professional writing, and how it can get you ahead in the workplace.

Guidance

You should always try to let your students know how much time weekly readings, activities, and assignments will take to complete. In addition, on the first day of a new class topic, you should typically communicate the objectives of the lesson and what expectations you have in accordance to

the lesson's assignments. Even better, always try to include a course calendar inside a posted syllabus, so that students may clearly identify when assignments are due.

Finally, if you're teaching a career-specific course instead of a class that fulfills a more general degree requirement, you should always keep in mind that you need to provide more practical guidance, and connect the course's concepts to applicable career objectives, goals, and struggles.

Experience

During online class time, you will need to share your expertise through interactions in your class's discussion forum, in grading feedback, and in general announcements. A good way to keep students engaged and to display your experience in the field is to supplement the course's basic content with current and external resources such as articles, websites, and videos. These help reveal core concepts in real world settings, and demonstrate the importance of your work in class.

Technological Aptitude

Perhaps most importantly, as an online instructor you will need to master the online learning platform in which your course operates. You will be expected to take full advantage of its capabilities. An experienced online instructor will recognize which tools should be used to enhance and advance the students' learning experience. Moreover, you should share navigational tips and tricks with students to ensure they are prepared to learn in an online classroom. Opportunities for synchronous communication, including live chat or live video sessions, will only help you gain credibility and respect in your students eyes.

About the Author

Sabrina Ely is a regional faculty manager at Rasmussen College in Minnesota, where she oversees instructors who teach various online degree programs. She has worked in the field of online education for nearly five years. Ely has a master's degree in communication studies from Bethel University.

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