

How to Help Struggling Students Succeed Online

By *Beth McMurtrie* MARCH 26, 2020

How to Help Students Learn Online

As instructors across the country move to remote teaching, many are worried about students who are already at a disadvantage. How can professors support them during this challenging time?

Maybe these students come from underresourced high schools or are the first in their family to attend college. Maybe they need additional academic support as they struggle to manage their time, devise good study habits, and engage in class.

Connecting with students — all students — becomes that much more difficult remotely. On top of that, students may now be spread across different time zones or lack access to Wi-Fi and laptops.

I asked two experts in online learning for tips on how to keep struggling students from falling through the cracks: Melody Buckner, associate vice provost for digital learning initiatives and online education at the University of Arizona; and Alexandra M. Pickett, director of online teaching at Open SUNY. Both of them oversee large online learning programs within their universities and have years of experience teaching online and training others to do so.

Here are a few of their suggestions.

1. **Remember that many students find remote learning a challenge.** It's important to keep all students in mind as you think about who might need extra help, including those who are not as digitally literate as others. "Those could be students from all walks of life," says Buckner.
2. **Be proactive.** Reach out to all of your students early, and often. Circumstances change, so what may seem doable in week one may not be true in week four. "Check in with them and try to understand what they're grappling with," says Pickett. Were they able to get home? Are they in an environment that's conducive to learning? Do they have the necessary gear and internet access? Do they need to work or take care of family members? Do they have access to health care?
3. **Be as low-tech as possible.** Reach out through your learning-management system or by email to check in with students. Don't assume people have the ability to hop on a live Zoom call.

4. **Be authentic in your interactions.** “Faculty presence in an online course is critical,” says Buckner. “When I record my lectures, I’m a one-take wonder. If my dog is barking I say, ‘Hold on, my dog is barking.’ I don’t stop and rerecord. That makes me real to students. I’m not just this person who is a content expert. I’m at home doing a lecture with my dog in the background.”
5. **Hold office hours.** You could post certain times when you’re available online, or ask students to email you with requests to talk.
6. **Offer options.** Students now may be in different time zones, have limited data plans and no Wi-Fi, or may not have a quiet space to study. Giving them more than one way to participate in discussions and complete assignments will allow them to figure out what works best for their situation. “Maybe you stream your lecture but then save it,” says Buckner. “Maybe it’s just an audio file, so students can download it later.” And be sure to caption the video to provide access to all students.
7. **Be flexible, but not too flexible.** Learning-management systems, while problematic, exist for a reason, says Pickett. They’re portals with which you can take attendance, communicate, post grades, and generally keep track of everything relatively easily. If you allow students to use a variety of tools to communicate and submit work, that could create problems with classroom management. “If everyone is using Gmail and someone writes in as pinkpony22 and doesn’t sign their name,” she says, “who the heck is that, and which class is that?”
8. **Turn to experts on your campus.** Whether they’re in the library, the teaching-and-learning center, the tutoring center, disability support services, or some other office, your college has experts who can provide support, training, and guidance for you and your students. Maybe your library has a loaner-laptop program or can find open-educational resources for your students. Maybe the tutoring center can provide remote one-on-one sessions. Or the tech department can help students figure out where they can find free Wi-Fi in their town. Don’t be afraid to ask.

Have you found a particular strategy that works well in helping students feel connected and supported? If so, drop me a line at beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com, and your story may appear in a future newsletter.

https://www.chronicle.com/article/How-to-Help-Struggling/248325?utm_source=at&utm_medium=en&utm_source=iterable&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=campaign_1107180&cid=at&source=ams&sourceId=5185489