**Setting up Your Online Course for Maximum Student Success**

Investing some time at the beginning of your online course can maximize student success. Here are some items to consider in getting your online class off to a good start. These suggestions are based on my 10 years of successfully teaching college success courses online, including good student success, retention and satisfaction. Modify these suggestions to match your own teaching style, use of technology, and the needs of your students.

1. **Get Organized**

When your course is well organized, your students will be able to easily navigate your course and you will have fewer students with problems and questions. The following is a suggested basic checklist:

The Welcome Letter

Once your class is filled, send your students a welcome letter that outlines the course content, benefits, myths about online courses and time required. This helps students know what to expect before the class begins and to make sure they are ready for online learning. For a sample online letter, go to: <http://www.collegesuccess1.com/WelcomeLetter.htm>

The Course Syllabus

The course syllabus is different from a face to face course in that it includes links to all your online material. As you gain experience in your course, revise your syllabus to clarify any questions you received in the previous semester. For an example of an online syllabus, go to: <http://www.collegesuccess1.com/ScheduleFA14.htm>

The Course Calendar

The course calendar is one of your most important organizational tools. It contains all the assignments on a weekly basis. For an example of an online calendar, go to: <http://www.collegesuccess1.com/ScheduleFA14.htm>

The Course Management System

Your course management system (such as Blackboard) is usually provided by your college and has your course content and grading. Attend professional development sessions at your college to learn your course management system and have it set up and available before your class begins.

Communication

Having a website with all your course information is helpful to begin communication with students during the registration process. List your web address in the college course schedule. Here is my page: <http://www.collegesuccess1.com/online.htm>

Set up a system to send text messages to your students. A phone app called Remind enables you and your students to communicate via text messages without students being able to view your cell phone number or the phone numbers of other students. You can send text messages from your computer to all students or individual students in your course. Set up your faculty account at: <https://www.remind.com/>

Your college probably provides a way to send emails to your students, but realize that text messages are more likely to be read than emails.

Set up Your Assignments and Grading System

Use your course management system to set up your assignments and grading system. Provide clear directions on how to complete the assignments with outlines or student examples if available. Plan to provide immediate feedback on assignments. Make a column for “Current Grade” since it is important that students know their overall grade in the course each week.

1. **Make it personal.**

Take steps to help students get to know you and other students. This will help students maintain interest and involvement in the course.

The Course Blog

I use a blog in my course instead of a discussion board. I can begin my blog before the class begins and it is independent of my course management system. In the welcome letter, students are invited to my blog to begin their introductions before the course begins or during the first week. My first blog has a brief video introduction of myself and the course. I ask students for a 100 word introduction and a 100 word description of their educational journey. I do the first postings as an examples.

Here is my blog for Fall 2014: [www.couns120fa14.blogspot.com](http://www.couns120fa14.blogspot.com)

Here is my completed blog for Spring 2014: [www.couns120sp14.blogspot.com](http://www.couns120sp14.blogspot.com)

You can set up a blog for free at: [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)

Establish Positive Rules for Conduct

It is easy to criticize others online because of the lack of proximity and personal involvement. However, students learn better in a supportive environment and I set this up before the course begins. I spell out the rules for conduct in my blog. Students are encouraged to be supportive of other students. If they disagree, they are asked to simply state their opinion without putting other students down. I closely and quickly monitor student interaction, especially in the first postings.

Provide Personal and Supportive Feedback

Grading assignments is a good opportunity to provide personal feedback and to be supportive to your students. Of course, include suggestions for improvement.

1. **The first 2 weeks are critical.**

Once your course has begun, pay particular attention to the first 2 weeks which are critical for student success and retention. If students are on track the first 2 weeks, they are more likely to have fewer problems in the course and to successfully complete it. By the end of the second week of school, all students must:

* Log into the course management system.
* Connect through the phone app, Remind, for text messages.
* Introduce themselves on the blog.
* Complete the online orientation. (See <http://www.collegesuccess1.com/ScheduleFA14.htm>)
* Complete the first assignment.

I look at the first two weeks as a trial period where it is possible that students may not understand how the course works and the requirements. If any of the above items are missing, I follow up with students and allow them to make up the work without penalty. My follow up is quick and I am persistent. Students are then required to turn their work on time after the second week.

1. **Make it interactive.**

Students are more likely to stay interested in your course and finish it if it is interactive. Think about ways in which you can encourage interactivity with the professor, other students, the textbook, the Internet and how you design your assignments.

* The blog encourages interaction between the professor and other students.
* Text messages help remind students of assignments and how to stay on track.
* Select one of the new generations of textbooks that are **interactive as well as online**. To see a sample of an interactive online textbook, take a look at this [short video demo of CollegeScope](http://www.screencast.com/t/WzEdBf115Bd), the interactive online text used in my course. For more information on CollegeScope, go to: <http://www.collegesuccess1.com/CollegeScope.htm>
* Design assignments that make use of the Internet and encourage critical and creative thinking.

Many of the followers of this blog use my interactive online textbook, CollegeScope. Here are a few reminders to get started with CollegeScope at the beginning of the semester:

* Delete your students from the previous semester.
* Delete your previous groups and set up groups or classes for the new semester. In this way, when students register for CollegeScope, their accounts will appear under “My Students.”
* Have students register for CollegeScope the week before class begins. Registration is free. Students do not pay until they begin Chapter 2.
* Compare your class roster with “My Students.” If any are missing, use the search function to locate them and add them to your account.

Does this seem like a lot of work? It is more work in the beginning and less once you have passed the first two week critical period. All your hard work will pay off when your course is running smoothly and students are enjoying and benefiting from the course. Keep in mind that how you begin is how you will end, so invest your time at the beginning of the course to make it the best it can be. I wish you much success as you teach your online course.