Get Your Online Course Off to a Good Start

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The beginning of an online course is a critical time in which the instructor establishes expectations, sets the tone, and helps students navigate the course. Here are some points to consider for the time leading up to and including that first week:

- **Remind students that they registered for an online course and that they need to take active steps in order to be ready when the course begins.** For starters, they will need a password in order to log in. Depending on your institution, log-in information may be sent via email or regular mail. Some institutions allow students to log in early to view the syllabus, access resources, see how the course is structured, and contact the instructor. I think it's important to remind students that they have to take an active step—that they need to log in and make sure everything works.

- **Direct students to your school's orientation for online students.** Many colleges provide self-assessments for online learning, an FAQ page, information about system requirements, sample courses, and practice quizzes for students to determine whether the online format is appropriate for them. If you have these resources available, you can direct students to them before the course begins, which will make the start of class proceed more smoothly.

- **Establish expectations.** In that first week, you've got to get in there quickly and send an email, establish a connection, and have the students use the communication tools, explain where to go for help, and establish expectations. If a student logs in late, make sure he or she understands that the course demands regular participation. I recommend to students that they should log in at least every other day. I tell them, "You may spend only an hour, but if you can carve out that time and get on a schedule, you'll find that it's a lot easier and you may be surprised at how much you get done in an hour instead of trying to cram all the work into one day a week."

- **Begin with low-stakes activities.** It helps to have some ungraded practice activities during the first week of class to give students the chance to take a practice test, post to the discussion board, send an email, and establish that they are in the course. Some faculty have designed quizzes or scavenger hunts in which the student has to navigate the course to answer some of the questions.

- **Provide access only to those parts of the course management system that will be used.** Course management systems often have tools that you will not use in your courses or will use only at a specific time in the course. To avoid confusion, limit students' access to only the CMS elements that are relevant to what they are currently working on.

- **Have students introduce themselves.** Have students use whatever discussion feature you will use throughout the course to introduce themselves. This gives students a chance to use that tool—discussion board, blog, wiki—with no points tied to it. It's kind of a practice run. They can't really make a mistake or get it wrong, and the introductions establish community in the course. The key thing is that the instructor post his or her introduction first to set the tone and model what they want from students. It also lets the instructor know who has logged in and who is having difficulty. When I post to an introductory discussion board, I use it as a chance to tell a little bit about myself. Then I invite students to respond and give them a list of three or four things I'd like them to

share, such as whether they have taken an online course before, what they found most difficult, and what advice they have for first-time online learners. This advice is typically the same advice that an instructor would have, but coming from several students, it strengthens the message and encourages students to look to each other for help.

- **Use the first week to establish prior knowledge.** The first week of an online course can include graded assignments and may be used as a way of testing prior knowledge. I think it's important not to consider that first week a throwaway week. I try to get at prior knowledge and introduce some of the content—whether it's reading a journal article or viewing a video clip. Most of the students are in there on day one, and you don't want to do a disservice to them by having them wait. They're there and ready to go. If two, three, or four people come in late, I can work with them and get them up to speed.

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