

Learner Support

Online students generally work alone. Therefore, our online classrooms should include a section directing students to any resources available within our institutions such as the Writing Center, Disabilities Services, and so on, just as we provide in our syllabi for courses held on campus. We should also make sure that students can access tutorials on how to use the LMS and navigate the online classroom.

Prior to the first day of class, create an announcement and send an email containing your contact information, the best hours to reach you, and your photo, if possible. Include links to your website, your institutional email address, your phone number, and instructions on your preferred communication methods. You should have shared this information in the course outline, but it's helpful to send it out to your students directly, too. Letting students know when they can generally find you online, when you'll comment on their work, and when you'll post their grades is also helpful.

Supporting students goes beyond directing them to the appropriate resource for whatever problem they're experiencing. As instructors, we should be dedicated to our students' success, which sometimes means that we need to modify assignments, extend due dates and deadlines, or even excuse students from some of the course's expectations, whether or not they have a documented disability.

For example, a student in an online course I taught a few years ago had fallen very far behind. He really didn't have a good excuse for this, but he was very contrite and made a herculean effort to get his missing work done before the deadline. Despite his best efforts, though, he was going to fall short and earn a failing grade, and since it was the last semester of his senior year this would prevent him from graduating on time. I decided to exempt him from the discussion posts he was still missing, especially because his classmates would never have seen his late comments, anyway. This allowed him to earn a C- in the course and graduate as scheduled. Of course, I'd have been within my rights to fail him, but what purpose would this have served? Demonstrating compassion and understanding made a much more positive and lasting impression on this young man than a hardline approach ever could have.

Flexibility and respect for our students should also include awareness of their identity preferences. For instance, some individuals choose to employ plural pronouns even when referring to a singular subject because the plural version is gender-neutral whereas the singular is gender-specific. Strict grammarians may maintain that this usage is incorrect, yet it is increasingly common in our culture. It's also a matter of tremendous importance to these students. Rather than deducting points for incorrect grammar, we should mobilize our understanding of their identities to respect their preferred pronouns.

Faculty often feel that holding all students to the same standards and treating them all the same is how we demonstrate fairness. However, if our goal is for our students to learn the content of our courses, we might need to be a bit more flexible. Some students might need additional resources, or some leeway with deadlines or due dates. Our point should be to help them learn, not simply to enforce compliance.