Ten Tips for Student Success in a Virtual Environment

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Building a sense of community in a virtual environment may seem impossible, but rest assured, it is possible. When students feel connected to classmates or a larger working group in general, they are more likely to achieve a level of growth and success that they may not have done so on their own.

This roundtable discussion and workbook provide ten tips for fostering student success in a fully virtual or hybrid environment.

LET'S GET STARTED

INTRODUCTIONS

Let's get acquainted in three short sentences. Tell us your name, title, and one fun fact most people don't know about you. For example, maybe you like to visit haunted houses or eat ketchup on scrambled eggs. From left to right, it is time to spill the tea.

ABOUT ONLINE LEARNING

An October 2022 *New York Times* special learning report looked at online student learning pre and post-pandemic. The writer, Jon Marcus, reported some key findings of Associate Professor of Economics, City College of New York, Kameshwari Shankar's research suggested that "online higher education may work better than pre-pandemic research suggested" and that a trend toward online or blended classes (hybrids) was evolving.

Nearly 99 percent of the university chief online officers in the CHLOE survey expect an increase in online instruction, up from 70 percent who expected one before Covid.

What are some likely reasons for the success of online courses? Name three and share.

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Three other positives also reported by Marcus in his October 2022 article because of online learning's growing popularity were that:

Today, 70 percent of college students give online and hybrid learning a thumbs-up.

1. Online Research grew nearly 50% over the previous year.
2. Students graduated faster because more courses were available.
3. Faculty began to favor hybrid courses over in-person only.

Today Why college students turned from being down on remote learning to mostly in favor of it: February 5, 2023
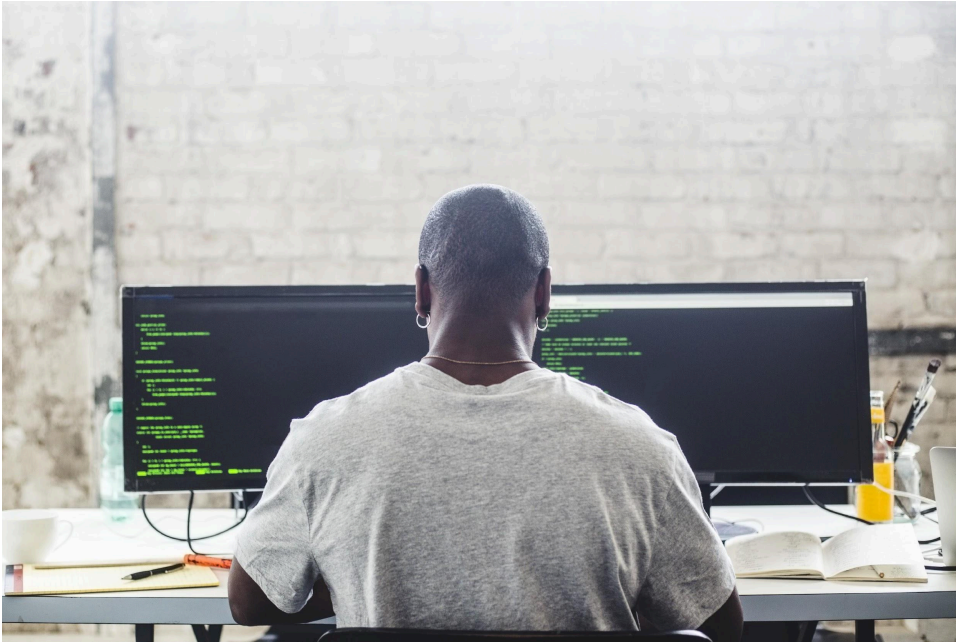
However, with any coin there is always another side. While there are sufficient arguments to support online learning, there are just as many legitimate problems despite its popularity in education delivery. December 2022 research documented favorable and non-favorable findings from National Institutes of Health research; it claimed that "**lack of technology skills** and **low learning motivation**" resulted in **low engagement in online learning**." Researchers also found that some students were shy or reticent in talking and being on video online and thus did not fully engage. So, what can we do to improve or enhance a sense of belonging, engagement, and confidence among students online? Share three ideas.

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Ten Tips for Fostering Student Success Online

1. Be Present

Our job online is no different from our job in a physical environment. While we wouldn't "ghost" our students in an in-person course, we should also not leave them alone and waiting in a virtual environment. Fully virtual environments are not intended to run on autopilot. You wouldn't want to be on an airplane where the pilot only sat in the cockpit during takeoff and landing.

2. Build Rapport

It's important to introduce yourself immediately, just as you would if you were welcoming an in-person class on day one. Consider posting a short video or PowerPoint with ten things about you.

3. Set Ground Rules

When operating in a fully virtual environment, it can become very easy for students to step out of traditional roles usually practiced in a physical setting. For example, because they are online, they may be more inclined to address you on a first name basis. That is a no-go and should be addressed in your syllabus under a section on *Communicating with Your Instructor*.

4. Don't Go Overboard

Some faculty are tempted to go overboard when teaching fully online. This means being too available on too many platforms. To avoid any misunderstandings and to maintain student/faculty communication integrity, avoid communicating with any student outside of the university's email platform or Teams. That means no social media with students.

5. Break the Ice

In an online environment, it is much easier for students to hide or be unseen by classmates, unlike in a physical classroom where you must sit next to someone and have some type of personal interaction. To break the ice, try adding a graded Discussion Post in the first week's module where everyone must post a personal introduction that includes: (1) Name and How to Be Addressed), (2) hometown, country, or state, (3) Major and Desired Career, (4) Hobbies and Favorite Food, (5) Your dream job and (6) One fun act to share. This gives students a chance to connect through shared interests or backgrounds immediately.

6. Be Intentional

Discussion posts provide an interactive component to hybrid and fully online courses. They keep students

engaged and regularly interact with course content and each other. In a 15-week course fully online, consider at least five mandatory discussions. Make sure to not just grade them but also comment on your rubric. This shows the students that you are listening to what they say and participating in the conversation.

7. Be Ready to Go

Don't run your course like a doctor's office with many patients waiting to be seen. It's best to have your content and all modules fully loaded on the first day of classes, with open and close times for each unit. This helps alleviate students' anxiety and assures smooth course facilitation. It is also a safety net should a faculty member experience an emergency or unexpected life event and need the help of another faculty member.

8. Stay Current

A proven area of stress for students is grades. It is important to alleviate as much stress as possible by staying current with grading. While you may find it challenging, particularly with large enrollment courses, there are things you can do to keep some form of assessment readily available for students. For example, short, automatically graded quizzes or self-assessments can help students monitor their progress and identify areas needing review or further study. It also helps them make more informed drop/add decisions.

9. Be Inclusive

It's important to understand the global makeup of our student population, which makes it necessary to be inclusive in course content. This would mean using content that reflects a mix of backgrounds, from wealthy to unhoused and from first-generation college students to older adults.

10. Be Resourceful

Kennesaw State University offers a wide range of free resources for our students, from Academic and Personal Counseling to Financial and Emergency Food and/or Housing Assistance. Consider adding a special module to your course shell and syllabus that includes a mix of resources. It is also a good idea to use your Announcements to remind students of upcoming campus events and ongoing services regularly.