

An Emerging Set of Operational Performance Guidelines for the Online Instructor

The following online performance expectations describe the operational and management aspects of instructing online. The specific expectations establish guidelines to ensure the learner has a reasonable opportunity for success in their online educational experience. These expectations assume the parameters of the “anytime and anywhere” context of the online environment.

1. Conduct the online class in a predictable and professional manner, adapting as appropriate to specific student needs and considerations.

Once the online course has been developed and is functional, it is recommended that the instructor appropriately manage all course activities necessary for successful operation from beginning through course completion. Online students expect the instructor to follow the established course schedule and to deliver the course within the scheduled time frame, making schedule adjustments as needed to meet special student requirements, for example, adjusting deadlines for graduating students and others with special circumstances.

2. Monitor and support learner performance in order to enable student success.

Instructors can help ensure a successful learning experience by practicing proactive course management strategies. It is recommended that online instructors monitor assignment submissions and communicate frequently, reminding students of missed and/or upcoming deadlines in a reasonable fashion. Since the dynamics of the online educational environment are new for both learner and instructor, it is anticipated that the instructor will take measures to effectively communicate expectations of student performance.

3. Establish and communicate patterns of course activity, including frequency of instructor access.

Increasingly, students electing to participate in an online learning experience do so in order to balance other dimensions of their lives, including work and/or family responsibilities. Online learning provides the flexibility they require to create this balance. It is recommended that the online instructor provide learners with a reliable schedule for class activities at the beginning of the semester, including start and end times for lessons and time frames for the submission of lesson assignments. It is recommended that instructors access the course minimally five days a week with no two consecutive days of inactivity.

4. Communicate changes and/or adjustments to course activities and flow.

The online learner relies on the instructor as their main source of course information, updates and adjustments, and feedback on learner progress. If an instructor is unable to access the course for more than four business days (e.g., during professional travel), it is recommended that the instructor give one week's notice to students and, if appropriate, the designated student services unit. In cases of personal emergency, instructors are asked to notify students and student services as soon as possible regarding the anticipated duration of the delay and anticipated resumption of course activity.

5. Provide timely student feedback to communications in order to maintain student progress.

Because online learners must manage their time carefully, timely feedback from the online instructor is critical to learner progress. It is recommended that instructors prominently post clear and consistent instructor response parameters to their students. The recommended instructor response time to student inquiries is to respond within 24 hours during business days, and 48 hours for non-business days. If the instructor cannot provide a detailed response to the inquiry within these time frames, it is recommended that the instructor inform the student regarding when a more detailed response will be provided.

6. Provide clear, concise, and constructive feedback.

Feedback on assignments is most helpful to students when clear and concise language is used to explain the degree to which student performance meets relevant course objectives. In the online environment, the student may not be able to receive immediate answers to questions they may have on a graded assignment. This increases the need for clarity and detail from the instructor on graded assignments.

7. Submit assignment and exam grades promptly.

It is recommended that the online instructor grade and provide appropriate feedback to student assignments and exams within 48 hours of receipt where possible. Proctored exams should be graded and submitted to the appropriate recipient (usually a student services unit) within five business days of the receipt of the completed exam. In cases where this expectation is unrealistic, the instructor is encouraged to inform students as to the anticipated response date.

8. Post final student grades in compliance with established institutional policy.

It is recommended that online instructors adhere to institutional standards for the posting of final course grades, including distribution methods and deadlines. This process ensures student progress toward academic achievement and milestones, as well as confidentiality.

9. Use institutionally supported communications systems for all course-related student interaction.

The use of a secure, institutionally supported e-mail tool ensures the security of course communications and supports the tracking of interactions. For example, the learning management-based e-mail environment is the preferred communication system for online courses. Other modes of communication between instructors and students (e.g., fax, phone, surface mail) may also be required. In cases of student-instructor discrepancy, communications records contained within the learning management system (LMS) aid in conflict or dispute resolution.

10. Monitor and maintain course quality across the learning system, including content and editorial accuracy as well as elements related to the design and operation of the learning event.

High quality course content and well-designed instructional activities are essential for a successful learning experience. For this reason, it is recommended that online instructors take responsibility for immediate correction of errors in the accuracy of course content, editorial errors, confusing or conflicting information, non-operational hyperlinks, and other course design issues.

11. Identify and establish relationships with institutional support services to ensure a quality online experience for both instructor and student.

The online instructor is encouraged to identify institutional support service units related to the delivery of the online course. On occasion, staff members from support service units need to contact instructors regarding systems performance, updates, upgrades, and other factors that may affect the delivery of instructional material. Alternatively, instructors may find it necessary to contact support services on matters of immediate consequence, given the assignment and completion deadlines expected of learners. Whenever possible, it is recommended that instructors respond to communications from the online service unit within 24 hours and, where appropriate, to surface mail communications by the date specified.

12. Maintain access to the online course via predictable and reliable technology.

It is recommended that the online instructor have immediate and predictable access to the same technology required for student participation as prescribed by the minimum technology specification for course participation by the learner.