

Setting Student Expectations for Distance Learning

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Summary

Misaligned student and instructor expectations may create frustration and lead to attrition in distance learning courses. These expectations encompass the roles of student and instructor, peer interactions, course organization and content, and use of technology. Clear communication among all class participants is essential for aligning expectations.

Problem: Misaligned expectations

Enrollment in distance learning programs has increased in recent years, yet student attrition remains an issue of concern ([Hart, 2012](#)). Misalignment of student and instructor expectations leads to frustration on both sides, and contributes to attrition ([Bork & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2013](#)). Students who have not experienced an online learning environment may not understand how it differs from a traditional, face-to-face setting.

Face-to-face classes tend to feature an instructor in the active role, while students remain passive. Alignment of expectations occurs organically as participants interact in real time. Online students must assume a more active role, while the instructor serves as a facilitator.

In a traditional classroom, interactions with others are immediate, and tempered by body language and tone of voice. Online interactions are mostly asynchronous. A student may post a question on a discussion board and wait for hours or days before seeing a follow-up from the instructor or another student.

In a traditional face-to-face class, the instructor leads the class through the content. Online students may feel overwhelmed if the material is not thoughtfully organized.

Although students may feel very confident in their ability to use technology, an online course may require them to apply their skills in unfamiliar ways. They may struggle unproductively or simply give up if no assistance appears to be available.

Solution: Clear communication

Just as frustration results when expectations are unmet, satisfaction follows when expectations are fulfilled. Satisfaction contributes to student persistence ([Harris et al., 2011](#), [Bork & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2013](#)).

The SEOLS (Student Expectations of Online Learning Survey) instrument was designed to assess a wide variety of student expectations ([Harris et al., 2011](#)). It may inform administrators, course designers, advisors, and instructors as they work to set appropriate expectations and increase persistence in online courses.

Giving students the opportunity to assess their own readiness for distance learning can be useful for setting expectations ([Songer, 2015](#)). Aggregate data can inform faculty of their students' overall readiness and mindset, helping each instructor develop strategies for providing guidance to his or her class.

The course syllabus is the default location for a list of instructor expectations; however, this

document often goes unread. Thus, it is helpful to present this information in at least one alternative format. This strategy is exemplified by the web page “How to Survive in an Online Class” ([Shimabukuro, 2008](#)), in which the instructor provides concise and supportive advice. According to [Revak \(2014\)](#), best practices include:

- Asking students to list potential obstacles to their success in the course and then plan how to overcome them.
- Having students at the end of the term provide advice for students in the next class.
- Assigning exercises that require students to engage with important information, such as the syllabus, and with instructor feedback on assignments.
- Providing examples of superior student work.
- Providing opportunities for students to give feedback for the instructor.

Clear and frequent communication is essential. [Bork and Rucks-Ahidiana \(2013\)](#) stress the importance of not only setting expectations for students, but also clearly stating the consequences for not meeting them. Likewise, they emphasize providing students with explicit instructions on how to access all means of assistance that are available to them.

Conclusions

Expectations are most effectively aligned by an instructor who is aware of the preexisting expectations of his or her students. Expectations and detailed directions need to be conveyed clearly and creatively. Frequent dialogue is an important element in setting expectations. This approach can help students avoid frustration and persist in their distance learning classes.

Works Cited

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About the Author

Stephanie Songer joined Carolina as a Distance Learning Specialist in 2014. She was previously Associate Professor of Biology at the University of North Georgia. She holds a BS in Biology from North Georgia College, a MEd in Instructional Technology from Georgia Southern University, and a PhD in Neuroscience from Emory University.

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