



BEST PRACTICES IN ONLINE LEARNING FOR AT- RISK STUDENTS

April 2020

In this report, Hanover evaluates best practices for supporting students in an online learning environment. The analysis focuses on how to support vulnerable students, such as first-generation, academically at-risk, and low-income learners. The report also includes a brief overview of services that support students' mental health.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on an analysis of best practices for online teaching, Hanover recommends the following:



FACULTY SHOULD STRIVE FOR FREQUENT AND CONSISTENT INTERACTIONS WITH ONLINE LEARNERS WHILE PROVIDING POSITIVE AFFIRMATION IN FEEDBACK.

A strong faculty presence increases the likelihood of student persistence and provides critical emotional support. In fact, Latinx learners identify student-faculty relationships as the key difference between their face-to-face and online learning experiences. In the absence of physical proximity, instructors must establish a virtual presence through check-ins, constructive feedback with positive affirmation, and targeted support. While the quantity of student-faculty interactions is important, it is not as critical as consistency. Therefore, instructors should identify specific points in a term to engage with students individually.



PROMOTE PEER-TO-PEER INTERACTION THROUGH ICEBREAKER INTRODUCTIONS, COLLABORATIVE WORK, AND STUDENT PRESENTATIONS.

Peer-to-peer interaction promotes learning and social connectedness. Contact with classmates is especially important for vulnerable student groups that are more likely to feel isolated or have weak college preparation, such as first-generation or minority learners. According to students, the aforementioned activities are the most important for fostering peer-to-peer engagement. In particular, interactive discussion boards are a well-established tool in online education and promote deeper learning through collaboration.



CONSIDER USING AN ONLINE LEARNER ASSESSMENT TO PREPARE STUDENTS FOR THE UNIQUE DEMANDS OF ONLINE LEARNING.

Students generally underestimate the difficulty of online courses. Readiness assessments offer a preliminary introduction to the challenges of online education. These formative assessments can evaluate the risk of vulnerable students by appraising technical skills that are essential to successful distance learning. Evaluation results should inform faculty-student interactions and potential academic supports. Instructors should also consider course-specific orientations to introduce students to the structure, materials, and environment of their online classes.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

KEY FINDINGS

Many students from low-income and rural backgrounds face internet access challenges. For example, 58 percent of rural adults indicate that access to high-speed internet is a “major” or “minor” problem in their community. These factors may limit students’ access to virtual classrooms, particularly those hosted on high-bandwidth, advanced online platforms.

Faculty are comparatively well-positioned to identify rising-risk students. Attention and care from instructors can drive student interest in learning and overall motivation. Within an institution, faculty play a critical role in identifying and supporting academically on-track but socially disengaged learners. Potential supports include targeted mentoring, subject-specific workgroups, academic skills workshops, and supplemental instruction. Further, online learners report seeking more contact with their instructors.

Among advising models, intrusive mentoring is the most effective way to reach disconnected and at-risk students. Intrusive mentoring is designed to support students who are less likely to seek help on their own and is linked to improved achievement and persistence. Advisors proactively build relationships with students before they fall behind and provide mandatory mentoring.

Virtual mental health services help students cope with the demands of online learning and the unprecedented state of higher education. More than 90 percent of college and university presidents are “very” or “somewhat” concerned about the mental health of their students during the current epidemic. Many institutions are working to maintain counseling services by offering telephone or video therapy appointments.

FAST FACTS



89%

Percentage of online students that find video and PowerPoint presentation materials “helpful” or “very helpful” for their learning.



76%

Percentage of online students that consider optional virtual office hours “attractive” or “very attractive.”



27%

Percentage of low-income households that have broadband internet and a full range of computing devices (a smartphone, tablet, and laptop or desktop computer).

SPOTLIGHTED INSTITUTIONS

Arizona State University	Emanuel College
Austin Community College	University of Florida
Brandman University	University of Miami

Note: Spotlighted institutions were chosen due to enrollment volume or growth of a student segment of interest (e.g., online, Latinx, first-generation) or existing programs relevant to the topics in this report.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR ONLINE TEACHING

CHALLENGES OF ONLINE LEARNING

OVERVIEW

Online learning can impair student outcomes, particularly those of at-risk students.

According to the [Center for Education Policy Analysis](#), online courses reduce student achievement, as measured by final grades, and the likelihood that individuals will graduate from college. In the study, students in face-to-face classes earned an average GPA of 2.8, whereas participants in online sections of the same course finished with a 2.4 GPA. After one year, online learners were also 3 percent less likely to stay enrolled or successfully graduate.

The study also suggests that the negative effects of online learning are more severe among less-prepared learners: for every one-point increase in a student's prior GPA, the final course grade increased by 0.12 points. [Recent research](#) adds that students from disadvantaged backgrounds also typically underperform and experience poor outcomes in online courses. The [Brookings Institute](#) highlights the implications of these findings: "While online courses may have the potential to differentiate coursework to meet the needs of students with weaker incoming skills, current online courses, in fact, do an even worse job of meeting the needs of these students than do traditional in-person courses."

Learners commonly underestimate the difficulty of online courses.

Students are often drawn to distance learning due to perceptions of flexibility or fit with their current lifestyle. (For example, see [Ilgaz and Gulbahar, 2017](#); [Essling, Mattsson, & Gallego, 2017](#).) As a result, they frequently assume that virtual classrooms will require less time and effort, causing learners to overlook the [unique challenges](#) of online courses. These include the demands of self-driven learning, learning with fewer educational props than in face-to-face courses, the need to become familiar with a new learning platform, and technical issues. To prepare online learners, higher education institutions should promote realistic conceptions and expectations of online education.

Warning Signs of At-Risk or Unmotivated Students

- Slipping grades
- Tardiness or absenteeism
- Disruptive, disrespectful, or risky behavior
- Failure to complete assignments
- Feeling overwhelmed by tasks
- Inability to comprehend the instruction provided
- Unwillingness to engage in classroom activities
- Lacking self-confidence

Source: [Brandman University](#).

INEQUITABLE DELIVERY

DISPARITIES IN INTERNET ACCESS



Only 21 percent of low-income households are highly connected.

The [2016 census](#) considers households as “highly connected” if they “have broadband internet and also own or use a full range of computing devices” (smartphones, tablets, and a desktop or laptop). Nearly half of low-income households do not have a desktop or laptop, likely inhibiting the use of [advanced learning software](#). According to educators, siblings of low-income families commonly share a single cellphone to complete their schoolwork.



Non-white racial groups are less likely to be digitally connected, particularly black and Hispanic families, as a result of income inequality.

Non-white individuals account for [nearly half](#) of the population without home internet. Among racial groups, black and Hispanic households are the [least likely](#) to have a smartphone, tablet, or computer. These families also represent higher proportions of “smartphone-only households” that rely exclusively on smartphones for internet usage.



More than half of rural adults encounter problems accessing high-speed internet.

Based on a 2018 [Pew Research Center](#) survey, 24 percent of rural residents report that “access to high-speed internet is a major problem in their local community,” nearly double the percentage of urban adults (13 percent) and triple that of suburban adults (9 percent). Another 34 percent of rural residents consider high-speed internet access “a minor problem.”

Strategies for Supporting Online Learners with Limited Internet Access

Connect with students to [assess their needs](#). Some [educators](#) are using low-bandwidth tools, such as WhatsApp or Google Forms. To reach the most disconnected, a [calling campaign](#) may be useful.



Inform students and families of helpful programs offered by [internet providers](#). In response to COVID-19, [many companies](#) are not terminating service to residences that cannot pay their bills or are waiving late fees.



As resources allow, increase access to online learning by distributing [laptops](#) or [mobile hotspots](#). As a less cost-intensive alternative, use G Suite applications and enable [offline access](#).

ONLINE PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES FOR ONLINE INSTRUCTORS

Plan for Presence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create a schedule for meaningful and active involvement in online courses, basing time commitment off of teaching and planning requirements of in-person classes• Engage with students via weekly announcements, live discussions, office hours, and timely grading
Be Human	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Physical energy can get lost in the medium of video lectures – try to capture your personality and passion in ways that are different from what you do in person• Infuse writing with your unique voice and warmth, and practice immediacy
Envision the Student Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Anticipate student feelings of isolation and plan for it in a course's design• Have experienced online faculty or instructional designers evaluate courses
Build an Intuitive Course Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strive for clear, methodical, and intuitive organization, and consider if structures help or hinder student progress• Increase the usability of learning management systems by activating the student preview function, adding navigation instructions, and providing quick pointers
Add Visual Appeal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use headers and spaces to break up long sections of text, and embed relevant images or thumbnail videos• For more ideas, consult institutional media designers or the layouts of favorite websites, books, or magazines
Communicate Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Produce thorough, yet digestible explanations of expectations, such as directions written in a conversational tone, informal two-minute videos that explain the details of an assignment, rubrics, and examples of exemplar work
Use Scaffold Learning Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Break down complex tasks to allow for timely progress, feedback, and students to modify their approach, if needed• Scrutinize assessments to ensure that students have had the opportunity to build – step by step, as with face-to-face learning – the knowledge and skills needed to do well
Use Multiple Examples and Explanations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Source existing videos that approach a particular topic from different angles, record a short guest-lecture video to let students hear from another expert, create opportunities for students to explain information to one another• Consider offering supplemental examples for students who want more help
Promote an Enjoyable Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Help students feel comfortable by being engaged and positive, showing compassion for busy online learners, using engaging teaching activities and materials, and streamlining course organization and navigation to create flow
Ongoing Professional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develop as an online teacher by participating in available workshops, joining discussion groups focused on effective online teaching strategies, subscribing to teaching-related newsletters, and exploring best practices

Source: Adapted (sometimes verbatim) from the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#).

PREPARATION FOR ONLINE LEARNING

Online learner assessments can be used to assess the individual needs of at-risk students.

Many institutions offer or require online learning readiness questionnaires for students who plan to enroll in distance courses. These surveys provide students with an introduction to the unique challenges of online learning. According to [one article](#) in the *College Student Journal*, institutions can supplement these quizzes with mandatory assessments that evaluate the basic competencies necessary for navigating online courses. Furthermore, these surveys can be designed to assess the preparedness of at-risk learners by appraising writing and reading proficiency, time management skills, study habits, and communication style. Faculty can use the evaluation results to understand an individual student's strengths and weaknesses to inform potential academic supports or interventions.

WHAT IS THE ONLINE READINESS ASSESSMENT?

Online learning presents students with a unique set of opportunities and challenges. A key to student success in online learning is awareness of how to capitalize on those opportunities and overcome the challenges. To that end, the Office of Distance Education and eLearning has developed an online readiness assessment.

The self assessment consists of a series of questions that prompt students to reflect on a variety of factors that might influence their experience as online students, ranging from study habits to technical skills to time constraints to personality traits. As students work their way through, they are presented with videos with tips on topics like time management and online study skills. Once completed, they receive a summary of Ohio State resources and tips for online learners.

Online Learning Readiness Assessment

A common misperception is that online courses are easier and take less time than regular courses. The reality is that they can be more challenging because they require strong reading and writing skills, self-discipline, and time management skills. These short videos help students know what to expect in online classes and how to get the most out of them.



Source: [Ohio State University](#) (top), [Mt. San Antonio College](#) (bottom).

COURSE ORIENTATIONS

Use short course orientations to establish expectations and allow students to prepare in advance.

Early communication of online course requirements and distribution of content promotes success. In a [2017 survey](#), online graduate students reported that “clear course expectations and access to course documents prior to the start of courses facilitated proactive planning and strategizing for the completion of course work in context with other life responsibilities.” At the undergraduate level, pre-course preparation is correlated with improved student outcomes. A [study](#) of 530 online learners found that those who reviewed an introduction packet before the beginning of the course performed better.



Spotlight: Online Course Orientations at Emmanuel College

[Emmanuel College](#), a small, baccalaureate college in Boston, Massachusetts, notes that in addition to course syllabi and schedules, orientations to the online format of distance courses are extremely helpful to students. Instructors are encouraged to include orientations within a “Getting Started Module” or as part of the first class. Faculty can use this as an opportunity to show how to log in to the learning management system, locate important documents, where to check grades or turn in assignments, describe the course structure, and share a printer-friendly schedule of assignments and deadlines, among others.

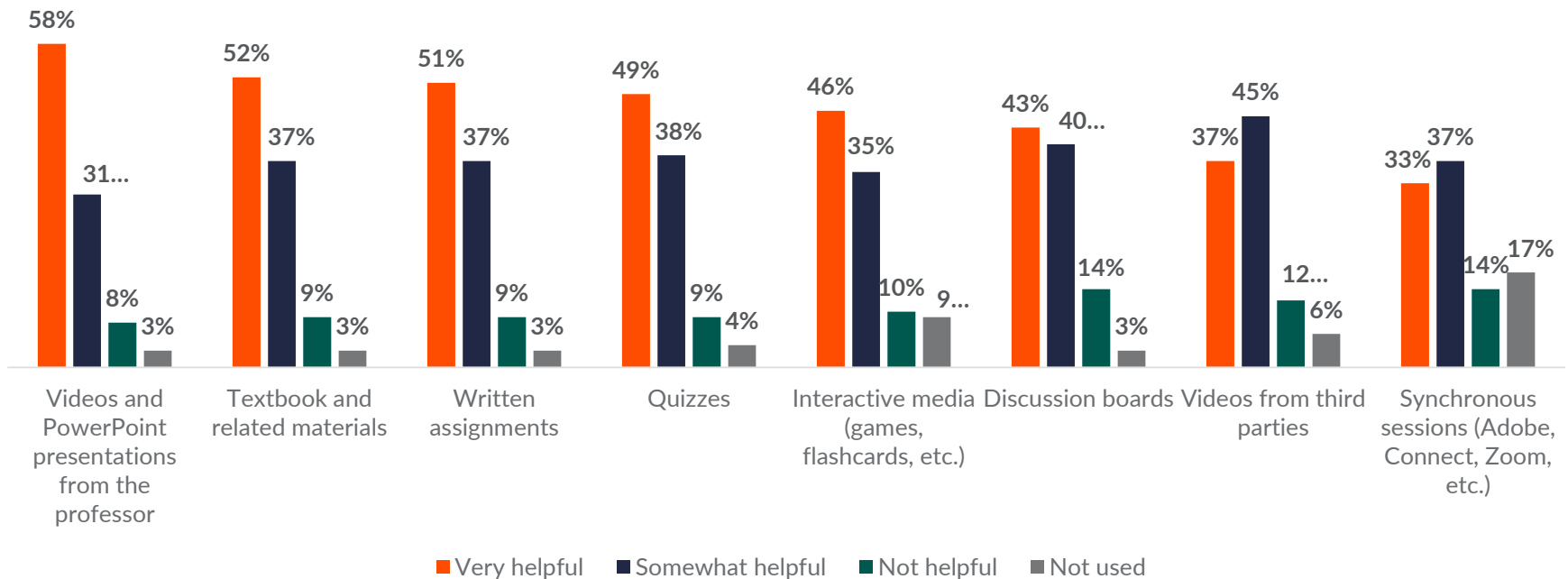
ONLINE TEACHING ACTIVITIES

ANALYSIS

Students report presentations from professors are the most helpful teaching method for online learning.

Based on a [survey](#) of 1,500 prospective, present, and past online college students, “some of the most helpful activities for the online classroom happen to be asynchronous items that students are able to consume and complete on their own time.” These include videos and PowerPoints from the professor, textbooks and related materials, and writing assignments. By contrast, only one-third of learners believe that synchronous sessions are “very helpful” for their learning and success.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF HELPFULNESS OF ONLINE CLASS ACTIVITIES AND MATERIALS



Source: [Learning House](#).

FACULTY PRESENCE

OVERVIEW

Interactions with faculty support student persistence and provide emotional support.

There is a broad consensus that faculty play an important role in promoting student engagement, which, in turn, predicts learner outcomes (see [Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005](#); [Yen and Abdous, 2011](#)). Recently, a [study](#) of pedagogical approaches in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) found that a professor's presence throughout a course and interactions with students are significant determinants of completion. In the absence of physical proximity, instructors must establish a [virtual presence](#) through check-ins, feedback, and targeted support.

In addition to promoting persistence, faculty interactions boost student morale. Studies show that learners [value](#) the perception that professors care about their performance. This sentiment can drive students' [interest in learning and overall motivation](#). In some cases, students may also feel a "reciprocal responsibility" not to let their instructor down.

Faculty should strive for consistent interactions and provide positive affirmation in feedback.

Recent [research](#) indicates that while more faculty interaction in asynchronous online courses is critical for supporting students at risk of failure, "it is not as important as consistent interaction over time." To promote regular interaction with online students, instructors should identify specific points throughout a course to conduct individual student check-ins. Additionally, when giving [feedback](#), online instructors should pair actionable, constructive criticism with positive commentary. Encouraging communication allows students to "minimize stress, modify performance, and provide their highest level of work."

LATINX AND AT-RISK STUDENTS

Faculty presence is particularly salient for Latinx students.

A [study](#) of community colleges in California found that Latinx students taking online courses experienced larger declines in grades and completion rates in comparison to their performance across in-person sections of the same courses. As a result, the achievement gap between Latinx and white students widened. In interviews with researchers, Latinx students reported that the [lack of a strong relationship with their instructor](#) was the main difference between their in-person and online learning experiences.

Faculty mentoring plays a critical role in supporting rising-risk students.

Student supports are [typically designed](#) to serve the most or the least at-risk students. Due to the high volume of contact hours, faculty are well-positioned to identify and help students in between: those who are on-track academically but are socially disengaged. [Potential supports](#) include targeted mentoring, subject-specific workgroups, academic skills workshops, and supplemental instruction.

76% of online students find **optional virtual office hours** "attractive" or "very attractive"



27% of online students believe **more instructor contact** would improve the quality of online courses



Source: [Learning House](#).

FACULTY PRESENCE

STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING TEACHING PRESENCE

While there are many approaches for increasing faculty presence and engaging online learners, the table highlights 10 possible strategies and outcomes:

Action	How it Works	Purpose	Intended Impact
Post a Video Introduction	Instructor initiates contact with students by uploading a video introduction	Connects instructor with students; orients students to expectations	Initiative social and cognitive presence in the classroom
Rediscover Student Introductions	Students upload text-, audio-, or video-based introductions	Allows for stronger community-building in initial forum	Increases social presence and interaction
Customize the Course Roster	Instructor creates document listing student-provided background information	Creates and sustains a sense of community	Instructor is able to lead discussions that connect students to common themes
Set Up Web Alerts	Instructors post relevant web articles	Reinforces instructor lectures and comments; enriches discussion	Learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through reflection
Produce a Podcast	Instructors post audio files to the site to stimulate individual reflection on relevant issues	To develop audio/video mini-lectures	Reinforces learning outcomes
Use RSS Feeds and Aggregators	Instructors create an RSS site that aggregates information on related topics	Reinforces instructor lectures and comments, enriches discussion	Injecting new sources of information; useful for directing discussions
Post a Screencast	Instructors develop instructional tools that support course content	To post lecture notes onto the site; develop audio/video mini-lectures	Accurate understanding of the material; injecting new sources of information
Make a Word Cloud	Instructors develop visual tools that emphasize key themes	Provides collaborative insights into course material	Deep learning by looking for patterns
Post Unit Summaries	Instructors summarize the events of a week/module and post it to the site	Provides personal insights into course material	Diagnose comments for accurate understanding; scaffolding learner knowledge
Create a Voicethread	Instructors highlight relevant issues and stimulate thoughts for individual reflection	Asynchronously replicates interactions of traditional classrooms	Reinforces learning outcomes

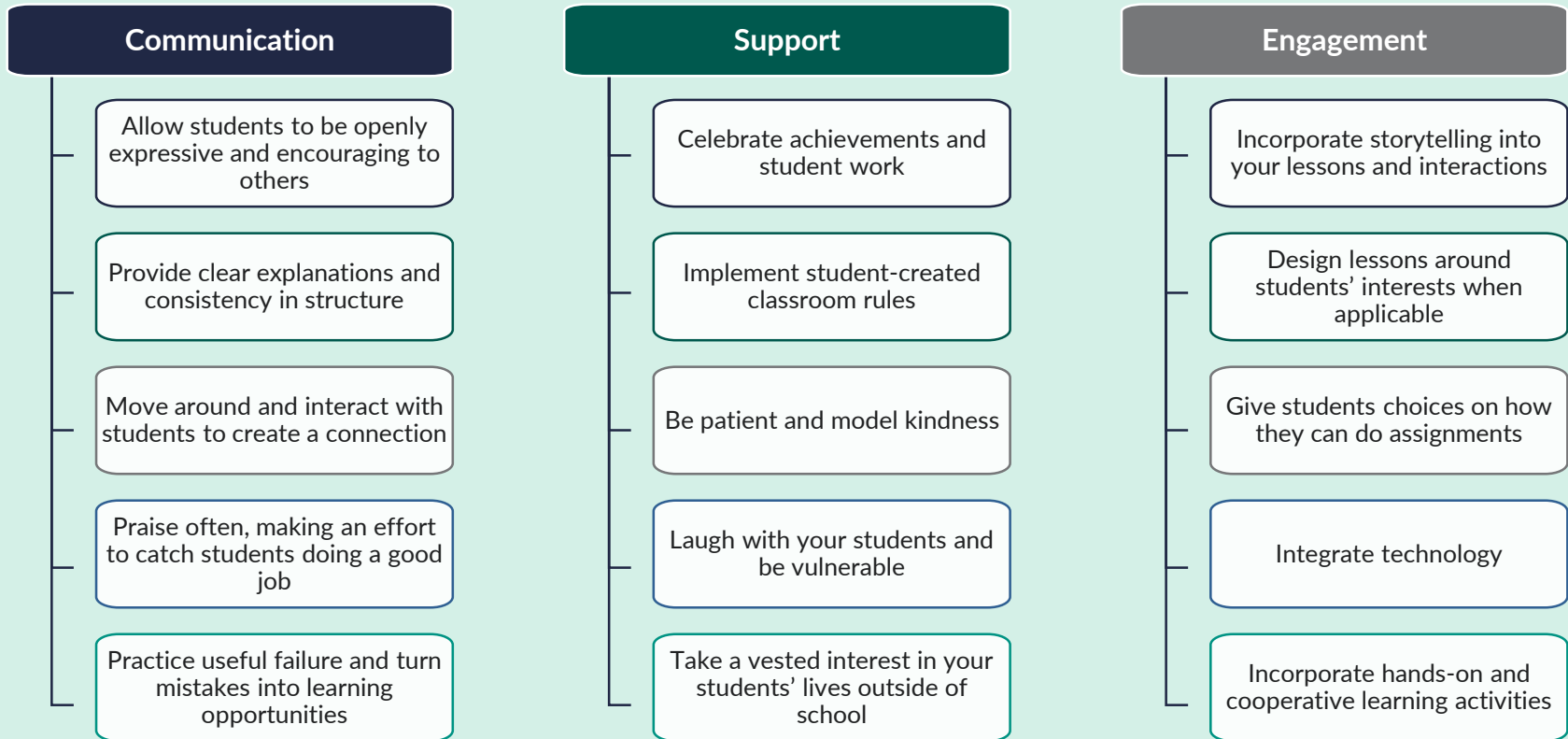
Source: Adapted (sometimes verbatim) from the [Wiley Education Services](#).

SPOTLIGHT: BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY

STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING AT-RISK STUDENTS

Brandman University identifies three strategies for helping at-risk students succeed: foster positive relationships, incorporate a democratic classroom model, and consider the classroom applications of the enabling component model.

While the enabling component model focuses on institutional-level interventions to reduce learning barriers, instructors can contribute by [consolidating and coordinating](#) student support services that are commonly fragmented across institutions. To build strong relationships with students, Dr. Cheryl Burleigh, a faculty member and instructional coach at the University, recommends the following communication, support, and engagement strategies (nearly verbatim):



PEER-TO-PEER ENGAGEMENT

OVERVIEW

Peer-to-peer interactions increase social connectedness and provide academic support.

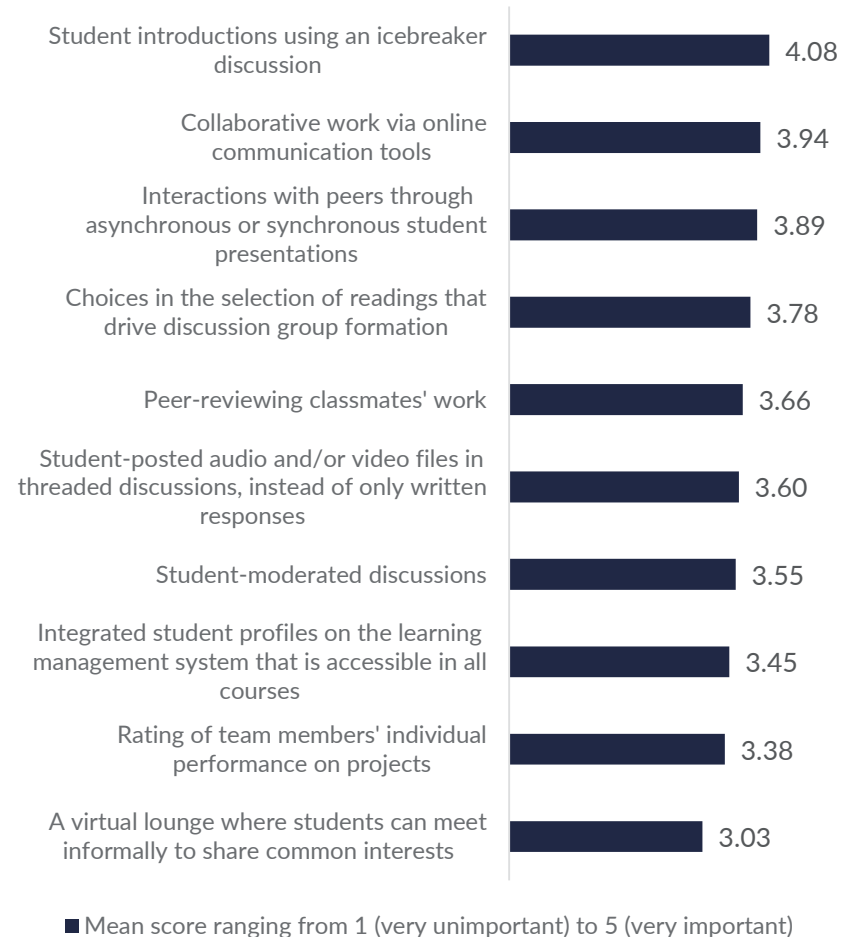
Online students are more susceptible to feelings of [social isolation](#) than their on-campus counterparts. As a result, social engagement is particularly important in virtual classrooms. Research shows that contact among online learners improves student performance, reduces the likelihood of attrition, and fosters a sense of community (see [Diep et al., 2018](#); [Wei, Peng, and Chou, 2014](#)).

These outcomes are driven, in part, by the [academic support and queues](#) students obtain from engaging with peers. Interactions provide opportunities for resolving questions and gauging acceptable work standards that, in turn, determine personal contributions. Additionally, as students share “the same experiences, stressors, and successes,” they develop a sense of comradery. The benefits of classmate interactions are especially important for students who are first-generation or have weak college preparation, as they may struggle to develop [strong study skills](#), as well as students of color, who are more likely to feel [socially isolated](#) than white students.

Students most value engaging with classmates through icebreaker activities, collaborative assignments, and interactive presentations.

Online students scored peer-to-peer activities on a scale of one (very unimportant) to five (very important) and rated, on average, the aforementioned activities as most important for their engagement. By contrast, team member evaluations and virtual lounges were seen as the least important.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF IMPORTANT OF PEER-TO-PEER ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES



Source (almost verbatim): [Martin and Bolliger](#).

PEER-TO-PEER ENGAGEMENT

DISCUSSION BOARDS

Discussion boards provide opportunities for small-group collaboration and enhanced learning.

Online students experience [deeper learning](#) when they work collaboratively with their peers, and educators have long used [discussion boards](#) as a tool for interactive remote learning. In particular, small-group discussions may be especially helpful for some learners. In a 2017 [study](#), nearly one-third of students reported that groups of seven to eight allowed them to build stronger social connections, produce more in-depth conversations, and maintain a manageable workload. Note, however, that discussion boards may [alienate at-risk students](#), as written posts can expose inadequate writing skills. To ensure that all students feel comfortable participating in discussions, instructors should allow a variety of contribution methods, such as audio-recorded responses.

BEST PRACTICES FOR ONLINE DISCUSSION BOARDS



Discussion Board Structure

- Allow students to choose what prompt they would like to respond to from a bank of five to six questions
- Select discussion leaders responsible for adding questions and moderating answers
- Grade student contributions, with a suggested weighting of 20 to 30 percent
- Divide students into groups of no more than 20, if necessary
- Consider setting a maximum response length to promote engagement and control instructor workload



Establishing Expectations

- Describe what constitutes acceptable contributions and reinforce appropriate behavior
- Share an example of exemplar discussions
- Provide a clear assessment rubric and a rationale for expectations
- Communicate activity requirements, such as the number of posts or replies, and associated deadlines
- Clarify the instructor's role in the discussion, depending on teaching style



Instructor Facilitation

- Offer instruction on how to submit posts and replies
- Provide coaching to allow students to improve contributions
- Encourage note-taking and sharing of relevant materials or references
- Solicit new ideas and assign students to support different positions, as needed
- Send weekly newsletters that highlight topics to be covered and weekly summaries of past discussions
- Track participation—both of students and the instructor—and ensure that feedback is evenly distributed

Adapted (sometimes verbatim) from: [Blackboard](#), [Educause](#), and [Kebble](#).

SPOTLIGHT: UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

BEST PRACTICES FOR FOSTERING ONLINE COLLABORATION

The University of Florida offers six best practices for bringing collaboration into virtual classrooms.

Instructors commonly find it challenging to foster peer-to-peer collaboration in fully online courses. However, the University's [Center for Instructional Technology and Training](#) notes that instructors can create engaging and interactive classes “by keeping general best practices for [collaboration](#) and [group work](#) in mind and considering the opportunities and barriers posed by technology.”



Use Existing Tools

Start with the technology that is already in the learning management system. Discussion boards, conferences, and chatting or messaging can be easily accessed and used by all students.



Assess Student Needs

First decide what students need to do and how they need to interact to achieve the learning goals for the course. Then find technology that allows them to do what they need.



Specify Collaborative Expectations

Be specific about what types of interaction you expect. For example, when assigning a discussion post, explain clearly what students should include in both the initial post and any responses to classmates.



Make Technology Accessible

Ensure that any technology students use is accessible and useable. Provide tutorials for tools that students may not be familiar with. Consider a practice assignment to allow students to learn to use a complicated or unfamiliar tool and have a plan for when technology fails.



Consider the Pros and Cons of Synchronous Study

Consider synchronous sessions like conferences, but also consider what challenges those will pose for students. Are all students in the same time zone? What will you do for a student who cannot attend a synchronous session?



Make Collaboration Manageable

Keep groups small. Managing communication between large groups of students online can be a challenge, so keep group sizes small so everyone can participate and follow the conversation.

Adapted (nearly verbatim) from: [University of Florida](#).

STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

MENTORING AND ADVISING

INTRUSIVE ADVISING

Intrusive advising can reach disconnected and at-risk students.

[Academic advising](#) provides the foundation for the success of underprepared learners and plays a critical role in student persistence. Though advising programs [vary across institutions](#), advisors can help students choose courses to ensure timely graduation, identify and access academic and non-academic resources, and address personal matters interfering with their performance. Additionally, student-advisor relationships promote [social connection](#) to an institution, which helps to counter sentiments of isolation.

Intrusive mentoring strategies are most appropriate for vulnerable students who are less likely to seek support on their own, such as [first-year, non-white](#), or [at-risk, online learners](#). This form of advising is [characterized](#) by proactive outreach—advisors seek to build a relationship with students before they fall behind—and mandatory touchpoints. Previous research shows that intrusive mentoring is effective in improving academic performance and persistence (see [Earl, 1988](#); [Rios, 2019](#)).

Strategies for Mentoring At-Risk Students with Time Management Challenges

- ✓ Reach out to students **weekly**
- ✓ Help them **identify how their time is being mismanaged**
- ✓ **Offer a plan and encouragement** for overcoming procrastination
- ✓ Provide **guidance on how to start** tasks
- ✓ Explain how tasks **relate to a student's everyday life** to increase the likelihood that they will start the tasks

Source: [Flynn](#).



Spotlight: Mentoring Programs for Online and Latinx Students

Arizona State University has the [second-largest](#) enrollment of online undergraduate students (nearly 36,500 students in 2019). To support distance learners, the [Student Success Center](#) offers each student a success coach. These mentors “help with the transition from high school or the working world to becoming an online student, assist in goal setting, offer time management advice, provide tips on academics, connect students to university resources and much more.” According to the center’s director, help with time management is the top reason students contact coaches.

Over the last decade, the number of [Latinx students](#) at **Austin Community College** grew to represent 38 percent of total enrollment. In response to the changing demographics of its student body and persisting equity gaps, the institution launched [several initiatives](#), such as [Guided Pathways Advising through Coaching](#). This program provides Latinx students with “personalized, proactive advising to help them select an academic path, persist, and graduate.” Advisors have at least five check-ins with their students each semester via in-person meetings, email, text, or calling. The program has led to a six percentage point gain in retention of first-time Hispanic male students and a 12 percentage point increase in the persistence of Hispanic students who completed more than one check-in.

OVERVIEW

Telemental health services help students cope with the demands of online learning and the current unprecedented state of higher education.

In a [recent survey](#) by *Inside Higher Ed* and Hanover Research, 92 percent of college and university presidents reported being “very” or “somewhat” concerned about their students’ mental health in light of the COVID-19 epidemic. With limited to no opportunities for connection to campus, online learners are [susceptible](#) to feelings of isolation. Lisa Antel, the director of Post University’s counseling center, explains that “being on a college campus itself can be a resiliency factor.” As a result, institutions are working to [maintain counseling services](#) by offering telephone or video therapy appointments. Among institutions that allow clinicians to have virtual sessions with students, popular online platforms include Zoom for Healthcare and Doxy.me.



Spotlight: Telemental Health Services at the University of Miami

The **University of Miami** offers a [24/7 Crisis Line](#), which allows all students in any state to speak with a counselor. The institution’s Counseling Center is also offering continued care during the COVID-19 epidemic through phone or video sessions. Video appointments are delivered via Zoom or Skype for Business.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR OFFERING TELEMENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Benefits

- Increased access
- Convenience
- Cost savings
- Barrier removal
- Accommodation of stigma and/or privacy concerns
- Increased clinical capacity

Risks

- Confidentiality
- Cybersecurity
- Crisis intervention
- Training and supervision
- HIPAA compliance

Limitations

- Service disruptions
- Efficacy
- Gaze angles
- Difficulty of assessment
- Lack of infrastructure
- Social justice barriers

Practical Considerations

- Administrative logistics (e.g., insurance, fees, billing)
- Location of service provide and appropriate security measures
- Scope of services provided
- Appropriate hours of operation for target population(s)
- Optimal office environment (e.g., view of nonverbal cues, sound quality)
- Costs and benefits of third-party providers

Adapted from: [Higher Education Mental Health Alliance](#).



HANOVER
RESEARCH

