YES WE MUST COALITION
COLLEGE SUCCESS FOR ALL

Online Learning:
What Works for Low-Income Students?

A Report from the Yes We Must Coalition
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Online Learning: What Works for Low-Income Students?

The current COVID-19 crisis has forced colleges and universities to transition courses to an online format. Research suggests that low-income students in fully online courses do less well than students with more financial resources. Yes We Must Coalition schools understand the complicated lives and learning needs of the low-income students they work with every day. These schools have responded to the shift to online learning with sensitivity to the needs of their students and the complexity of their lives.

The Coalition is pleased to share the insights of our member institutions as well as insights from the literature. All of the suggestions below are part of an overarching sensitivity to the importance of reinforcing student identity within the context of a supportive community where relationships are still important and part of the learning environment. As in face-to-face classes, clarity of course requirements is essential. Expectations should take into account the ways in which life circumstances present challenges for students, and faculty must remain willing to partner with their students to adapt to their needs. Online courses can take this approach into account by intentionally designing formats that provide ample opportunities for interpersonal interactions among students and between students and faculty, including structured and frequent instructor feedback, guidance and encouragement.

What follows are some specific suggestions taken from recent literature and from the practices of experienced online practitioners at YWMC member schools. Ideally, students in online courses will feel that they are in supportive communities characterized by the following messages.

"We care that you have the tools that you need to be successful."

COMPUTER AND INTERNET ACCESS

- Low-income students often have limited access to both computers and internet connectivity. **Institutions must be proactive in assessing these needs and developing strategies to allow access to laptops or Chromebooks and WiFi hotspots.**

- Faculty need to be aware of the technology and connectivity that is available to the students and **design courses and assignments to correspond to those resources**. For those sharing computers and managing children and siblings' schedules, synchronous classes may not be possible and should not be expected. Always provide written and recorded instructions, recorded lectures, and recordings of any synchronous sessions, so students have varying and multiple opportunities to receive information.

"We know you may not be a technology expert; we are here to help."

TECHNOLOGY SUPPORT

- **Before courses begin, make sure students are sufficiently trained** about how to use the institution's Learning Management System (LMS) and any other software that courses require (such as online lab kits, supplemental textbook materials, Google products, etc.).

- **Provide remotely accessed technical support** via a hotline, online chat, or other ways for students to get their technology questions answered quickly.

- Within course sites **post succinct instructions and links to tutorials** for all aspects of using the LMS and other primary software; also provide these resources through the institution's website or another accessible source outside the LMS.

- **Do not assume that students know how to utilize Smartphones** except for personal communication/ social media; provide instructions for using phones if they will be used to complete or submit assignments or to access the LMS or other primary software.

- If you are using email for communication **state clearly and often that students need to check their email for messages from you.**

"The goal of this course is for you to succeed and learn from participating with others in the course."

INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

- **Have one place to go for course information.** Ideally, courses should utilize an institutional template for course design in the LMS (use of a "master course shell") so students can dependably find where various types of course and support information are housed within any course shell.

- **Make course objectives clear.** Learning outcomes and objectives should be explicitly aligned with assignments and assessment; these should be posted in the syllabus as well as restated in course organization such as introductions to weekly learning modules, in assignment directions, and in grading rubrics for assignments.

- **Provide a weekly schedule at the beginning of the term** for readings, assignments and assessments, with clear due dates so students can plan their school demands in concert with work and family schedules.

- **Design the course** so that it relies on **multiple interactions between students and between student and instructor**. "An array of studies suggest that instructors' caring, connection, encouragement, and guidance are critical to help alleviate these students' anxiety, build their academic motivation, and support their success. . . Accordingly, one might suspect that in order to support diverse students' learning and achievement, online courses need to incorporate stronger interpersonal connections and instructor guidance than most currently do" (Jaggers, 2014. Democratization of education for whom? Online learning and educational equity. *Diversity and Democracy*. 17 (1).) Whether courses are asynchronous or include a synchronous requirement, it is important to create an interactive environment at the start of the course. Take time for activities that introduce the students to each other and to the faculty in order to create a sense of community, a sense that "we are all in this together." Utilize structured asynchronous discussion forums, formative learning checks, break-out groups for assignments that build interpersonal relationships, and audio/video tools ideally within the LMS (though other software such as Zoom, and Google Meets and Hangouts can also be used). Individual audio/video feedback on assignments communicates an instructor's attention to individual learning.

- **Pre-determine if there are to be synchronous aspects of a course at the outset,** and hold those on scheduled days, at the same time of day, and for a given length of time so students can plan accordingly. If a course will contain required synchronous activities, that and the required times, should be known when students are registering for a course.

"This is a place where we meet to talk together about achievement and improvement."

ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK

- **Provide individual feedback directly, consistently and often**; instructors can use email and video/ audio tools within and outside of the LMS. A course Announcement can be used to notify students that grades/feedback are posted in the LMS and/or to check email for feedback.

- **Provide opportunities for students to discuss assessments and progress**, as well as their assessment of the course and how it might be improved, through online office hours in chat rooms, Google Hangouts, and by appointment which can use the good old-fashioned telephone.

- **Provide formative feedback using non-graded learning checks** to reduce stress. Instructors and students can still gauge accountability by recording that students took the time to do the check-ins.

"We want to help you grow and do your best."

ASSIGNMENTS

- **Keep instructions simple and clear**, and repeat them in a variety of formats (post in LMS Assignments section, send via email, then copy and paste email in the Announcements section of the LMS, etc.) Have assignments due on the same day of the week or month.

- **Create assignments in chunks** to be accomplished over time, rather than as one big assignment due at the end of the semester.

- **Develop learning modules with flexible due dates** and **avoid timed exercises** (such as quizzes or exams).

- **Create assignments that can be done in a variety of formats** (written, PowerPoint presentations, YouTube presentations, Google Docs, etc.) but provide students with sufficient training/tutorials for using software.

- **Provide information about web-based academic resources and appropriate links and passwords to databases.** Don't assume students have easy access to a library. Work with your librarian to help provide access for students and provide students with contact information to the librarian.

- **Ask students to submit assignments via their institutional LMS** if possible; submissions to instructors via email can be hard to document, and tracking and responding to individual submissions can be overwhelming for the instructor.

"We know life is hectic. The whole campus is mobilized to help you succeed with your courses."

STUDENT SUPPORTS

- **Institutions must adapt student support services and resources to the virtual environment** and provide contact information, links to services, chat options and hours of availability to students. These should be listed on every syllabus. Required virtual services/resources should include disabilities support services and ensure that the LMS and course materials are ADA-accessible; library services and access to resources; tutoring/learning support; mentoring programs; technology support; and an online Early Alert Process for instructors.