



Improving Student Engagement in Online Courses

8 strategies to make it happen

Online learning is clearly mainstream. The Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics found that the number of students who took some of their courses online grew by 36 percent between fall 2016 and fall 2017. During that same time, 15.4 percent of students took classes completely online and 33 percent of students took at least one course online.

But how do you know if your online students are engaged? Are they doing the work with persistence and enthusiasm, such that they feel as involved as they might in a traditional classroom? How can you encourage a growth mindset? Prevent frustration and burnout?

Generally, we define student engagement as the level of interest students show toward the topic being taught and their motivation to learn and progress through the course. Is that possible in an online world? Absolutely.

We need to provide positive online experiences so that students remain interested and on track. Such experiences not only provide a supportive feedback loop, but also inspire students to take responsibility and challenge themselves. Here are eight effective ways to increase student engagement in online courses.

Online enrollment increased for the 14th year in a row, and a third of college students now take at least one class online, according to latest analysis of [U.S. Department of Education data](#).





“Five clusters of activities indicate student engagement, including level of academic challenge, a supportive campus environment, enriching educational experiences, student-faculty interaction, and active and collaborative learning.”

—*Online Learning Journal*, March 2018

1 Encourage faculty to find ways for every student to participate.

Think of this as virtual hand raising. Instructors can assess students' prior knowledge, allow them to teach each other, and break up larger concepts into bite-sized pieces to improve comprehension. Or they can ask students to share videos, contribute to a blog, and assess their peers' work. In addition, they should run reports to detect students who are not participating and reach out to them with targeted prompts.

2 Offer professional development for diverse learning needs.

All lessons should include objectives that cater to various learning modalities and preferences. Providing examples and case studies on a variety of topics will help reach different strengths, viewpoints, and interests. Professors can offer instructional content in audio and/or video formats—not just text—and include interactive quizzes, images, and photos to supplement text-heavy lessons. Other things to consider: concept mapping, self-correcting quizzes and exercises, and simulations.

3 Train your team to provide options for personalized learning.

Let students demonstrate their mastery in different ways, such as a presentation or group project. Make sure an online rubric to evaluate learning outcomes is provided.

Find ways to develop rich course content, assignments, and discussion prompts that mirror the content styles your students are accustomed to in social media platforms, but with academic rigor not often present in those types of forums.





news article that captured their interest, they will increase students' comfort level with the overall community.

Within your forum, keep your ideas and conversations well organized so students' thoughts don't get lost in the structure.

5 Find ways to help keep everyone on track.

Virtual office hours are a terrific way to keep both your staff and students on task. Administrators and instructors can schedule video conferences or be available at specific times for online chats; encourage anyone to text if they have a quick question. Today's generation appreciates the speediness of a text, and we all know timely feedback is essential for keeping students motivated and responsive.

6 Help students set achievable goals.

Professors should share estimated completion times for each project and assignment and make sure students know what they need to do to succeed. If students have clear expectations of what is expected for different levels of performance, they will determine what they want to get out of the course.



4 Create an online community.

As with face-to-face interactions, professors need to find ways to help students develop connections between each other and with them. They should invite students to answer background questions in discussion boards and introduce them to each other.

Encourage them to post about themselves, so that they are modeling this practice. When they establish a positive tone from the outset by sharing photos, anecdotes from their weekend, video announcements, or a link to a

7 Tailor your analytics to the online experience.

To support online student success, institutions need metrics and quality measurements that are tailored to the online learner—rather than the traditional classroom experience.

8 Provide the means to allow all learners to reflect.

Faculty can guide students to reflect individually and collaboratively on what they have learned by conducting assessments of themselves and their peers, summarizing their experiences, and sharing key takeaways with each other. Group reflection in an online forum

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helps students to uncover hidden biases or roadblocks to understanding. When instructors offer questions and prompts to help students tie their learning into the real world, it makes the online experience more meaningful.

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5 Strategies That Online Students Ranked as “Most Important”

1. The instructor posts/emails regular reminders.
2. The instructor posts grading rubrics for all assignments.
3. Students work on realistic scenarios to apply content (e.g., case studies, reports, research papers).
4. Discussions are structured with guiding questions/prompts to deepen their understanding of the content.
5. The instructor creates a forum for students to contact the instructor with questions about the course.

—*Online Learning Journal*, March 2018



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