

## Resource Guide

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### Considerations When Teaching Online: Part 1

The U.S. Department of Education (2019) estimates close to one-third of all college students are taking online courses, with current enrollment figures expected to increase as more universities expand their online degree offerings. Faculty, however, continue to hold negative and often hostile views toward online teaching, usually citing concerns over credibility, quality, and engagement. Many of these concerns are traced to myths perpetrated about distance formats, which have real design and instructional delivery implications. As educational development scholar Michelle Miller (2014) notes, faculty that accept popular online teaching myths are more prone to design courses that lack coherent organization, a sense of community, and quality interactions. To be clear, there are real differences between online courses and alternative formats; however, it is important to dispel the following online myths:

- **Myth #1: Online courses are less rigorous.** Your learning outcomes should not differ in an online course simply based on format. What is different is how you approach and execute these outcomes in a learning environment that separates students from you and each other. You may find the need to modify your outcomes based on your online-specific learning activities and assignments, yet leverage multimedia content (e.g., videos, podcasts), collaborative activities, and critical, reflective discussions to engage your students with course topics and debates just as you would in any other format.
- **Myth #2: Online courses are rife with cheating.** It is a daunting task to monitor exam-taking and academic honesty in distance formats. Designing with intention and transparency will help alleviate your concerns. If you worry that your students might share or copy answers on an exam, consider revising multiple-choice formats by adopting open-ended questions, having students work on a joint study guide, or randomizing the order in which questions appear. If you are concerned that students might plagiarize a research paper, have them submit individual parts and stagger their due dates. In addition, leverage the power of formative feedback and assessment to reduce incentives to cheat to begin with by reducing student stress (Lang, 2013).
- **Myth #3: I can teach the same way.** Many faculty naturally default to using strategies and techniques that worked in alternative formats when first teaching online. Keep in mind that the representation of your content may not translate in the same way in online formats, and that your role as an instructor in the digital learning environment requires a different approach. Borrowing from the “phases of engagement” model developed by Palloff and Pratt (2009), it is best to view your role as a facilitator of the learning process rather than being front-and-center. In addition to sharing expertise, effective online instructors are well-versed in community-building techniques,

facilitating engaging discussions, and designing quality learning experiences often through novel learning-centered strategies (e.g., video discussion boards).

- **Myth #4: If you build it, it will run.** Asynchronous courses give a false impression that once they are built, they become well-oiled and self-running machines. This myth often contributes to faculty virtually “walking away” from their course, which has negative effects on presence, interaction, and community. It is essential for you to establish your presence early and regularly to create a welcoming, engaging, and challenging learning environment. Online teaching is ultimately a two-stage process; the first stage involves clear and intentional design, while the second stage involves facilitating learning experiences to promote deeper learning. If you disappear from your online course, your students will take note of this silence and act accordingly.
- **Myth #5: Students are proficient with the LMS.** Most faculty assume that students are proficient with the format and technology that is common to digital environments. Keep in mind that your course may be the first online learning experience for some of your students, and even more seasoned online students may not know how to navigate your course to download files, submit assignments, or participate in discussions. Consider including a “Start Here,” “Getting Started,” or “Week Zero” module that teaches students the basics of a LMS (e.g., how to create a discussion board post) and helpful tips (e.g., a screencast of you navigating the course) for how to succeed in digital learning environments.

#### Resources

Ginder, S., Kelly-Reid, J., and Mann, F. (2019). Enrollment and employees in postsecondary institutions, Fall 2017; and financial statistics and academic libraries, fiscal year 2017: First look (provisional data). U.S. Department of Education. Available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>.

Lang, J. (2013). *Cheating lessons: Learning from academic dishonesty*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Miller, M. (2014). *Minds online: Teaching effectively with technology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Palloff, R. and Pratt, K. (2009). *Assessing the online learner: Resources and strategies for faculty*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

*For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your course, [email](#) the Reinert Center to schedule a consultation.*