

Strategies for the first six weeks of class

As we start a new semester, let's focus on how we, as faculty, can better support students. Whether they're just out of high school or an adult learner, research shows that the first six weeks of a college term are the most critical for student success. Research has shown that more than half of students leave college in the first six weeks (1). They may be facing challenges like learning new technology, balancing expectations from instructors with family obligations, and a lack of face-to-face interaction (an important factor in student retention). These first six weeks are critical not only to students but to UAF as well.

Use the following tips to help your online students and our university find success in the first six weeks and beyond:

BE FLEXIBLE

I've heard instructors say it wasn't their responsibility to monitor if students were completing course assignments on time. That statement is somewhat troubling as we've all missed a deadline. While deadlines are an important aspect of college, these first few weeks are critical to student success and providing some leeway could improve student success and provide success for our institution as well.

As retention agents we all need to do what we can to help students persist. Many students take online courses because of the flexibility they offer — helping them to balance family, military or work obligations — and the stress of strict course assignment deadlines can often get lost in the shuffle of “administrivia.” Consider giving students some flexibility with deadlines in the first few weeks of the semester.

Additionally, take a few minutes to reach out to a student who has not completed their first contact/first week assignments. We don't know all the circumstances a student is going through as they transition to collegiate coursework but reaching them halfway can go a long way in helping us all.

REFER STUDENTS TO SUPPORT RESOURCES AND SERVICES

As an institution, we have developed an array of support services to increase the chances of student success and retention. This includes, but is not limited to, advising, counseling and tutoring services. Additionally, outreach

efforts through eCampus, Admissions, Advising and New Student Orientation can effectively get students back on track. Learning about these resources and being able to accurately refer students to them can be the just-in-time assistance students need.

If you don't have time to reach out to students who have not submitted their first assignments, take advantage of the eCampus Early Outreach program, which starts next week. We'll take on the responsibility of contacting students to help determine their commitment to the course. Additionally, eCampus recently launched a new [Student Support Page](#) that includes nearly every resource available to online students. Students can easily find helpful resources that will benefit them over these first six weeks, throughout the semester and beyond. Consider sharing this support page with your students.

UNDERSTAND THAT LIFE HAPPENS

Students — especially if they are new freshmen — are learning to navigate a university bureaucracy, experiencing what it means to add/drop, trying to purchase their course materials and monitoring that their financial aid came through. They're also working with new course technology (i.e., Blackboard, Canvas or another learning management system) and balancing the rigors of collegiate academic work with their family circumstances. It's no wonder that half of all students who drop out of college do so in the first six weeks.

Stress and anxiety is inevitable. While we may not have control over the battles students are facing, we can be understanding that life happens. What might be seen as a miniscule excuse to us could be a paramount issue for the student. Showing that UAF faculty are understanding and flexible will not only help students in the first few weeks, but can help them persist until they have a degree in hand.

eCampus offers a full complement of faculty services to help your students be successful. Let us know how we can help.

References

1. Nelson, V. (2016). The Importance of the First Six Weeks of College. Retrieved January 9, 2020 from: <https://www.collegeparentcentral.com/2013/09/the-importance-of-the-first-six-weeks-of-college/>