



# The OSU Bright Side Project

## **What the Pandemic Taught Me: More Communication and Flexibility Goes a Long Way with Students by John Hansen**

During the apex of the COVID-19 pandemic, I had an atypical spike of non-participating students in all my online English sections of transitional writing, composition, and literature courses. Soon, copious amounts of zeros packed the grade books. My eyes began to glaze over when looking at them. At the time, some of these students were at a high A in the class and never missed an assignment. I also knew some of them -- the crème de la crème -- as an advisor for Phi Theta Kappa. Different reasons began to float around in my head on why they suddenly stopped submitting assignments. It didn't make any sense. These students would do anything in order to achieve excellence (you know the type of student I'm talking about) or at least reach out to me to tell me what was going on.

I've always placed high importance on keeping in communication with students before the pandemic -- since it is such a vital component of creating a thriving learning environment, but the pandemic has revealed to me that more is, in fact, better. From increasing the frequency of individualized messages and course announcements, and sharing campus and student resources, to showing and offering a willingness to be flexible with late assignments under extenuating circumstances, such approaches can usher in greater student success and retention.

When I messaged these 32 non-participating online students in total, eight of them responded in a couple of days; however, I had 11 students respond around 10 days later, and yes, the rest of them never corresponded back at all. Within this 10-day timeframe, I sent messages to each student every three days (I know, seems a bit much), but many online students need gentle reminders. Additionally, I also dispatched two text messages each (on the days I didn't send out LMS messages or emails) to all of these

students, which was time consuming. However, three students responded within 15 minutes. I don't know if they saw those messages or e-mails and decided to respond through text, but it worked. Online students are unique and so are their personal preferences for how they want to communicate with their instructors. All of these students ended up passing these online courses with a C or higher -- something I'm very proud of. What if I wasn't persistent or didn't send out those text messages as well? Would the attrition rates have been even higher? Would the trajectory of these students' lives have drastically changed? I don't know, but I often consider the possibilities.

Another measure that I have in place is posting an announcement a few times a month. These can range from asking how students are doing, reminders about upcoming assignments, supplemental resources (if students were struggling with a particular concept), how they are doing with the course material, and asking for feedback on the course or myself (at midterm and at the end of the semester). In the past, I've had students prompted by these announcements and they will divulge that they did have a question about an upcoming assignment and would like some further clarification. One other instance involved a student saying how she always appreciated the check-ins and that it made her feel comfortable asking questions and knowing that the instructor was caring made the class better. Cultivating this type of mindset for students takes time, but this is one way to start.

We aren't just faculty teaching in our specialized areas and interests. Often, we have to take on the role of student advocate. A few years ago, I remember a student who was facing hardship, lost his job, and couldn't afford to fix his car to attend his classes on campus. I put him in touch with our campus dean and they were able to provide him with a grant of a few hundred dollars to make the necessary car repairs. He was so thankful and said if it wasn't for that grant, he might have just given up. A more recent example was with one of my online students. This student needed extra assistance on his argumentative paper and never knew about Smarthinking -- the school's free online tutoring service that can be accessed right through the course. Not only did he use the tutors for English, but also for his math and science courses. As faculty, students most likely interact with us the most and we are usually in the best position to direct them to all of the student support services the school has to offer -- from coaching and supplemental instruction, and financial assistance, to mental health counseling, etc.

The last method I discuss here only started because of the pandemic. This is the notion of allowing for more flexibility with late assignments under extenuating circumstances. Pre-pandemic, I was very stubborn about accepting late work. Occasionally, I sometimes reflect on this previous mindset and get a little down on myself for having been so strict about the policy (I had my reasons). Yet, when I began to show more compassion and accepted late work (more details were discussed and a deadline was mutually agreed upon before proceeding), I was happier because I knew that I was ultimately setting students up to be more successful -- and I'm sure the students were less stressed as well while trying to juggle the sickness or job loss and coursework all at the same time.

Although anecdotal, these various practices I've put in place have helped countless students in my online courses. For the most part, I've done a majority of these things before COVID-19, but it feels like I've become more adamant throughout the pandemic about trying to save the student from failure and attempting to provide them every opportunity to succeed in my courses -- an outlook I wish I had developed sooner and will certainly continue with in the future.

John Hansen received a BA in English from the University of Iowa and an MA in English Literature from Oklahoma State University. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Sunburst Review*, *One Sentence Poems*, *The Dillydoun Review*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, *Eunoia Review*, *Litro Magazine*, *Wild Roof Journal*, *The Banyan Review*, *Drunk Monkeys*, and elsewhere. He is an English Faculty member at Mohave Community College in Arizona. Read more at [johnphansen.com](http://johnphansen.com).

