

Virtual Office Hours to Connect With Your Students

Being easily accessible and regularly reminding students you are eager to talk with them will encourage them to reach out to you for the support they may need. It is important to offer regular virtual office hours as well as a variety of formats that students may use to communicate with you (e.g., phone, chat, email, Skype, Facetime, or other virtual face-to-face meeting applications, and/or texting). At the beginning of the course, ask students to fill out a survey asking for their availability and preferred communication format for meeting with you. Use this information to inform how you schedule and the communication tools you use for your virtual office hours. Customizing your virtual office hours sends a message that you care about being accessible to them and recognize that they have busy lives as well (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016).

Group office hours: Hold regular office hours in a virtual chat or conference room for students to drop in and/or post questions. This practice helps build community among learners (Nilson & Goodman, 2018).

Individual office hours: Be available for students to meet with students individually. Since some students are reluctant or nervous about reaching out to their instructor, consider requiring that all students have at least one virtual meeting with you early in the course to establish a line of communication with you, and so you can learn more about them and their learning goals (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). If students have a positive experience in this initial meeting, they will be far more likely to reach out to you when they are struggling with the course or have a question.

Here are some questions you might ask students in that initial meeting to establish rapport and learn more about their personal and professional goals:

- How does your course fit in to their program of study? What are they working towards?
- Have they taken online courses in the past? What were the challenges? What worked well for them?
- How often are they on campus (if at all)? What do they do while on campus?
- What kind of support can you provide to help them succeed?
- Do they have any questions about you or the course?

This initial meeting can go a long way towards establishing good connections with your students early in the course. Once you have discussed their goals and challenges, let them know that you are confident in their ability to succeed in the course and that you are there to help them do just that.