



How Can I Encourage My Students to Ask For Help?

How do other instructors encourage students to seek help?

In the Fall of 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, over 100 University of Kentucky instructors were surveyed to learn more about the nature of teaching and learning during this global educational phenomenon. Reflecting on the fall semester, instructors were asked to report on their teaching successes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some representative comments are shared below.

"I actually have more students that are NOT afraid to reach out to me and ask for help. [In office hours] I was asking students for suggestions and tried to be more helpful and meet all their needs."

"When we broke in March to go on-line, I gave the problem sets to students to work on and told them I would use class time for office hours. I found that few people joined me. So this semester...I turned the [problem set] activity into something we would work through together, via zoom."

"I encourage [students] to reach out to me for help outside of class time...The direction I give is: 'If you have a question that is not urgent email me. If you need help with the software or your are stuck, then text me and I will make time to get online and help you.'"

What can I do to foster help-seeking in my students?

As instructors, we can't make students come to us for help, but we can design a learning environment that will reduce the psychological barriers that might keep students from reaching out when they are unsure. Here are five ideas to help encourage students to ask for academic help when they need it.

1 Re-brand Office Hours



Some students may think that "office hours" are hours when the instructor wants to work uninterrupted in their office. Clarify this misconception and make this sacred time slot more student-friendly by re-branding office hours as "Student Hours", "Review Hours", or "Open Hours".

2 "Ask the Students" Discussion Board



Give students a low-key way to ask questions by creating an ungraded "Ask the Students" discussion board in Canvas. Students can pose questions to be answered by their classmates, and you can follow the discussion board thread to see which concepts students are struggling with.

3 Assign a Gateway Visit



It's much easier to get students to return to office hours (virtual and in-person) if they've already visited once before. Have students "break the [office hours] seal" by assigning a visit to one of your first office hours sessions for a nominal amount of participation points.

4 Schedule Office Hours Strategically



Students may not visit office hours because they don't want to seem like they need help. Remove this barrier by scheduling office hours a day or two before weekly assignments are due, and tell them you will help them check or review their work before turning it in.

5 Metacognitive Reflections



Build in short reflections to help students pause and think about what they know & what they need help with. One strategy is using a stoplight reflection after teaching new content: Green=What do you understand really well? Yellow= What are you unsure/iffy about? Red=Where are you totally lost?

