ADMINISTRATION FOR
CHILDREN & FAMILIES

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This brief is one of a series that accompany the Distance Learning Planning and Implementation Guide. These resources are designed to help State/Territory decisionmakers increase the capacity of their professional development (PD) systems by providing additional access to distance learning. For more information visit https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/distance-learning-planning-and-implementation-guide-0.

This brief outlines tips for effective online teaching and provides an example of one State's strategies to support distance learners as they navigate an online learning experience.

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE ONLINE TEACHING

For any PD to be effective, the instructor must understand adult learning and the needs of adult learners in every aspect of the learning experience. Becoming an effective online instructor builds on what is already known about content, who the learners are, how they learn, and their desire to be part of a learning community. The following summarizes some common tips and guidance for effective online teaching (Donohue, Fox, & Torrence (2007). See also: Cincinnati State Distance Education; Edelman, 2013; Sloan Consortium, 2011; and, Stanford Center for Teaching and Learning.

- **Be intentional and present in your course**
  - Make purposeful decisions related to technology, methods, activities, interactions, community building. Present material based on the learning objectives identified for online learners and be actively involved in your course; interact with each participant at least weekly.

- **Understand the learners**
  - Learners in the EC field tend to be low-tech/high-touch, nontraditional adult learners with a strong desire to connect with others. To be successful, online students depend on their reading and writing skills and need to be competent working with a computer. Online instructors need to recognize and address these potential barriers to effective online learning for EC participants.

- **Remove the barriers**
  - Reliable access to computers, high-speed Internet connections, and basic computer skills are essential requirements; address issues of access, technology skills, and computer literacy in advance.

- **Prepare learners for success**
  - Provide access to the online learning environment before the course begins to enable participants to explore and experiment with the technological tools and preview course expectations. Posting a syllabus and assignment dates at the beginning of the course will also help students know what to expect and when.

- **Make it easy to get help**
  - The environment should be a safe place for a student to say, "I don't know how." Develop solutions to common problems in advance, and offer these in ways that are easy to understand by learners.

- **Keep it simple**
  - The learning environment should be welcoming, inviting, simple to access and navigate, uncluttered, easy to look at, and user friendly; chunk learning materials into separate modules so that students are not overwhelmed.

- **Create a community of learners with discussion board topics that invite questions, reflections, and responses**
  - Interaction and peer support are key to the success of a DL environment. Learning communities that connect students with one another support cooperation and collaborative learning.

- **Be a learner**
  - Online instructors can look for teachable moments to reflect on how the process of learning to teach online encourages improvement in their own practice.

STATE EXAMPLE: MASSACHUSETTS' DL SUPPORTS

Massachusetts' Bay Path College established the on-campus Center for Distributed Learning (CDL), an integrated information technology and academic support organization, to provide a comprehensive, accessible support system for students and faculty. The CDL developed a facilitated, highly interactive orientation course to meet the needs of new online students. The college also hired an Online Student Support Coordinator to facilitate the orientation course and to act as the first point of contact for all online student support needs. The Online Student Support Coordinator:

- Provides learning management system (LMS) technology support

- Assists students who are struggling with online learning

- Monitors students' transitions from orientation to their online courses

- Helps students with matters like financial aid and course registration

- Answers other questions about the institution

Results

Since the fall 2007 semester, nearly 1,600 students have completed the Orientation to Online Learning course. A recent survey showed that 89% of students felt that the orientation experience was helpful in preparing them for their first online course. Other information collected by the CDL shows that:

- Faculty feel they can focus on the content of their courses rather than worrying about technology.

- Faculty feel the Online Student Support Coordinator provides students with an ally who is there to assist them through any challenges they face, from orientation to graduation.

- Students indicated a 19% increase in their own perception of their readiness for online learning and a 13% increase in their comfort level with using the LMS.

- Following completion of at least one online course, 92% of students felt that they were highly successful in their first online course.

- Many students decided to take additional online courses. Of those who did, 87% stated that the support services that were available to them at least somewhat influenced that decision.