Best Practices in Distance Education

The Welcome Message

One of the best practices often recommended for online faculty is to create a "Welcome" message that is the first thing that students see when they enter the online course environment. Consider sending this Welcome message to students via email before your class begins. Much of the information listed below could/should also be included in your course syllabus as well.

The types of things you can include in that welcome letter are:

- Introduce yourself! Let students get an idea of who you are
- Give students your contact information including when and how to contact you
- List your office hours. Are you holding virtual office hours as well? Post those here
- A brief overview of the course objectives and student learning outcomes for the course
- Course access! Include information about how to get started, including link and instructions on how to log into Blackboard.
- Do you have a personal website? If you post your course syllabus on this site, include a link to it in your welcome letter. Otherwise, consider attaching a course syllabus to your Welcome Message.

Some additional items you might include are:
- **Tech support**. Information on how to get tech help before class begins.
- **Date when the class begins**
- **Number of weeks and ending date for the course**. Are you teaching a short term class? – This can be a little confusing when students don't realize that not all classes are the same length.
- **Textbook Information**. If you would like students to have textbooks on the first day of class, it's important that you provide them with all of the pertinent information (author, title, edition, ISBN number) they will need. You may also opt for an "older" edition if your text is used primarily for reference and its content changes very little.
- **Number of required synchronous meetings** (if any) including when and how they will take place. If you require students to "attend" a "real-time" web facilitated, virtual meeting, provide them with the necessary information so that they can make arrangements to be "present" or opt to take the course at a future date.
- **Number of optional synchronous meetings** (if any) including when and how they will take place. For example, you can hold "virtual" office hours so that students can reach you at a particular time. How you hold these office

hours is up to you, but some ideas include being available for instant messaging (IM), chat, Skype, e-mail, and (for those who are more "old-school") telephone! Skype is a powerful free web-conferencing tool that allows you to interact with your students using audio, video, or text. Facebook also has a video chat tool that is easy to use.

- **Homework Information.** Consider including general information about the required homework for this course, and how such homework is submitted to you, the instructor. List projected due dates for this homework.
- **Exam information**. If students are required to take proctored exams, provide information about where, when, and how those will be taken. If your exams are online, consider at least sending a list of **projected test due dates**.
- **Technical Requirements**. Explain what types of hardware, software, browser and Internet access students will need to complete the work for your course. Will students need MS Word? Are you using any other type of specialized software? You should make those expectations clear so that students can evaluate whether they can meet those requirements before your class begins.

Sample Welcome Message Template

Hi there!

You are receiving this message because you are currently enrolled in ABCD 123, crn12345, during the Fall 2014 semester. I will be your instructor this semester. My office is located in XXX, and my contact phone number is: 123-456-7890. My office hours are as follows: XXXXX. I will also hold a virtual office hour, via email, on XXXX between the hours of X and Y.

Course objectives for ABCD 123:
- ABD
- XYZ

How To Log Into Blackboard?
Your username for Blackboard is your myHancock portal username you received when you applied at AHC. Your password is now as follows:
- First letter of first name
- First letter of last name
- Last five numbers of Social Security Number (i.e. ab12345) The letters must be lower case and there are no spaces.

If you have any problems with Blackboard, please click on the student help links via the Blackboard login page. For registration issues, please email: admissions_help@hancockcollege.edu.

Required Textbooks:

xxx

Online Activity On The First Week Of Classes:
Just in the same way students could be dropped from a course for not attending the first day of class, the same is true in DL classes. Make sure to log in during the first week of classes, preferably the first day, and to complete the online orientation on of before XXX day/time. The orientation is located in Blackboard via a course menu link [see attached image].

Critical Dates For This Class (this info is available via your course roster):
- Start Date: 16-JUN-2014
- Last Date to drop with a refund: 19-JUN-2014
- Last Date to drop without a "W": 19-JUN-2014
- Last date to choose Pass/No Pass: 30-JUN-2014
- Last Date to drop with a "W": 25-JUL-2014
- Last day of instruction: 07-AUG-2014
- End Date: 07-AUG-2014

Projected Due Dates For Homework/Unit Exams (example):
NOTE: Unless otherwise noted, all homework and unit exams are due on or before 11:59pm on the day noted for each chapter.
- Chapter One - Sunday, June 22, 2014
- Chapter Two - Sunday, June 29, 2014
- Chapter Three - Sunday, July 6, 2014
- Chapter Four - Sunday, July 13, 2014
- Chapter Five - Sunday, July 20, 2014
- Chapter Six - Sunday, July 27, 2014
- Chapter Seven - Sunday, August 3, 2014
- Final Exam - Thursday, August 7, 2014

For more information on the course, feel free to open the attached course syllabus and/or complete the online orientation for this course.

Looking forward to teaching this class,
John W. Doe