Use community-based strategies to enrich online courses

Adding community-based learning to an online course can motivate students and reduce feelings of isolation. Students can have more “hands on” opportunities to apply what they are learning, such as helping organize a community event or getting involved with a non-profit, and to learn from community members and peers.

Begin with a “module zero”

The first online session should help students who have never taken online classes to get comfortable with the basics. Early describes this best practice as “a starting point on the home page, to help my students familiarize themselves with the class, me, the syllabus, quizzes, expectations and what they’re about to embark on.”

Plan ahead, keep it small and plan for contingencies

Give yourself three to four months’ lead time to plan this type of course, which works best with 30 students or fewer. Work your network to find partner organizations that can benefit from student service.

Provide students with options

Allow students to choose from a variety of projects with options that can be completed individually, with a partner or in groups. This helps students design a schedule that works for them and can mitigate barriers for students whose work, health and/or life situations might otherwise prevent them from participating.

Ensure good communication

Regular communication with students and community partners is vital to ensure there is reciprocity and to work through unexpected situations. Early builds in mid-quarter progress reports and schedules student conferences as needed. Keep open lines of communication with community partners as well, and schedule check-in phone calls or meetings regularly.

Consider Community of Inquiry (COI) dimensions when designing a class

Community of Inquiry highlights three elements that are critical to successful online learning environments: cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence. Learn more about COI at tiny.cc/COI.

Read more about how Jody Early manages online classes such as Women’s Global Health and Human Rights in Engaging online students with their communities, part of the Innovators Among Us series at uw.edu/trends/innovators.