

**Getting Straight A's:
Effective Mentoring in
Distance Learning Programs**

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The Distance Learning Experience

Distance education classes, whether in corporate training or higher education, have alarmingly high attrition rates. The problem is widespread and costly for organizations and institutions that have invested heavily in distance learning strategies in the hopes of serving larger audiences with fewer resources. Part of the problem lies in the allure of online learning itself: the opportunity to learn anytime, anywhere, putting the control of the learning experience in the hands of the students. More and more course content is available to students in a completely asynchronous format that they can access at their own pace and schedule. While this format is attractive to students and faculty alike, it typically leads to low completion rates and low student satisfaction. While it appeals to the students' desire for convenience, it does not satisfy their various learning styles or need for interaction.

Designers of distance learning programs must consider the profile of the non-traditional student as they create online courses. Individuals taking distance learning courses are typically working professionals with job and family demands. They have more life experience to bring to their classes and want to immediately apply the knowledge they gain. They are typically not as patient (or enamored) with technology as 18-25 year olds. They can also think on multiple levels and bring a healthy skepticism for theory that is disconnected from real world evidence.

Considering these characteristics, it follows that adult learners in distance education courses respond better to structure than to the self-paced model. They want to discuss ideas and share experiences with a learning group rather than process information in isolation. They want reflective, open-ended assignments rather than tests and quizzes. They want knowledgeable faculty who know the real-world application of the course content rather than just theory. Learning activities need to engage them at the same conceptual and practical levels at which they operate everyday. They want technology that is transparent, not the latest bells and whistles. What keeps adult learners engaged in distance education is a learning experience where they are guided, not taught. In a word, they need to be *mentored*.

Role of the Facilitator-Mentor

Currently faculty roles in distance learning courses fall into one of two categories: the traditional instructor who dispenses information and responds to assignments, or the mentor who provides support and motivation for students as they make their way through course material. Each of these roles has its limitations. The traditional instructor provides too little interaction with students one-on-one, and the mentor provides too little instruction. The successful role lies in between these two: the facilitator-mentor.

Facilitator-mentors are responsible for delivering a *transformative* learning experience for each student in a learning group. Ideally, they bring academic, practitioner, and customer service perspectives to the role. Facilitator-mentors guide students' thinking process as they negotiate course assignments, always challenging them to think on multiple levels. They purposefully manage all group and individual communication to encourage and challenge new approaches to the course material and interaction among peers. Facilitator-mentors maintain one-on-one contact with each student to offer advice or motivation, as well as encouraging peer mentoring. They represent the outcome the students want to achieve: the reflective practitioner.

For an organization or institution, the keys to ensuring the successful fulfillment of the facilitator-mentor role are structure and training. We have identified five critical components of this role:

1. **Advisement:** Mentoring begins during the advisement period when students are seeking not only information but also comfort. During advising the mentor-facilitator is establishing a relationship with the student, discovering his or her unique needs, building trust, and managing expectations. As Laurent Daloz has aptly stated, "Knowing what is important to our students as individuals, we can more readily help them find connections between the lives they live and the subjects we teach" (111). The facilitator-mentor should make contact with each student before the course begins, or during the first week, and establish a relationship of trust and credibility from the outset.
2. **Accountability:** The facilitator-mentor must be held accountable for more than dispensing grades. She should also be accountable for the students' learning experience in all aspects of the course. In a distance learning course this includes monitoring all group communications (chat sessions and discussion forums), communicating with each student weekly, responding constructively to all student postings, and facilitating group activities. Even though discussion is built into the course design, facilitator-mentors monitor group discussions, both synchronous and asynchronous, to constantly encourage critical and practical thinking. Likewise, students are evaluated on group participation, quality of online communications, and critical thinking.
3. **Alignment:** The role of the facilitator-mentor must be aligned with goals of the course. These goals will vary depending on the nature of the course, so the facilitator-mentor role must remain flexible to adapt to the needs of the students. For example, theoretical/historical courses require different thought processes than skills-based courses. Not only are these courses different in design from one another, but also in the ways that students interact with their facilitator-mentor and peers.
4. **Application:** Students in a distance learning course are predominately working professionals who have an immediate need for the knowledge and skills they are acquiring. They demand that courses are designed and instructed toward this end. Effective facilitator-mentors have practical experience in the subject they are instructing and bring those practical experiences into their discussions with students. They are also adept at pulling out of students their own experiences in order to evaluate them in light of research and others' perspectives.

5. **Affiliation:** Distance education courses must bridge the social gap created by the absence of the face-to-face classroom experience. The primary reasons students drop out of self-paced courses are a lack of interaction others and lack of motivation. The facilitator-mentor must feel responsible for establishing and maintaining relationships with and among the students in a virtual learning group. Students need to feel cared for and that they can talk with the facilitator-mentor about their learning experience as well as the course material.

Getting Straight A's

When properly structured and implemented, the facilitator-mentor model for distance education courses earns more than straight A's—it earns high completion and high student satisfaction rates. The learning group and facilitator mentor provide the much-needed support and structure that distance learning students need in order to manage the demands of rigorous courses, careers, and family lives—all of which are reasons to drop out. This learning community *pushes* the student through requirements of distance learning while the mentor *pulls* them through to the desired outcome. Programs with this model enjoy high student retention and high completion rates. But most of all they truly are the best of both worlds: high quality learning experiences and convenient delivery that surprise and delight students and faculty alike.

References

Daloz, L. A. (1999). *Mentor: Guiding the journey of adult learner* (2nd ed.) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Biographical Sketches

Dr. Gloria Pickar is the Chief Education Officer and Dean of Compass Knowledge Group, a distance education company that partners with institutions of higher education to deliver online degree programs to working professionals. Before joining Compass Knowledge Group Dr. Pickar served as a Dean at Seminole Community College responsible for corporate training and continuing education. She earned her Ed. D. from the University of Florida in 1996. Dr. Pickar has made presentations to state and national professional associations, including the Florida and American Nurses Association and the League for Innovation in Community Colleges and authored two nursing textbooks published by Thomson Learning.

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