

Office Hours: Bringing Them to Where Your Students Are

Introduction

Students lead busy lives; so do instructors. While institutions of higher learning require faculty members to post and keep office hours, students don't always come to our offices; in fact, the frequency of student meetings in our offices may be declining. Times that work for our schedules often don't work for theirs even if we include an open door policy. All of us value the rationale behind office hours, and know that the more we can promote contact with our students, the better the possibility is for student success. The fact is, even our on campus students may need alternatives to coming to our offices. For distance students, office hours may not work at all because of their work lives. Few of us have evening office hours where distance students (or others) can call us since they can't come to where we are. Email works for both student groups, but doesn't have the immediacy that students want. And there is no face-to-face with email. While students may get their questions answered via email, it feels more distant and less connected than meeting in person. Students use their phones, laptops, iPads and other tablets many times a day. Using Skype for office hours is a possible solution to bringing office hours to where the students are.

Procedure

Start a Skype account by going to <http://www.skype.com>. It's free and you can set up an account with a Skype name that reflects that the site is one you'll be using only for student contacts. I use "profkcw" as my Skype name to keep it separate from my personal Skype account. I don't add details to my contact information; students have that in my syllabus, webpage, and within my distance course shells. I prefer to keep things professional. Then, as you are creating your syllabus, add your Skype name to your contact information along with your phone and email information. As you pass out your syllabus, let your students know that you will be available by phone, in your office, or through Skype during office hours. If you teach online, use the email class function to direct students to that portion of your online syllabus. I like to do an intake survey for my distance students to find out their comfort level with online learning, interests, chat time availability, etc. I also ask if they have a Skype address and to share it with me if they do. I email them if I see that they have a Skype account, alerting them that they will receive a Skype invitation shortly. Then, within my Skype account, I send them an invitation to be a contact. When they accept, we can communicate via Skype.

Assessment

I have been using Skype office hours for some time. During my posted office hours, students know they can come to my office, call, or connect via Skype. I do not keep my Skype status as "online" except during office hours unless a student has requested to meet at an appointed time that works for both of us. This reinforces that I'm using Skype for work, and that I won't be constantly available there. There is no cost for them or for me. If I have to be at a conference or out of town, or home with an illness that I don't want to spread to the students, I can still be on Skype. I expected my distance students to use Skype the most. It's actually the on campus students who connect using the instant messaging, video chat or audio chat options that Skype provides. For example, one of my students is an RA in the dorm and Skype allows her to be there in case students need her. Another is a stay-at-home mom who is also working on her degree. Skype allows her to connect with me when she can't come to campus. There are some changes I will make next semester. I do plan to have one hour in the evening for office hours to better accommodate the needs of my distance students, perhaps rotating nights of the week the way I do chat sessions in my course. I will also let students know that we can connect via Google Hangout or Face Time if those are things that work better for them than Skype.

Submitted by:

Karen Cachevki Williams
Director, Bachelor of Applied Science Program
Professor of Human Development and Family Sciences

Department of Family & Consumer Sciences
University of Wyoming
Email: cachevki@uwyo.edu