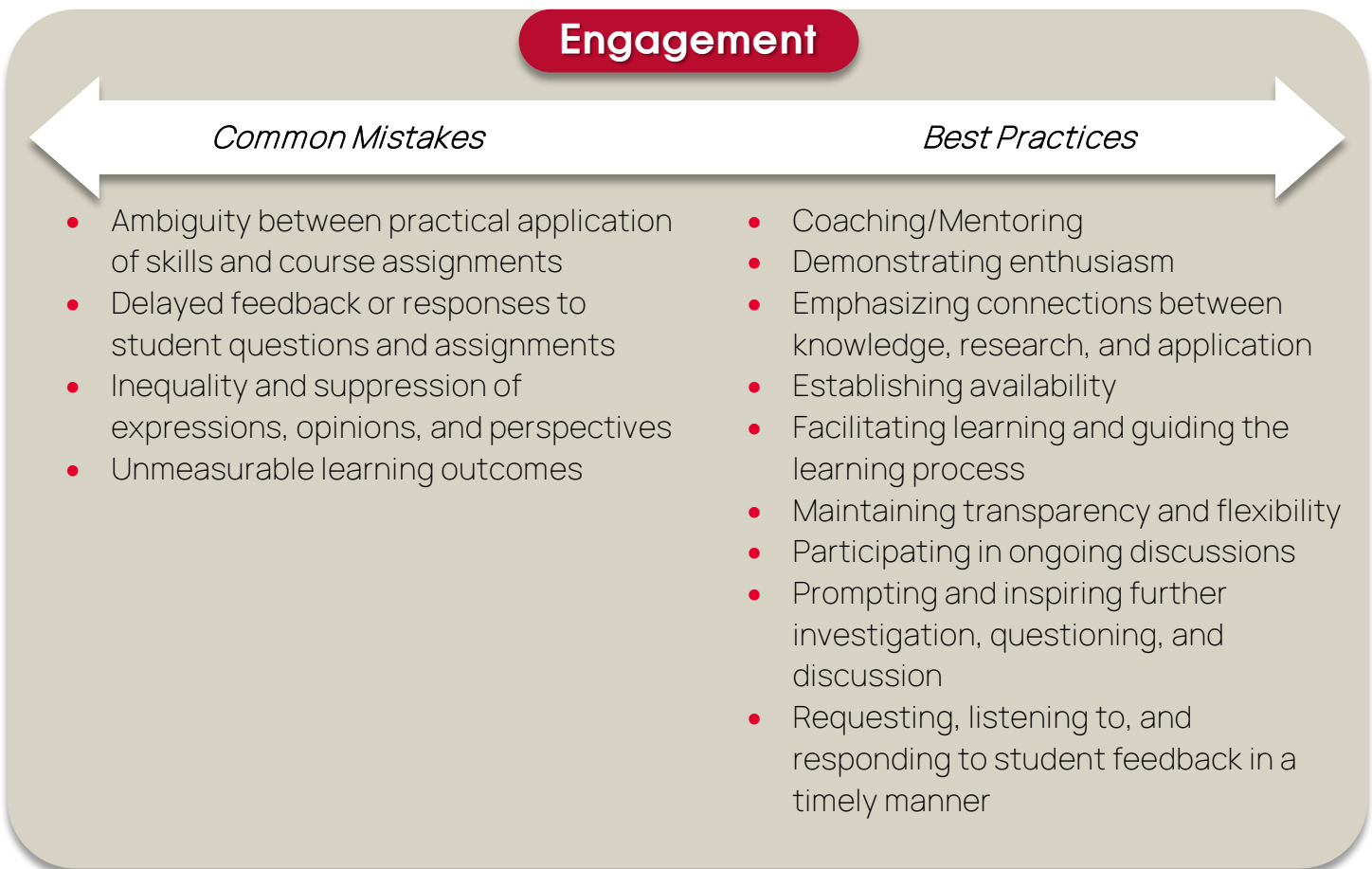# STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN ONLINE COURSES

BUILDING A LEARNING COMMUNITY

Online instructors are most successful when they *plan and support their courses as online learning communities*. Three good ways to do that include:

- Acknowledging and validating students' diverse perspectives and experiences
- Integrating learning activities that encourage interaction
- Maintaining a frequent presence in the course

Engagement

Common Mistakes

- Ambiguity between practical application of skills and course assignments
- Delayed feedback or responses to student questions and assignments
- Inequality and suppression of expressions, opinions, and perspectives
- Unmeasurable learning outcomes

Best Practices

- Coaching/Mentoring
- Demonstrating enthusiasm
- Emphasizing connections between knowledge, research, and application
- Establishing availability
- Facilitating learning and guiding the learning process
- Maintaining transparency and flexibility
- Participating in ongoing discussions
- Prompting and inspiring further investigation, questioning, and discussion
- Requesting, listening to, and responding to student feedback in a timely manner

Student Autonomy

When students do not feel as though they have any autonomy to make decisions about their learning, they do not engage in the process.

How can we improve sense of autonomy?

- Provide low-stakes assignments at the beginning of the course to encourage students and scaffold learning.
- Collaborate with students at the beginning of the semester on creation of the syllabus, major assignments, and course goals.
  - Give students a "substitute" assignment option to replace one they missed or reflects a failing grade.
  - Give students options on discussion forum questions and prompts, as well as assignment paths.

Student Interactivity

Students do not feel connected with their classmates they do not engage with them.

How can we improve student connections?

- Implement pair and group collaborative activities and assignments and regularly check-in to gauge student feedback and responses to them.
  - Use workshop partnerships or accountability pairings for students to share their ideas, work, and drafts of assignments with one another and remain accountable for steps to completing an assignment or project.
- Use guided discussion forums, either as whole-class discussions or small group discussions. Encourage interaction and responses among the students.
- Require students to introduce themselves to their classmates (text, audio, or video) and review their classmates' introductions.

Discussion Quality

When student responses in discussion forums are either not completed timely or they are not in depth (e.g. "I agree," or, "Good post"), they will not engage the topic.

How can we improve discussions?

- Provide variety with discussion questions to allow for greater diversity of thought and responses.
- Allow adequate time for students to make sense of and digest the material, and then reflect on their reactions prior to requiring them to respond.
  - Consider time zones, student responsibilities outside of education, and their work schedules. Allow time between initial responses and responses to classmates.
- Implement deadline and guidelines for responses to discussion questions and prompts to establish expectations early in the semester.
  - Model acceptable responses in discussion forums and provide examples for the students up front. Inspire more extensive responses by using probing questions to help students further elaborate on their points.

Theory & Application

When students do not make the connection between theoretical or research angles and the practical application of knowledge and information, they become detached.

How can we improve the connection between theory and practice?

- Implement regular, low stakes assessments, evaluations, and self-evaluations to gauge student understanding of course content and application, as well as assessment of their own skills.
- Use activities that require practical application of the information. For example, use case studies, scenarios, and student demonstrations.
  - Explain how the skills the students learn from the content is relevant to the course and the field of study.
- Use learning outcomes to drive the content and activities in the class. Learning outcomes should be tied to each assignment to demonstrate purpose.

Instructor Presence

When students do not feel as though the instructor is present, they do not put forth the effort either.

How can we improve sense of presence?

- Be present.
    - Validate students' perspectives. Ask probing questions when students respond and include your own observations and opinions about the topics discussed.
    - Engage in the discussions on a daily basis and respond promptly to any questions, concerns, or observations made by the students. Do not wait until the end of the module to respond to posts in discussion forums.
- Be clear and concise in course expectations in the syllabus. Explain your role and responsibilities as the instructor, and the students' roles and responsibilities.
    - Provide timely and constructive feedback. Include comments and suggestions for improvement and further development.
- Include a faculty introduction video in the welcome module.
    - Introduce yourself and include something about your approach and philosophy of learning, expectations for the class, and personalize it to help the students see you as a person behind the screen.