

The New Online Professor

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This case depicts the real life adventures of a professor, Dante Alexander, who has been assigned to teach an online management class. He has never taught online before but is an avid learner; however, he is at a bit of a confusing and troublesome juncture point. His courses started off well enough, it seemed, with just a few glitches with getting students acclimated to being in an online course and accommodating some students with connection problems. After the first exam, more troublesome problems surfaced. One was a matter of possible collaboration on exams and the other involved the legality of "voting a member" out of a team project. He wondered how other professors handled such issues.

INTRODUCTION

"Sued?!?! Why in the world would anyone want to sue me," Dante Alexander, PhD, said as he finished reading a student's email. Over his fourteen years of teaching, he had never experienced issues such as the ones he had faced this semester. Before reaching for the phone to call the Legal Division at Skyy State University (SSU), he sighed as he thought back over all that had happened during the semester.

PROFESSOR DANTE ALEXANDER

Dante Alexander, professor of management, has been at Skyy State University (SSU) for fourteen years. He has taught mainly principles of management and organizational behavior during this time. Throughout the years, he has taught mainly face-to-face with the exception of some distance learning classes taught in his early years at the university.

Professor Alexander has always been a favorite instructor among students. This preference is reflected in his excellent student evaluations, the fact that his courses are the first to fill, and his many requests for overrides. Students describe his teaching style as motivating, lively, interesting, and invigorating. His lectures were known to be creative and to include unexpected and thought-provoking

exercises. Class attendance was rarely an issue since most students actually enjoyed and looked forward to his classes.

During his tenure, he has always been an avid learner of new technology. When new student delivery systems were announced, he was always one of the first to take classes. His philosophy has been “It is coming, so I might as well be ahead of the curve.”

Over the last several months, talk of offering online classes has increased. In preparation of possibly teaching online, Professor Alexander signed up to take a course during the spring semester offered through the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL). The class was mainly online and the purpose was more centered on pedagogical elements of online teaching and learning. During the first session of summer, he took classes with the Center for Academic Technology Support (CATS) to learn the mechanics of the online world. These classes focused on learning the software and how to build a class in the new student delivery system. At the beginning of the second session of summer classes, the department chair asked Professor Alexander to join her for a meeting. The department chair had been asked by superiors to offer online classes beginning in the fall. The pressure was on because fall semester started in seven weeks. “Dante, would you be willing to teach a session of organizational behavior online in the fall.” the chair asked. Dante replied, “Yes, I will be happy to give it a try. I have been preparing for this by taking classes. I appreciate the opportunity.”

As fall semester approached, Professor Alexander began preparing the syllabus and other materials for the online class. He was not concerned about the technical part of teaching online, but he had to admit delivering the material online rather than face to face did sometimes keep him awake! Lecturing face to face was second nature to him. He really enjoyed sharing information with students and getting immediate feedback and reaction from them. Students enjoyed the creativity with which he presented material that might otherwise be dry and boring. He never hesitated to bring in what some thought of as “unusual” materials to get his point across or to get their attention. In fact, a favorite exercise among students involved the use of color crayons and the drawing of a pig! How would he share the same information and get the same results without being face-to-face with the students? How could he even remotely share the same enthusiasm or be the same effective instructor with just a computer screen and software “teaching” the students? Could he expect any sort of teacher-student relationship that had always inspired him to go outside the box to keep students interested?

THE SEMESTER BEGINS

After many long hours, Professor Alexander had the class ready for fall semester. The first thing he had learned about teaching online was that the preparation was much more involved than teaching in a traditional setting. Sky State University had a policy that required all students to attend the first day of class or the student would be dropped from the course. Professor Alexander required all students to introduce themselves on the discussion board as attendance verification to meet this policy. On the second day of class when he checked the discussion board, only about half of the registered students had done an introduction. What should he do? Turn in the listed students and drop the rest? Maybe the policy did not apply to online classes. Upon further investigation, he found out that the university did not extend the policy to online classes. Well, this did not seem fair to students who may need the class and were hoping to add late after others were dropped for not attending. He decided to give students until the day before drop/add ends to verify attendance. He also sent emails to the class stating this new policy. How long should a student be given to verify attendance before being dropped from a class? Should the university have a policy for online classes that is similar to the policy for traditional classes? This issue would need to be addressed before the next time of teaching an online class.

Another issue that arose during the first week was access to technology. Professor Alexander received a phone call from Mary Beth Sikes, a student enrolled in the online class. Ms. Sikes was very upset and practically sobbing. "Professor Alexander, I have just read the course syllabus and I may have to drop the class. I am a non-traditional student with two small children. The only access I have to a computer is at the local library which closes daily at 5:00 pm," she said. "I will be unable to meet with the team if the meetings are at night. To make matters worse, the town I live in is at least an hour's drive from SSU. I don't know what I should do. Can you help me," she sobbed. Professor Alexander promised that he would work with her if possible. Upon investigation, he discovered that Ms. Sikes was close to completing her degree but with the cost of tuition and books, she could not afford to travel and pay for childcare. Should he make changes to the required evening times for virtual team members, so that she could stay in the course? Professor Alexander wondered why any student without a computer would register for an online class. But then, Ms. Sikes desperate voice reminded him that some students have more challenges than others and that the student body was more diverse than ever.

EXAM TIME

Before the first exam, two students contacted Professor Alexander regarding special accommodations for exams. The two students had accommodation letters from the Student Disability Resource Center (SDRC) stating that they required

“extra time” to complete online exams. According to the syllabus, all exams were expected to be completed within an hour. How long is “extra time”? When Professor Alexander contacted the SDRC, he was told that the students could have “up to twice the normal time” allowed for other students. Two hours seemed rather extreme to him. The exam would be online, and he had concerns regarding the use of outside resources. After much debate, he decided to set the due time at seventy-five minutes. He hoped that this would be ample time and considered it to be a reasonable accommodation. Professor Alexander made a note to do some research on how long other professors allowed for online exams.

Everything seemed to be going relatively smoothly until the week of the first exam. First, his university’s computer system went down which, in turn, created delays, confusion, and even lost student work. After spending time correcting the issues caused by the down time, he sat back with a cup of coffee to relax when his phone rang. It was a student from his online class who did not want to give his identity. The mystery caller informed Professor Alexander that he was in the library over the weekend working on the exam when he noticed a group of three students huddled around a single computer. The students were laughing and hurriedly flipping through a textbook that looked like the textbook for the course. He stated that as he finished the exam he walked over to the three students’ area and glanced at what they were doing. He realized that they were working on the same exam that he had just completed. Furthermore, he said that this was cheating because in the course syllabus it was clearly stated that students were not allowed to collaborate on exams. Professor Alexander assured the mystery student that he would look into the matter. How would he be able to identify the students in question? How does one prevent collaboration during an online exam? Were other students doing the same? This was not going to be an easy fix.

THE TROUBLE WITH TEAMS

When Professor Alexander designed the online class, he decided that he would include a team assignment as he did in face-to-face courses. The virtual teams would have to work together in cyberspace to plan, develop, and deliver an online presentation. This would be a semester long assignment with portions due throughout the semester. He knew that the teams would have some challenges, but he felt that it would give the students some practice in conflict management and in decision making.

Before the first team portion was due for review, Sue Ellen Rogers appeared at the door during Professor Alexander’s office hours and wanted to talk. “Professor Alexander may I speak to you regarding a group member,” she asked. She was a student in the online class and visibly upset. “I just received a disturbing email from a team member. We have had some issues with Johnny Brown. He has not

been doing his team assignments nor has he attended any of our virtual meetings. We have tried to talk with Johnny but he has been unresponsive,” she stated between sobs. “Last night we, as a team, decided that we would ‘vote him off of the team’ since in the course syllabus you stated that this would be allowed within the teams,” she said. As the slack team member learned of this, he contacted all of his fellow team members and threatened to sue them, the professor, and the university if they followed through on the vote. She continued to state that the team member said that legally a student could not be “thrown off” of a team. This issue had not been anticipated by Professor Alexander. He assured her that he would address the situation immediately and get back to her. After she left the office, Professor Alexander checked his inbox for an email from Johnny Brown. Sure enough, an email was there that supported all that Ms. Rogers had said. Is it illegal for a student to be voted off of a team? As he picked up the phone to call the Skyy State University attorney, he sighed aloud. He wondered how other professors handled such issues.