

## Create an Online Buddy System to Encourage Peer-to-Peer Support

Having students collaborate or team up with other students can create a support system that is helpful to all students and can be critical for students who need additional support, particularly in an online environment (Roper, 2007). Oftentimes instructors will create these buddy systems during the first few weeks of a course (Cost, 2012) and continue them throughout the course if the students are finding them beneficial.

Below is a suggested process for setting up a buddy system. Once you have established teams, look for ways you can increase their visibility. For example, if a student asks you a question, ask if they reached out to their team first or ask them to post your reply in the Q and A forum and send the clarification to their team or ask teams to report attendance for their team during live sessions.

**Step 1: Create the buddy teams.** Two strategies for creating buddy teams are outlined below. Three is an effective number for team size because it is small enough to organize communications easily, while at the same time provides flexibility in the event a team member drops the class, or other issues arise.

- **Random groups.** You may create random groups of students by organizing students alphabetically or counting off by three down the course roster.
- **Strategic groups.** You may want to create strategic groups based on similarities or differences that might be relevant to the course or for convenience. For example, it might be helpful to group students who have similar schedules or majors. If there is enough variance, you can group students who have more online learning experience with those who have less. You may also want to form groups based on demographic differences. You can gather information at the beginning of the course by asking students to fill in a survey that includes their major, career interests and experience, communication preferences, experience with online learning, digital skills, demographics, and scheduling availability. If you gather this information using SurveyMonkey or Qualtrics, you can download it into a spreadsheet to make it easy to sort and utilize.

**Step 2: Post the buddy system process.** Create a document that lists the groups of students who will be buddies. Post the group listing on the announcements page or send an email with the following instructions:

*I have placed you into buddy groups or teams to ensure you have the opportunity to get to know some of your peers and have a ready support system. I know students often feel more comfortable asking other students questions or sharing concerns. With these teams, you will always have someone you can call on. These small groups of peers can be helpful if you are uncertain about something, you need some help, you are struggling, or you need some words of encouragement. As a team, your job is to help one another succeed in this course.*

*To set up your team, please follow these steps:*

1. *Using the contact information on the team sheet, contact one another and set up a time to meet, either virtually or in person. Please let me know if you have any problem with contacting a team member.*
2. *At that meeting, work together to agree on a time and method for having a weekly check-in with one another for the first four weeks. You may want to continue meeting after the initial four weeks; that will be for your group to decide. If the group agrees to continue meeting, please work to be available for one another for the remainder of the course.*
3. *Your team will also need to decide the best way to communicate (e.g., chat, phone, text) outside of the weekly check-ins in the event that one of you needs help or has a question.*
4. *Please elect one person in your group to send an email to me with your buddy system process by Wednesday at 7:00 PM and notify me if any issues arise with one of your buddies (e.g., your schedules do not align, your buddy is unresponsive, etc.). I will work with the group or individuals to resolve any issues that might arise*

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5. *Note: If a question arises during this process that you are not able to answer, please post it to the Open Discussions and Questions Forum (found on the course entry page) so other students, who likely have the same question, will see it as well as my response.*

#### Sources

- Cost, P. (2012). Building relationships in online classes by incorporating letter writing, buddy systems, and teaching and utilizing proper netiquette. *National Social Science Journal*, 38(2), 16–19.
- Roper, A. R. (2007). How students develop online learning skills. *EDUCAUSE Quarterly*, 30(1), 62–65.