

## Role Ambiguity in Online Courses: An Analysis of Student and Instructor Expectations

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### OVERVIEW

With the development of new technologies, online courses have become a trend in higher education. A lot of community colleges have begun to offer online classes as part of their distance learning but what are the institutional expectations regarding the responsibilities and roles of instructors and students in the online setting? This Research Review summarizes a study done by the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Teachers College, Columbia University. In their study, "[Role Ambiguity in Online Courses: An Analysis of Student and Instructor Expectations](#)", Bork and Rucks-Ahidiana (2013) explore data from a qualitative investigation of online courses. They find that students and instructors have misaligned expectations toward each other's behaviors and actions. Such role ambiguity can cause confusion, frustration, and tension for online instruction and learning, as both students and instructors meet challenges understanding how their online roles differ from the traditional roles in face-to-face courses.

### RESULTS

- **Expectations about students**
  - *Technological preparedness skills.* Instructors think students lack certain technological skills for online classes, but students think they are the "technology generation" and they already have good computer skills.
  - *Learning management.* Since there is no mandated "seat time" for online courses, both instructors and students agree that time management is crucial. However, there are misaligned expectations regarding responsibility and motivation.
  - *Help-seeking behavior.* Instructors and students disagreed on expectations regarding help-seeking behavior in online classes. Students do not always seek help when the instructors think they should, and online settings have made help-seeking behaviors less convenient.
- **Expectations about instructors**
  - *Communication habits.* Students complain that it often takes too long for the instructors to respond to emails, e.g., 48 hours. They expect instructors to create very clear guidelines and reply almost immediately to email questions; however, instructors expect students to realize that responses may not be as quick as they assume.
  - *Substantive feedback.* Students expect instructors to give written feedback rather than merely assigning a grade; however, instructors expect students to solicit more information if they do not understand the assigned grade.
  - *Online presence and pedagogy.* Students expect instructors to have a strong and frequent presence to guide them through the online learning by creating more engaging course materials, such as multimedia resources. However, instructors have a diversity of philosophies and preparation for online presence and pedagogy.

### DISCUSSION

This research is based on qualitative data collected from two community colleges in Virginia. The researchers conducted 38 interviews with online instructors and 47 interviews with students. The study concludes that community colleges should implement institutional-level support for online teaching and learning, such as student readiness and faculty development activities. This has been an important topic for community colleges, as most of them are adjusting from a traditional face-to-face setting to an online environment. Online interaction between instructors and students are mediated by computer technologies. This fact will make communication harder, due to lack of immediacy, gesture, and tone of voice. A comprehensive support department that connects faculty, administration, and services should be established to help both the instructors and students with online teaching and learning. More studies should also be done to examine the differences between online and traditional face-to-face courses.