

Managing Student Email: A Family Economist's Perspective

Family economists, like instructors in all other disciplines, are finding it difficult to keep pace with the ever-increasing volume of email that is finding its way into their inboxes. Sorting out (and answering) student email is consuming more and more of an instructor's time. Explicit instructions in the course syllabus that reflect a commitment to not becoming a 24/7 instructor, and the use of course management software, such as WebCT, can help instructors more efficiently manage their own time as well as student communications.

Jan D. Andersen, California State University, Sacramento¹

About two years ago I decided that I could no longer keep up with the "ideal" expectation that seems to permeate the academic world today: kind, caring, student-centered teachers (those teacher-of-the-year-type teachers) are always accessible. And why not? Computer technology allows students to contact us any time of the day, any day of the year.

Before my accessibility epiphany, I thought it would be an easy task to answer all student email within a few hours after receiving it: "I was a Family Economist, an expert in resource management, including time management (at least that is what I had been telling my students), and it was time to practice what I was preaching!" Those first few semesters after leaving graduate school were a management fiasco. I was checking my inbox and composing email replies many times throughout the day, in the evening, and on weekends. Once, because I was having difficulty sleeping, I even replied to a student at 2:00 a.m. on a Saturday morning. In my attempt to always be accessible to my students I was becoming a 24/7 instructor, an ultimately impossible transformation. What I hadn't factored into my thought processes were my personal needs, other professional responsibilities, and all of the non-student messages that I was receiving.

My failure as a 24/7 instructor forced me to find a better way to handle student email, and to really employ my resource management skills. In the process three crucial principles emerged: (1) student email must be separated from other email, (2) specific email policies and procedures must be established and disseminated to students, and (3) instructors must maintain and follow their own policies.

Is it Ham or is it Spam?

Spam is no longer just that "mystery" ham product that I loved as a kid. Spam is also those unwanted emails (commercial, professional, and social) that clog our inboxes. In my effort to promptly respond to students, I discovered that I was expending valuable time trying to distinguish student messages from all of the other messages. Invariably I would miss student emails thinking they were something else, or I would get distracted reading, answering, and deleting non-student emails, thus delaying my responses to students. It is clear now that when I only want to respond to students, all non-student email is spam.

I decided that what I needed was a separate email environment that only my students could access. And, ideally, an environment that would not only keep out spam, but also let me further separate student emails by course. The solution I found was to use the email function of WebCT², a web-based, commercial course management system that the university had already purchased and made available to all instructors. With the help of the on-campus WebCT personnel, I set up a separate WebCT component for each of my courses. Because WebCT is a password-protected system that allows only the instructor, instructor-designated guests, and students currently enrolled in the course accessibility³, my problem with separating student email from spam was solved. Additionally, since WebCT does not allow students from one course to email to another course, the secondary problem of separating student email by course was also solved. And, lest I sound too teacher-centered, WebCT also solved the students' similar problems with separating course emails from spam.

What's in the Syllabus?

It's not totally accurate to say that WebCT solved all of the student-email problems, at least not at first. Not only did I want to separate spam, but I also wanted to cut down on the volume of course-related emails. Because students usually send emails to ask for clarification, I looked to my own explanations as a primary source

of confusion. In the process I reviewed and revised all of my course syllabi and assignment instructions; I tried to anticipate potential areas of misunderstanding based on past questions and student performance.

Additionally, I developed a specific set of policies that reasonably balance the instructor's and students' needs. It is very important that students are informed on the first day, and throughout the semester, of the email policies. Therefore, they have to be stated in the syllabus, discussed the first week of classes, and periodically reemphasized. Following are the five email policies that I use and recommend:

- **Consult syllabus and assignment instructions before sending email.** I tell my students that although I try never to verbally contradict myself, occasionally I might, or so it may appear to them. I declare, therefore, that what's written in the syllabus and assignment instructions "is the law." And I always direct them to look there first.
- **Emails sent after 5:00 p.m. will not be read until the following workday.** There is no arguing that computer technology has changed the way we communicate. But I think it has also created more stress and made us less patient. In my quest to become the 24/7 instructor I realized that 24/7 communication was stressing me and teaching some of my students that it was all right to procrastinate to the very last minute because the instructor would help bail them out. The few, true, student emergencies I have encountered have always been able to be successfully resolved after 8:00 a.m. the following workday. Consequently, I have a non-professional life into which students are no longer invited.
- **Depending upon the volume of mail, the instructor may take up to two or three working days to reply.** This policy not only provides for student patience and reduces the instructor's urgency-related stress, but also allows the instructor to see if several students are having the same problem. If so, one well-stated response can be sent to all students in the course (see the next policy) or openly discussed at the next class meeting.
- **Not every email will be answered individually.** Of all the policies I've implemented, this is the one which is most difficult for me to follow. The "good" teacher in me says that every student question deserves a response. And I think that is a correct philosophy. However, not every email needs an individualized reply if several have asked the same question. Chances are that other students are similarly confused, but haven't asked. In these situations I carefully craft a response addressed to the entire class and use WebCT to simultaneously send out the same message to all students. (I suppose that these class mailings could be thought of as course-related "spam," except that spam is unwanted email and I know that students want information that will help them succeed, whether they realize it or not.)
- **Students must check WebCT several times per week.** This policy is designed to help students get in the habit of using WebCT as the primary out-of-class communication tool. Not only do I use it to answer student email, but I also use WebCT to send out general announcements and to post assignment instructions and supplementary material. On the first day of class I emphasize that students will miss vital information if they don't regularly check WebCT. Minimally, I recommend that they check WebCT at least a few hours before attending each class session. I let them know that although I try to plan my emergencies a few days in advance, there have been times when I've used WebCT to notify students at the last minute that class was cancelled; those who didn't check WebCT before coming to class made an unnecessary journey. Since implementing this policy, not only has the number of emails declined, but noticeably fewer students inquire if they "missed something important" because major announcements are posted in WebCT.

Did I Mean That?

Policies that are not enforced have little effect. Students, like children, will test the consequences of not following them. At first I had to constantly remind myself that I couldn't expect my students to follow the policies if I didn't. However, unlike our students who have to learn anew each semester the policies of different instructors, I've had two years to practice and to internalize. Consequently, I make virtually no exceptions to the email policies.

Student communication now is much easier to handle. I no longer feel guilty for being less accessible, and thoughts and aspirations of becoming a 24/7 instructor no longer haunt me. Instead, WebCT, which is accessible by students any time of the day, has provided an effective mechanism for out-of-the-classroom, teacher-student communication.

Endnotes

¹ Assistant Professor, Family and Consumer Sciences Department, 6000 J Street, Sacramento, CA 95819-6053; (916) 278-6414; jan.andersen@csus.edu

² WebCT is one of several course management systems available. Compared to the other software packages, I make no endorsement or warranty that WebCT is more or less capable or suitable for the purposes I discuss.

³ WebCT mail is basically a closed system. Although it is possible to have WebCT mail forwarded to an account outside of WebCT, one cannot send mail to WebCT from outside of WebCT. That is, one has to be logged into a specific course within WebCT in order to send and reply to WebCT mail only for that specific course.