

# Online Campus Learning Team Handbook

A Resource from your Learning Team Toolkit



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# Online Campus Learning Team Handbook

## ***LEARNING TEAMS AND UNIVERSITY OF PHOENIX***

Since the University's founding more than a quarter-century ago, Learning Teams have been an essential element of our Teaching/Learning Model. University of Phoenix Founder, Dr. John Sperling, recognized the value of teams in both academia and the workplace long before these benefits became widely known and accepted. Dr. Sperling believed—and subsequent research has confirmed—that collaborative learning groups serve several essential functions that are especially beneficial to working adult learners. As a result, the University's faculty continues to mandate the use of Learning Teams across the curriculum and in every academic program.

In the online learning environment, Learning Teams face the additional challenges of asynchronous work times, time zone differences, and the general inability to meet face-to-face. This document identifies the Learning Team policies and procedures that are specific to the Online Campus.

## ***PURPOSES***

Learning Teams provide the following benefits:

- Create collaborative learning environments in which working adults can share the practical knowledge that comes from life and work experiences.
- Allow students to broaden and deepen the understanding of concepts explored in the main classroom newsgroup.
- Serve as laboratories through which students develop into effective leaders and members of workplace teams.
- Improve the quality of group projects and assignments.

- Serve as vehicles for reflection, by which adult students make sense of and apply new knowledge.
- Provide a sense of community and support that is invaluable in helping working adults cope with the challenge of balancing school with other life demands.

## ***DESCRIPTION OF LEARNING TEAMS***

Learning Teams are small, intact groups of students formed at the beginning of each course from the larger cohort. Teams meet in designated Learning Team newsgroups to establish relationships and complete group assignments and projects.

## ***TEAM SIZE***

Learning Teams generally have three to six members. Research suggests that Learning Teams work best when they have four or five members. Larger teams become unwieldy and difficult to coordinate while smaller teams usually lack the resources to do a thorough job.

## ***MEMBERSHIP REQUIREMENTS***

University of Phoenix students attending courses in Online Campus programs are required to be members of Learning Teams. No “single-member” teams are permitted.

In the event that a student’s team situation is compromised by attrition (i.e., other students withdraw from the class), the facilitator can and should place the student into another existing Learning Team. Similarly, a facilitator may take appropriate action to balance the size of existing teams. For example, if all parties are agreeable, the faculty member may move one member from a team of five to a team of two.

In circumstances in which a team member is evicted from his/her learning team due to performance issues and/or participation (see Dealing with Team Conflict below), the facilitator must require the student to petition for membership to another team. Failure to join a team will result in the student being prevented from submitting assignments and earning grades for Learning Team participation for the duration of the class. In such a circumstance, the student should be encouraged to discuss his/her options with an Academic Counselor.

## ***APPROPRIATE TEAM MEETING LOCATIONS***

Online Learning Teams are able to and encouraged to meet asynchronously in the online classroom environment, as this method of accomplishing team assignments may often be the most conducive to the team’s performance and the achievement of its objectives. With faculty member approval, Learning Teams may also take advantage of other, real-time meeting options, such as teleconferencing or instant messaging, and as long as the following caveats are taken into account:

1. If an instant messaging service is used, the team should choose one that is the product of a reputable Internet service provider and has been in service for a sufficient period of time to maximize the likelihood of its compatibility and functionality under a variety of conditions. Among the most common and serviceable of these include:
  - AOL® Instant Messenger™ © 2002 America Online, Inc. All rights reserved
  - Yahoo! Messenger Copyright © 2004 Yahoo! Inc. All rights reserved.

- MSN Messenger © 2004 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.
  - ICQ Instant Messenger Copyright ©1998-2004 ICQ Inc. All Rights Reserved.
2. Even the most reliable of instant messaging programs, such as those listed above, may seriously compromise the configuration or security of computer systems. Because of this, the Online Campus does not sanction their use nor does the Technical Support staff troubleshoot or provide assistance for their use.
  3. Receiving academic credit for participation and work products while using instant messaging media is contingent upon the observance of specific requirements:
    - The use of instant messaging is strictly voluntary. Learning Team members may not be penalized for not meeting at specified times, since one of the characteristics of the Online model is the convenience and flexibility of meeting asynchronously. Thus, instant messaging may only be considered as an option if it is unanimously agreed upon by the team's membership.
    - Events that occur using this medium are only "official" if transcripts or minutes of such meetings are posted in the appropriate Learning Team newsgroup. Meeting times, attendance, topics of discussion, and action items for each participant must be included in minutes or transcripts. The name of each participating team member must be clearly identified in the transcript.
    - Mishaps resulting from the use of this technology will not excuse the late submission of assignments or insufficient participation.
  4. Receiving academic credit for participation and work products while teleconferencing is contingent upon the observance of specific requirements:
    - The use of teleconferencing is strictly voluntary. Learning Team members may not be penalized for not participating at specified times, since one of the characteristics of the Online model is the convenience and flexibility of meeting asynchronously. Thus, teleconferencing may only be considered if it is unanimously agreed upon by the team's membership as an option.
    - Events that occur using this medium are only "official" if summary minutes of such calls are posted in the appropriate Learning Team newsgroup.
    - Mishaps resulting from the use of teleconferencing will not excuse the late submission of assignments or insufficient participation.

While virtual and teleconference meetings may be legitimate means of communication for Learning Team activities, the Online Campus encourages students to use the Learning Team newsgroups in the asynchronous Online Learning Team newsgroup environment. They offer the benefits of flexibility, archiving, and reduced likelihood of computer virus infection.

## ***TEAM FORMATION***

During the first week of each Online course, facilitators will either assign students to Learning teams or provide students sufficient time (usually not more than three or four days) to form Learning Teams. Considerations for Learning Team formation may be based on convenience factors, such as geographic proximity and time zones, or other factors, such as diversity of skills and knowledge that might strengthen the team. Once a Learning Team is established, students are encouraged to exchange contact information in their

assigned newsgroup and determine, perhaps through the use of a team charter or similar organizational plan, how they will meet the team's goals and responsibilities.

In the customary scheduling format for Online classes, students typically begin a new class one week after completing the previous course. Therefore, it is common for class "cohorts" of students to continue together through a succession of classes. Having become comfortable with one another, these students may desire to carry over the same Learning Team configurations in subsequent courses. Additionally, individuals sometimes choose certain task roles in their Learning Teams that represent areas of personal strength and then go on to repeat those roles in ensuing courses.

In order to enhance the quality of learning that can come from Learning Teams, the Online Campus strongly encourages teams to periodically disband and form new teams with other class members in order to experience other points of view, to learn to work effectively in a variety of team situations, and to develop different skills by taking on new roles. To encourage these decisions, it is within the purview of the facilitator to assign students to Learning Teams if he or she wishes to do so.

## ***TEAM CHARTER***

Chartering is the procedure by which a team meets at the beginning of its process (in this case, a University of Phoenix Online course) to describe its mission or task, to set its goals, to secure commitment by members to the achievement of those goals, to plan, and to allocate its resources. The Online Campus does not require members of Learning Teams to complete a Learning Team charter unless the chartering process is part of the course curriculum or is required by the instructor. Developing and implementing a team charter is a valuable skill, and greatly increases the likelihood that a team will reach its objectives in an effective and an efficient manner. The charter also helps team members identify potential conflicts and decide how to resolve conflicts should they arise. One benefit of re-forming teams regularly (i.e., disbanding cohorts) is that students will avoid the tendency for the chartering process to become rote or perfunctory. A Learning Team Charter template is available in the Learning Team Toolkit under the Toolkit Essentials menu.

## ***FACULTY ROLE***

Faculty members play critical roles in enhancing the learning that results from the Learning Team process. Faculty responsibilities include:

- Publishing in the syllabus the method by which Learning Teams are formed and guiding students in this process.
- Reviewing Learning Team Charters, if required in the course curriculum or by the instructor, and coaching Learning Teams on the improvement of their team process.
- Outlining team task and process expectations in the course syllabus and during the course.
- Evaluating team assignments and projects, including the relative contribution of individual team members.
- Coaching teams in dealing with internal conflict.
- Periodically (and briefly) allowing students to reflect on the team process and coaching for team improvement as indicated.



## ***STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES***

Participation in Learning Teams is an essential element of a University of Phoenix education. As members of Learning Teams, Online students have numerous opportunities to plan and execute various aspects of group assignments. Contributions of individual members are often combined, through collaborative processes, into cohesive work products that demonstrate team mastery of learning objectives. Just as with personal assignments, the individual contributions of team members toward team projects must represent original work. Similarly, the integrated work of the team submitted for team assignments must represent original work. External material and references must be appropriately cited, in accordance with the Code of Student Responsibility and Standards of Student Behavior found in the *University Catalog*.

## ***GRADING***

Learning Team assignments and processes should generally comprise no more than one third of the total grade for a course. The faculty member is encouraged to grade not only the assignment or project, but also to assess the degree to which each team member contributed to the outcome, based on participation and contributing posts in the Learning Team newsgroup or transcript/minutes posted to the Learning Team newsgroup generated from other meeting options. This helps to mitigate conflicts caused by disparity in the levels of team member participation and effort. In addition, instructors may choose to have Learning Team members each complete a Learning Team Evaluation form that evaluates each team member's contributions as well as the overall performance of the team. A Learning Team Evaluation form template is available in the Learning Team Toolkit under the Toolkit Essentials menu. The Learning Team Evaluation form provides the instructor with qualitative and quantitative information about each member of a Learning Team and can serve as constructive feedback to each member of a team about his/her performance in the Learning Team.

## ***DEALING WITH TEAM CONFLICT***

Helping students learn to manage interpersonal conflict and to resolve disputes is a primary objective of the Learning Team process. Learning Teams are intended to serve as laboratories in which students develop the skills necessary to serve as leaders and managers of workplace teams. Conflicts should be dealt with in the following manner:

1. Learning Teams should manage conflicts and resolve disputes within the context of the team itself, just as teams would be expected to do in the workplace. Learning Team members should consider addressing the following questions in the process of resolving conflicts:
  - a) What, specifically, is the conflict?
  - b) Do we have all of the facts/perspectives surrounding this conflict?
  - c) What fair and reasonable options are available to allow all parties involved to resolve this conflict?
  - d) What are the potential consequences for all parties involved in the resolution of this conflict? Are these consequences fair and reasonable?
2. If team members are unable to resolve the dispute, they may contact the faculty member for additional coaching and feedback.
3. As a final resort, the faculty member may choose to take an action he or she deems appropriate. In deciding on an appropriate course of action, the faculty member may wish to consult with the Instructional Specialist Team. However, an instructor does not have the authority to remove a student from a Learning Team.



4. In the case of a non-contributing member, the Learning Team may issue a warning expressing their concerns and asking for specific improvements. If improvement in participation or contribution levels to team projects does not occur, the Learning Team may choose to evict the team member. Note that this can be done only for reasons of consistent lack of participation or contribution to team projects.

## ***ONLINE CAMPUS LEARNING TEAM TIPS FOR STUDENTS***

Below is a list of tips and best practices for successful Learning Teams at the Online Campus:

1. Use threading with appropriate subject lines in Learning Team newsgroups.
2. Check into Learning Team newsgroups regularly for updates and announcements regarding Learning Team projects.
3. Post all correspondence and contributions to Learning Team projects in the Learning Team newsgroup. If email is used to communicate with Learning Team members, copy those messages into the Learning Team newsgroup.
4. Establish early deadlines to accommodate any problems or miscommunications that might affect the timing of project completion.
5. Ask questions of your teammates if something is unclear and respond to questions from your teammates within 24 hours.
6. Use respectful and professional language and tone in the Learning Team newsgroups.

## ***TEAM LEARNING***

Through the process of working on teams, students have the opportunity to reflect on the learning that has taken place from their interaction and collaboration with their teammates. The University encourages instructors and students to reflect back on the Learning Team's process. We hope that students will ask themselves (individually and as teams) such questions as these: What have I learned by being a member of this team in this course about being a better team leader or team member at work? What did we do that was particularly effective? What could we have done differently to improve the process/task? By consistently asking these questions, University of Phoenix graduates will demonstrate the ability to work effectively as members and leaders of teams—a core competency employers expect of leaders and managers.