



Student-Instructor Ratio Guidelines for Online Courses

Consistent with Higher Learning Commission and US Department of Education definitions, Saint Louis University requires distance education courses to “support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor, synchronously or asynchronously” (University Policy for Distance Education). Additionally, SLU’s Distance Education Standards 4d and 4e (codified in the University’s Distance Education Policy) require the University to establish and enforce a policy on student-instructor ratios to support effective student learning and to ensure student-student and faculty-student interaction.

While there is not a clear consensus on an optimal number of students in an online class (Taft et al., 2011), the literature provides guidance about appropriate student-instructor ratios for online courses. The appropriate class size for online courses has been debated since the inception of online education (Ko and Rossen, 2010). Some researchers argue smaller class sizes result in better student achievement (McCarthy & Samors, 2009; Rovai, 2002a), while others suggest teaching strategies are more important than class size in determining student achievement, with the caveat that class size for online courses should generally be smaller than for the same course in a face-to-face setting (Ko & Rossen, 2010; Swan, 2002). In general, the literature suggests that online class sizes of between 15-30 students allow for the development of community among the learners and are manageable for instructors who employ an average to above-average level of interactivity (Grandzol & Grandzol, 2010; Orellana, 2006; Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Rovai 2002b). The type of course and the design of the course are the primary factors in determining class size for a specific course, and decisions about optimal online class size cannot be made without consideration of these factors.

An online course typically includes the following characteristics:

- Assigned readings – usually weekly
- Instructor provided notes and/or mini lectures
- Requirements for students to complete multiple discussion postings/virtual interactions per week which are graded (e.g., a substantial initial discussion posting synthesizing or critically reflecting on assigned readings, followed by postings in which students respond to discussion postings from other students)
- Students work on papers or projects throughout the course; the instructor is actively involved in guiding the students’ paper/project development and may periodically review drafts

Online courses that include the typical characteristics noted above and are taught by an *experienced* online instructor, offered in an accelerated format (for instance the course is offered in a compressed 8-week term), offered at the undergraduate or Master’s level, and designed with average level of writing intensity* should have a student-instructor ratio ranging from 20:1 to 25:1.

Factors that may affect the student-instructor ratio, and which may warrant a lower ratio, typically between 15:1 to 20:1, or a slightly higher ratio up to 30:1 include:

- Experience of the instructor teaching in the online environment
 - Instructors new to teaching online may warrant a lower student-instructor ratio.

- Experienced online instructors may be able to effectively manage courses with a higher student-instructor ratio
- Pedagogical approaches used in the online course
 - Courses with a significant amount of instructor-student interaction, student-student interaction, instructor feedback to individual students, and/or application-based instruction may warrant a lower student-instructor ratio.
 - Courses with smaller amounts of instructor-student interaction, student-student interaction, instructor feedback to individual students, and/or recall-based instruction may warrant a higher student-instructor ratio.
- Length of the course
 - Courses offered during a significantly compressed term may warrant a lower student-instructor ratio
 - Courses offered during a traditional term may warrant a higher student-instructor ratio
- Level of the course
 - Introductory-level courses may warrant a higher student-instructor ratio, while more advanced courses may warrant a lower student-instructor ratio.
 - Graduate courses beyond the Master's level or courses that are part of a professional degree program may warrant a different student-instructor ratio.
- Writing intensity* of the course
 - Courses designed with high writing intensity may warrant a lower student-instructor ratio
 - Courses designed with low writing intensity may warrant a slightly higher student-instructor ratio.

** Factors that might affect a course's level of writing intensity include: number, type, length, and frequency of writing assignments; amount and frequency of written feedback expected from the instructor; amount and frequency of revision expected for writing assignments; and other related factors.*

References

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