

Student Refunds for Errors in Online Courses

Question:

Dear WCET Community,

This summer we've experienced two instances of similar student behavior which is new at our University, at least as far as my experience goes. Each student, upon encountering issues in the online courses in which they were enrolled, contacted directly our VP of Student Affairs and President, respectively, requesting full refunds.

The issues each student encountered were legitimate:

1. Student single sign-on to electronic textbook not functioning the first day of class ("global" credentials were immediately supplied by the publisher as a work-around while the problem was addressed);
2. Inconsistencies between the electronic due dates associated with exams and the dates published in the course syllabus.

In each case, the problems were addressed immediately by our "Quality Assurance Checklist" procedure. Also in each case, there were no similar requests by any other students in the courses.

As our administration considers the outcome to these requests, the Office of the Provost has requested information on policy or procedure implemented at other universities related to such requests by distance students. It is my opinion that, while we strive for technical perfection in our distance offerings, issues such as those above will occasionally occur. Any other expectation is unrealistic. Am I wrong? How are your institutions protecting themselves while also striving to ensure quality "products" for online learners?

We currently have in place:

1. An electronic "Getting Started Checklist" (including video tutorials) providing comprehensive, step-by-step instructions for online course preparation auto-populated in every online course site each semester;



2. Our “Quality Assurance Checklist” procedure involving the Department of Distance Learning, instructor, department chair and dean, through which student concerns regarding online courses are documented and remediated in a timely fashion.

We are aware that neither of these students followed standard protocol when reporting their concerns, but this fact is irrelevant now. I believe it is possible that similar requests could become more commonplace in the future.

Opportunities for operational improvements are to be considered by the Distance Learning Advisory Committee this fall, but any guidance the WCET community can provide would be greatly appreciated!

- Scott Snell, Director of Distance Learning, Missouri Southern State University

Answers:

Great question. Over the years I have been fortunate to have the experience of helping students resolve a host of issues in both F2F and online environments, all from the position of the Provost Office. Where possible, I try to draw comparisons to F2F and online environments. In my opinion, the two examples you presented do not merit a refund or special treatment. This would be no different than the bookstore being out of books (which happens) or there being errors in the due dates in a syllabus distributed in a course. Errors happen. In this case they were resolved quickly and as long as a case can be made that student learning and an opportunity at successful experience was provided the students should not get a refund.

Let me offer one additional thought on process. You can develop a process that drives the student back to a departmental office or online office, but the reality is if they have found their way to the Provost or the Chancellor’s Office, it has been my experience that it is simply best to resolve it there. Their tenacity in reaching out to that office usually means they are fairly upset and it is best to resolve it there instead of sending them into some multi-step appeal process.

- Michael Moore, University of Arkansas System eVeristy

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A few thoughts from StraighterLine:

- Given that students pay for StraighterLine out-of-pocket and with credit cards, we have a lot of experience with figuring out the right policies around refunds.
- As students have more and more online course options and their expectations rise, this is going to get more prevalent at traditional colleges.
- Yes, mistakes happen, but consumers are increasingly intolerant of that and, with social media,



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they have a lot more leverage than they used to. Most won't be happy with "mistakes happen" as the response from a college.

- This is a great opportunity to turn someone who is unhappy with the service/experience into a champion or at least a satisfied student.
- Create and clearly communicate a policy of what does and doesn't count for a refund. If you are asked for a refund and your policy hasn't prohibited it, you should probably grant it. Then, update the policy.
- Explore other ways of resolving without a refund -- re-take the class for free, enroll in a second class for free, free textbooks, waive fees etc...
- When asked for a refund, try to resolve immediately by empowering those being asked with clear guidelines. Making the student escalate to different departments or people increases frustration.
 - Burck Smith, CEO, StraighterLine

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We give faculty members the opportunity to report errors to our Instructional Design team directly so changes/corrections can be made quickly (faculty have a "getting started" checklist they go through before the class starts). Should something slip through the cracks, which happens, and the faculty member can't resolve with the student, we have a detailed grievance procedure in our catalog:

1. Report the issue to the faculty member and try to resolve there
2. If not resolved there, then the written complaint goes to the Program Director
3. If not resolved at the PD level, then it escalates to me (VPAA)
4. Next step- President.
5. If it isn't resolved there, they are directed to contact information for the Arizona State Board for Postsecondary Education, Arizona Consumer Protection/Attorney General, the Department of Education- and if a distance ed student, the AZ SARA complaint page.

This entire process and contact information is provided in our catalog, so students theoretically could skip a step and go directly "to the top." Things very rarely even make it to my level (I can actually only think of one instance in the past 2 years), especially items like the ones you mention. Typically the faculty or the PD can talk the student "down" and like Michael mentioned, we can compare the situation to things that happen F2F. If a student does skip the process, for items like this, we typically don't send them back down through the process and just address it directly at that time- if the student is really upset, making them go back to their faculty for a process they may perceive as red tape can make them even more angry.

- Jennifer Brock, Ph.D., Vice President of Academic Affairs, Bryan University
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As an instructional designer always under a launch deadline to produce new courses with faculty members who have various levels of engagement, I understand mistakes can happen. I personally try to be transparent to both the faculty member and students about mistakes during the first launch. I recommend bringing the students into the process by rewarding them for finding mistakes. I suggest to the faculty members I work with to offer nominal extra credit points to the first student who finds any mistake in the course—spelling, access, punctuation, grammar, tech glitches, etc. It is amazing what students find.

I also communicate to faculty members the importance of responding immediately to any problems with the course, especially the first semester. If the faculty member cannot resolve the issue, instructional designers are available.

- Matt Dingo, MEd., Instructional Designer, Ohio University

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I hope this doesn't sound too cynical, but by any chance were either of these students receiving financial aid? I worked at a college in which two students were trying to engage in fraud in receiving aid. Although more complex than I make it sound here, they would sign up for courses, get financial aid, and then drop those courses without paying back financial aid they had received. This was several years ago so things may be more secure now, so this may be an outlier to your issue. I know that these students played up how enraged they were about the poor quality of the course and the instructor (neither of which were true to the situation). They were found out and turned over to the authorities.

- Susan Woerner, Senior Instructional Designer, Excelsior College

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It seems that consumers in all business areas have become increasingly vocal when it comes to the satisfaction of their expectations. In my view, education is a business and is certainly not exempt from certain expectations by those we serve. But I'm not sure why courses delivered online would be singled out as needing a separate refund policy. It would seem to me that the university might want such a policy for all courses, given there very well might be times when a student is dissatisfied with an on-ground or blended experience.

I'm sure that we can all think of a course that we have been enrolled in and it did not meet our expectations. Whether we were aggrieved enough by the bad experience to actually refer the matter to administrative review might be the exception. The claims by the two students offered as example seem weak and isolated. But if you're contemplating a policy on course refunds, I'd suggest that it be for all methods of delivery.

- Dr. Jeffrey L. Bailie, Ed. D., Professor, College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Kaplan University

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