

GROUP MANAGEMENT TIP SHEET

- You may want to make it required for students to post information to their Student Pages so that others can get to know them. One way of forming groups is to have students review each other's pages to find areas of like interests or varying fields of expertise which would complement the group. (This may be too difficult with large courses.)
- Make participation required and graded to effectively promote participation. Be clear about expectations in terms of how frequently you expect them to check the discussion area, how often you expect them to post responses, the quality and quantity. Because of the flexibility with participation at a distance, you want to make sure that students do not feel that they can contribute at the last minute – this would obviously hinder the effectiveness of the discussion since there will be fewer comments to discuss until the last minute.
- Be available – or have a TA available – to the group for questions or comments. Try to respond back to groups via email on a regular basis if group work is a significant part of the course. Follow up with students both publicly in discussion areas and privately through personal email. (This will remind them that you are there and involved.) One caution is to make sure that students don't expect you to be online 24 hours a day. A suggestion would be to set aside a specific time (and amount of time) each day or week to review postings, etc. and make that known to students.
- Be clear about what deliverables are expected from students and in what form. Also, where should they be posted and when? (For example, "Post a brief summary of your group's presentation to the course's main Discussion Board by the due date. Submit your PowerPoint file as an attachment to your summary.")
- If your students will be doing group work at a distance, you may want to suggest some roles to incorporate into their team work. For example, while you may expect all to supply content, in a group of three, one could be the project manager who makes sure that everything is getting done in a timely manner, one may be the editor who will take the content from each member and combine it into one document, and the third could actually publish the content (whether to PowerPoint, the web, etc.) for the rest of the class to review.
- Suggest that groups come up with a back-up plan for technology problems. Problems may not just occur with Blackboard but students may have problems with additional software, connections from home/work, etc. It is important to get them thinking about this in advance and have a plan. For example, they may want to exchange phone numbers, make sure that each person has a back-up computer/connection if need be, etc. You may want to suggest a policy of saving copies of all work to their hard drive.
- Let group members know that while the Blackboard group pages are private and only available to those within the group, as an instructor, you have access to their pages.

- State at the beginning of the course your preferred method of contact during course time at a distance. If you want students to wait until the next face-to-face class, contact you at a distance via email, phone, or through the TA, you should make that clear.
- Consider having one discussion forum set aside for Blackboard Q&A where students may post questions to you or the TA about technical problems, concerns, suggestions, etc. This may cut down on having a number of students writing about the same issue and will also be a way of documenting issues to consider for the next course – or to pass along to Blackboard support people.
- If you would prefer that groups work publicly, you can set up different forums in the main discussion area for each group in which they are the only ones who can contribute information (though others can read it.)
- Set due dates to midnight on the day you want projects turned in. (Our current version of Blackboard does not time stamp uploaded documents – only gives the date.)
- The dropbox in the Group pages has no version control. A good idea might be to remind students to rename each version they submit so that they do not replace their work or another student's work. (This will also allow them to always have a copy of a previous version available.) You may want to suggest that they come up with naming conventions in advance to keep files organized.
- The issue of software version in exchanging files should be noted for students. If a student prepares a slide in PowerPoint 2000 and another student is viewing this from home with only PowerPoint 95, they will not be able to access the work. (This is also true for instructors posting documents.)
- If students choose to use email in their group pages, you'll want to remind them that by default their email accounts are set up for Stern email. If they want emails sent to a different address, they'll need to change their Stern account settings through SIMON to forward their mail. Blackboard is set up so that the default is their Stern email account and in the email section there appears to be no place to add addresses.
- In the discussion area of the group pages, the instructor or TA must start a forum for the students because they do not have this ability. Once you create the first forum, you can then assign one or more of the students as Forum Administrators so that they can then create forums.
- Be clear about *which* Discussion Board you expect students to post to for different assignments. Blackboard has it set so that the main discussion area and the group discussion area are both called the same thing.