Student success is at the heart of what we do. We provide students with guidance and encouragement in the classroom on a daily basis. However, this support is not always confined directly to classroom issues. We recognize that our students often face difficult situations that not only impact their classroom performance, but also their overall well being. As online instructors, we are faced with questions such as:

What is my role in this situation?
How can I respond to those students in a positive and productive way?
How do I manage the balance between supporting my students and challenging my students?
How do I establish appropriate boundaries?

In today’s presentation we will review the concept of responding with empathy, as well as examine how our communication style may influence our ability to help students deal with difficult situations.

When we respond to students who have shares a difficult situation we react without even realizing what we are really doing. There are two different ways to react, two of the common ones being sympathy and empathy. While these two are similar and are sometimes used together it is important to know the difference.

First, empathy is defined as “the intellectual identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another.” Sympathy, while a synonym of empathy, is a little different. It is defined as “the fact or power of sharing the feelings of another, especially in sorrow or trouble; fellow feeling, compassion, or commiseration.” It is easy to differentiate between the two by remembering that empathy is based on how you feel, while sympathy is your reaction to the situation.

Regardless of the approach we take when dealing with a student’s situation, the way in which we do so is important. Communicating online can be difficult: the words we use are important and the way in which we approach the situation must always be considered.

When communicating online we are able to rely only on our words; we do not have the luxury or convenience of our body language or facial expressions. Tone is important as well. Without intending to an instructor could type something that could be misconstrued or misunderstood by the student. Instead of the student feeling helped they might instead feel attacked. Therefore it is imperative that we are sensitive but not condescending; supportive but not overbearing when working with these students.