

Discussion Boards

(Adapted from the School of Management Best Practices #1)

Discussion boards have become important elements of many courses at California Lutheran University (CLU). In particular, with a view to compliance with the University's policy on Carnegie Hours, it is important that discussion boards are set up and managed properly. This document provides a few guidelines for courses in the Bachelor's Degree for Professionals program.

It is important to recognize that the role of the instructor in the discussion board is not that of a "lecturer" but that of a coach and facilitator.

1. **Instructor-led vs. "Homework" Discussion Boards:** Discussion boards can count towards instructor-led or towards homework hours of a course.
 - ❖ When they count towards **homework hours**, it suffices that the instructor poses questions on the discussion board and then let students discuss the questions independently of the instructor.
 - ❖ When the discussion board counts towards **instructor-led course hours**, then the instructor must show a high level of involvement – he/she must participate in discussions by initiating them, steering them towards meaningful exploration while maintaining a high level of interaction – similar to the way an instructor would facilitate a discussion in the traditional classroom.
2. **Number and Duration of Discussion Boards:** Depending on the course format, the purpose of discussion boards, and the learning objectives, the number of discussion boards per course could vary. Sometimes, just one board with one question that gets discussions into a "burst mode" is enough; however, sometimes you need multiple boards that are spread out over an entire term.

What is important, however, is that you clearly align the number of discussion boards and the duration with your student learning objectives.

No matter whether discussion boards count towards instructor-led or towards homework hours, it is important that you provide a realistic estimate for how much time an average student needs to complete the discussion board requirement.

For documentation purposes, this estimate must be included in a workload statement as part of the course syllabus. As a guideline, discussion boards could account for anywhere between 1 (in the case of a 'low involvement discussion board') and 3 academic hours (in the case of a 'high involvement discussion board'). In order to provide a better understanding for how you can calculate the time that an average student would spend on discussion boards, here are two examples:

Low-Involvement Discussion Board:

- a. Reading of the question and critical review: 5 mins.
- b. Initial research: 10 mins.
- c. Contribution I: 10 mins.
- d. Reading of other contributions: 10 mins.
- e. Intermediate research: 10 mins
- f. Contribution II: 5 mins.
- g. TOTAL: 50 mins.= 1 academic hr.

High-Involvement Discussion Board:

- a. Reading of the question and critical review: 10 mins.
- b. Initial research: 30 mins.
- c. Contribution I: 15 mins.
- d. Reading of other contributions: 15 mins.
- e. Intermediate research: 25 mins.
- f. Contribution II: 15 mins.
- g. Reading of other contributions: 15 mins.
- h. Contribution III: 15 mins.
- i. Reading of other contributions: 10 mins.
- j. TOTAL: 150 mins.= 3 academic hrs.

Please note that the above are by no means meant to be standards that must be met, but only guidelines.

3. **Frequency of Student Participation:** Students are expected to actively and substantively contribute to the discussion questions posted on the discussion boards. How frequent the participation is depends on several variables. What is important is that the frequency is commensurate with the nature of the discussion, the number of students in the course (or on the discussion board), the depth of student contributions, or the weight of the discussion board in the overall grade. It is important that the expectations are clearly outlined in the syllabus, that they are commensurate with the weight of the discussion board in the overall grade, and that the different levels of frequency reflect on the student grades.
4. **Distribution of Contributions Over Time:** It is not unusual that students get involved in discussions only very late before the deadline for the closing of the discussion boards. This will negatively reflect on the quality of the discussions, and it will particularly frustrate more engaged students. Threaded discussions need time to develop depth and breadth, and if all contributions come in at the last minute, it's very unlikely that students will be able to go beyond the obvious and engage in more meaningful discussions. Also, discussions that start late make it more difficult for the instructor to get involved in a meaningful and consistent way. It is therefore recommended to ensure that students spread out their contributions over time. This could be achieved in a number of alternative ways: (a) incentives (more points for early

contributions), (b) through a series of deadlines throughout the entire discussion board period.

5. **Threads in Discussion Boards:** It's not uncommon for students to open new discussion threads within a discussion board instead of engaging in an existing thread. This can result from a variety of reasons including unfamiliarity with the technology or not being able to engage in a meaningful dialogue with others for example. Even if discussion board questions are multi-faceted, it's best to encourage students to stay within one thread.
6. **Quality Considerations:** Questions posted on discussion boards are not like questions in an exam. Their purpose is not to test student's cognitive abilities or their ability to apply knowledge in a test situation. Discussion boards should help students explore complex or controversial matters by engaging in a creative and critical dialogue with others. It is therefore important that discussion board questions are challenging and stimulate such exploration. Students should be stimulated to go beyond restating of the obvious. As an instructor, you also must ensure that students understand the depth of a discussion board question and progress in their discussions as students often don't recognize the true potential for further and deeper exploration of a question.
7. **Late Submissions:** Submissions to discussions after the discussion boards have closed should not be allowed as they defy the very purpose of discussion boards.
8. **Grading / Rubrics:** As with other forms of assessment, it is equally important for discussion boards that students understand the expectations that come with different levels of performance. Discussion board rubrics should outline expectations for both qualitative and quantitative criteria including examples of what you want to see and how they can be successful rather than telling the students what not to do.

Below is a sample for a discussion board grading rubric:

Student Achievement			
Below Average	Average	Above Average	Outstanding
1. Frequency: Participation in the discussion board is not acceptable (e.g. less than 2 contributions per thread). The numerical value of this level is 0.	1. Frequency: Participation in the discussion board is acceptable (e.g. more than 1 contributions per thread). The numerical value of this level is 1.	1. Frequency: Participation in the discussion board is frequent (e.g. more than 2 contributions per thread). The numerical value of this level is 2.	1. Frequency and Distribution: Participation in the discussion board is very frequent (e.g. more than 3 contributions per thread). The numerical value of this level is 3.
2. Distribution of posts: Students' contributions are entirely concentrated on a short period of time (e.g. completely front- or back-loaded). The numerical value of this level is 0.	2. Distribution of Posts: Students' posts are not entirely concentrated on a short period of time, but they clearly lack even distribution. The numerical value of this level is 1.	2. Distribution of Posts: Students post relatively evenly through- out the entire period through which the discussion board is open, with some gaps. The numerical value of this level is 2.	2. Distribution of Posts: Students post evenly throughout the entire period through which the discussion board is open. The numerical value of this level is 3.
3. Quality: Contributions are superficial and/ or they largely restate the obvious, concur with other students' opinions or simply re- peat text from sources used in the course. The numerical value of this level is 0.	3. Quality: Contributions lack substance, but they are responsive to other students' opinions and/or interesting enough to stimulate the discussion. They make references to sources outside of the course readings. The numerical value of this level is 1.	3. Quality: Contributions are substantive, and they foster further discussion. They make references to sources outside of the course readings and add their own opinions or interpretations. The numerical value of this level is 2.	3. Quality: In addition to being substantive and fostering further discussions, these contributions are challenging and complex. They clearly help in elevating class learning. The numerical value of this level is 3.
4. Level of Participation: Students do not engage in or foster further dialogue with other contributors. The numerical value of this level is 0.	4. Level of Participation: Students occasionally engage in dialogue with other contributors, but they do not foster further dialogue them- selves. The numerical value of this level is 1.	4. Level of Participation: Students engage in dialogue with other contributors, and they foster further dialogue. The numerical value of this level is 2.	4. Level of Participation: Students show initiative by initiating or stimulating discussions. They foster further dialogue and facilitate entire threads of discussions. The numerical value of this level is 3.
5. Style: Contributions lack coherence and/or structure. The numerical value of this level is 0.	5. Style: Contributions are coherent and/ or structured, but of low complexity. The numerical value of this	5. Style: Contributions are coherent and/or structured, and of acceptable complexity. The numerical value of	5. Style: Contributions are not only coherent, structured, or complex, but they are noteworthy in sophistication. The

	level is 1.	this level is 2.	numerical value of this level is 3.
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