

Fall 2021

Instructional impacts of Covid policies: Recommendations
Faculty Affairs Committee, University Senate

The following is a report on teaching issues during the pandemic that was recommended to the Provost's office in a meeting of the Faculty Affairs committee on November 9, 2021. Following that meeting, Senate president Robin Kear distributed this document to the Faculty Assembly members for review and comment. Comments were collected through Tuesday, November 16 and were incorporated into the present document.

Summary: The Faculty Affairs committee strongly recommends that faculty be allowed to determine which pedagogical practices (especially those pertaining to remote/hybrid teaching and student assessment) are best for their curricula and students. There are a variety of reasons for which faculty may or may not choose to record their lectures, but allowing faculty the opportunity to determine the method of delivery allows faculty to best serve their students. In addition, we believe that policies related to teaching should be communicated to all faculty and all students in a timely manner. Better communication regarding technological resources for faculty in the Teaching Center should also be practiced, especially for faculty who wish to record their class meetings.

Hybrid/Remote/Zoom Teaching:

Issue: *Is there a need for hybrid/remote teaching?*

Per the Director of DRS, only fourteen students (nine undergraduate, five graduate) have been granted accommodations to be remote for the entire semester. There are few Covid cases or quarantined students who would need extended remote/hybrid/Zoom access to classes. Since so few students are impacted, is there a real need for recommendations for remote/hybrid teaching? Students now assume that their class meeting will be recorded for any and every absence, even if unrelated to Covid or other illness.

Recommendation: Allow faculty members to decide whether they recommend the recording of class discussions and/or the use of hybrid or remote teaching technologies. In some schools where faculty and students interact with patients, remote or hybrid options may be preferred. In DSAS and other undergraduate-centered units, in-person teaching may be favored.

Issue: *There are various pedagogical concerns that have been raised by faculty:*

- It is inherently difficult to teach two populations (one in the classroom, one on Zoom) at the same time with little or limited tech support. The Teaching Center's recommendation is that faculty use Zoom to record lectures. Without supportive tech, there are often audio issues and students can only see the shared screen of the instructor and not the other students. Class discussions are difficult because laptop microphones cannot pick up students even a few yards away; instructors must repeat comments and questions from students for those on Zoom.

- If there is Zoom technology or the use of an "OWL" camera, many students do not wish to be recorded in the classroom or on Zoom. As one faculty colleague stated: "Many instructors, including me, feel strongly that a student's participation in class should not be contingent upon their acceptance of being recorded and having that recording made available, potentially forever (even if it's nominally gated to members of a class, we all know that it is trivially easily to circulate more widely). There is a suite of logistical, pedagogical, ethical, professional, and technological concerns raised by the normalization of class recordings, and we should not be forced into this framework during a crisis when there are plenty of other options available."
- If there is a Zoom option, there is no real way to encourage students to come to class. Students also email faculty the day of the lesson to say that they will not be in class and to ask if the instructor can record the lesson. This is often not feasible since lesson plans would then need to change to accommodate students' requests to be remote, potentially negatively affecting the effectiveness or the quality of the lesson.

Recommendation: Allow faculty to determine which pedagogical practices are best for their students. There are myriad ways to assist students who miss class, including posting materials on Canvas, encouraging them to come to office hours, encouraging study groups with peers and on apps like GroupMe, etc. We recommend that Pitt not encourage the blanket policy of recording all lessons as the go-to default.

Recommendation: In units and departments where hybrid or remote teaching is preferred, ensure that all faculty know about which kinds of supportive technology are available and ensure that such tech, when necessary, is installed prior to the beginning of the term.

Assessment:

Issue: *There are no enforceable attendance policies, no reasonable way to assess in-class participation (since keeping attendance is not permitted), and little guidance on excusable absences for in-person exams.*

Courses that require in-class engagement and participation cannot effectively proceed without student attendance. Students that opt to attend on Zoom for non-health-related reasons cannot easily or effectively participate in class discussions. In experiential courses such as labs, making up missed material is sometimes not possible, due to scheduling restrictions.

The lack of attendance policies has also created confusion about excusable absences for exams and other major assessments. Some faculty reported that students have contacted them after an exam to request an alternative assessment without providing a reasonable excuse. This leads to unreasonable workload demands for faculty, especially those with high-enrollment courses.

Recommendation: Permit faculty to employ effective assessment protocols at their discretion, based on best practices within their relevant fields. This may include the need to assess

attendance and active participation in class. In addition, allow faculty to require an excusable absence policy for exams and other major assessment dates.

Issue: *The Provost has asked faculty to not drop the lowest grades for quizzes and assignments and instead provide make-up assessments for all absent students.*

It seems unreasonable to ask faculty to provide alternative make-up assignments to every student that is absent, especially since students who miss an exam due to illness will return at different times, resulting in multiple make-up assessments required for those students. Dropping the lowest quiz grade or assignment grade has been common practice to address this (that is, students know that they can miss an assignment or quiz without penalty). In addition, this request was made in the fourth week of the semester, causing general confusion among faculty and students.

Recommendation: Allow and support faculty to employ effective assessment protocols at their discretion, based on best practices within their relevant fields.

Recommendation: Communicate any possible changes to syllabi before the beginning of the term to all faculty and students, allowing extra lead time in the weeks before the semester to ensure that faculty can make reasonable changes and accommodations in a timely manner. Syllabi are often seen as a contract between faculty and students, and changes to syllabi often result in confusion and disgruntled students. When possible, pedagogical rationales should be provided when university- or school-made changes are made to syllabi policies or practices.