

Preparing for the Fall of 2021

How Instructors Can Support Student Learning and Well-being

These strategies were developed by the Faculty Innovation Center, Longhorn Wellness Center, Employee Assistance Program, and Counseling and Mental Health Center. The purpose of this list is to help instructors think about various methods for supporting student learning and wellness through empathy, flexibility and community, especially given that the COVID-19 pandemic persists and the impact of the pandemic is significant. At a time when options are limited, it is especially important to create ways to communicate productively. Please consider which of the following might be most helpful to you and your students.

Preparation

- Work with your Chair and dean's office to determine what choices you have in structuring your classes and labs. For example, can you adjust your attendance policy to allow for mental health days? Are you required to give an in-class final, or could you give a take-home final instead?
 - Review your plan for the class and identify expectations, goals and choices students can make.
 - Consider modifying your expectations due to the unique circumstances of this semester. For example, instead of expecting students to complete 10 assignments across the semester, you could reduce this to 8 assignments that more efficiently assess the learning objectives students should master.
 - Be clear in the goals that you have for the class. These goals should tie directly to the assignments, exams, etc. that you will use.
 - Ask students to identify their own goals for the class. In the first week of class, have students write down their goals and share them with you.
 - What kind of flexibility and choices do students have in learning the content and demonstrating mastery of it? Will you allow students assignment options? For example, for one of your assignments, can they choose between writing a paper, creating a video, or making an interactive presentation?
 - What questions do you have for students to help you tailor the class to their expectations and goals?
 - Before classes start, email the students to let them know who you are and what your expectations and goals are for the class and semester. Invite students to email you if they have any questions or concerns.
 - Be as explicit as possible about the choices you've made for structuring the class. Let students know the why behind your instructional decisions.
 - What structure do you have in mind for safety – both physical and psychological (e.g., using a seating chart)?
 - Can you build flexibility and options into your schedule, assignments, etc. (e.g., working in small groups, strategies for completing assignments)?
 - What boundaries are non-negotiable (e.g., deadlines, expectations for respectful participation)?
 - How and when should students share their concerns (e.g., through email, in office hours)?
 - In your syllabus, allow for one or more mental health days (i.e., days when students can miss class – no questions asked). For example, if a student is feeling overwhelmed, decides they can't make it to class, and lets you know this, be compassionate and let them know that you are willing to work with them to help them make up whatever they missed. Remember, students may have to miss class more often than they'd like due to quarantining, helping with additional family obligations, having to get vaccinated or tested, dealing with family
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obligations, etc. It's always the case that life happens, and we need to be compassionate, but this is especially true at this time.

- Consider including a “statement of flexibility” in your syllabus, such as the one found in the Faculty Innovation Center’s [sample syllabus](#): “In acknowledgement of COVID-19 and its impact on the UT Austin community, this course will reaffirm one of UT’s core values: responsibility. Our responsibility to ourselves and each other is to put our humanity in the forefront of our academic pursuits. With that being said, this semester I commit to being adaptable in this time of great need, which is reflected in the course policies below around attendance, grading, and assignments/exams.”
- Create a syllabus scavenger hunt for students to participate in during the first class day. (A syllabus scavenger hunt has students work in pairs or teams to find information provided in your syllabus, e.g., “Identify three resources available at UT to support your wellness.”)
- Create a survey to use on the first class day to learn about your students, including their current feelings and perspectives on the pandemic and in-person instruction. (See sample survey/poll questions.)

Teaching Your Class: First Day/Week

- On the first class day, acknowledge the unusual circumstances of this semester and the stress that comes with uncertainty.
- Share your personal feelings and thoughts about the class and semester. For example, if you’re feeling a bit overwhelmed about starting the semester under the current conditions, let students know this and that you’ll do what you can to support them if they’re feeling the same way.
- Survey the students about their emotions, preferences, etc. related to the semester and their learning. If you are teaching an online/hybrid course or implementing online supports (e.g., remote office hours, asynchronous instruction), include [online readiness items](#). Share any findings from the survey that you think would help students connect as a class.
- State your goals for the class and consider asking your students to share their goals.

Teaching Your Class: Throughout the Semester

- Explain to students why you’re using specific instructional techniques, assignments, etc.
- If you feel comfortable doing it, consider offering group work, office hours, etc. both remotely and in person.
- Be sure to check in with students throughout the semester to gauge their anxiety levels, perspectives on how the class is going, and support they may need.
- Allow students to check in with each other throughout the semester using discussions or activities in partners/small groups, or if teaching online, in breakout rooms.
- Survey students again around mid-semester to see how they’re doing, learn their perspectives on how the class is going, and collect any suggestions they have for making changes to the class.
- During times when student partners or small groups are talking or working, walk around and have informal conversations with students.
- Offer informal meeting times (both in person and online if possible), coffee chats, etc. to get to know students and to let them get to know you.

Individual Conversations

Sometimes, it’s better to have a conversation one on one, especially if you are concerned about a student or if a student has violated an expectation. To get the conversation going, try the following:

- I've noticed...
- I'm concerned because...
- Is there anything I can do to help?

You may also have to speak to your department chair or supervisor about your concerns:

- What does the guidance we were given mean here...?
- I have noticed problems with...
- Are there any accommodations available to address my concern about...?

Resources

The University provides a wide range of resources for students, faculty and staff.

- For more information about University resources, visit this site:
<https://cmhc.utexas.edu/wellbeing/universityresources.html>.
- For off-campus mental health resources, visit this CMHC site:
https://cmhc.utexas.edu/counseling_resources.html
- For additional resources, visit the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) website
<https://eap.utexas.edu/referrals-resources>.
- For more ideas about how to have conversations, go to the Be Vocal website
https://cmhc.utexas.edu/counseling_resources.htm.
- The Faculty Innovation Center <https://facultyinnovate.utexas.edu/> provides numerous instructional strategies and resources to help faculty in the classroom.

Consult

You don't have to have all the answers. This is a dynamic environment and none of us have ever navigated this before, so it makes sense that complex questions are going to arise. The offices above have people who are available to talk through the diverse and unique challenges that are unfolding this year. We want to remind faculty you don't have to do this alone.

Possible Poll/Survey Questions to Start Conversations

The following are example questions instructors can use to learn students' perspectives, feelings, preferences, etc. Student responses can help with starting conversations with a class, building community among students, and differentiating the instructional support provided to students. For example, an instructor may want to gauge student anxiety coming into the semester by asking one or two of these questions and then share the results with students so they can see how their peers are feeling. As another example, some students may feel safe with in-person meetings during office hours, coffee chats, etc., while other students may not. If an instructor feels comfortable doing it and it's logistically possible, then offering both options can help students feel safer, that they're voice is being heard, and that they have some control over their learning (an important aspect of motivation).

1. How would you describe your ability to cope with Covid-19's impact on your health?
 - a. Completely able
 - b. Mostly able
 - c. Somewhat unable
 - d. Completely unable

2. How would you describe your ability to cope with Covid-19's impact on your family's health?
 - a. Completely able
 - b. Mostly able
 - c. Somewhat unable
 - d. Completely unable

3. How would you describe your ability to cope with Covid-19's impact on your friends' health?
 - a. Completely able
 - b. Mostly able
 - c. Somewhat unable
 - d. Completely unable

4. What is your level of comfort with being in this class?
 - a. Completely comfortable
 - b. Mostly comfortable
 - c. Somewhat uncomfortable
 - d. Completely uncomfortable

5. How are you feeling about your ability to be academically successful this semester?
 - a. Completely able
 - b. Mostly able
 - c. Somewhat unable
 - d. Completely unable

6. How are you feeling about your social connections right now?
 - a. I'm very well-connected socially.
 - b. I'm pretty well-connected socially.
 - c. I'm somewhat connected socially.
 - d. I'm somewhat disconnected socially.
 - e. I'm pretty disconnected socially.
 - f. I'm very disconnected socially.

7. When it comes to online learning, which do you prefer?
 - a. Synchronous only
 - b. Asynchronous only
 - c. A mixture of synchronous and asynchronous

8. How would you prefer to attend office hours?
 - a. Always in person
 - b. Always remotely
 - c. Sometimes in person and sometimes remotely

9. How would you prefer to participate in group work outside of class?
 - a. Always in person
 - b. Always remotely
 - c. Sometimes in person and sometimes remotely

10. What suggestions do you have for making this class as meaningful and enjoyable as possible?

11. Describe the optimal learning context for you. (For example: What kinds of instruction do you prefer [lecture, discussion, cooperative work, etc.]? What type of assignments do you prefer? Do you prefer reading a text vs. watching a video vs. another mode or maybe a combination?)