

Expectations, Course Flexibility, and Student Engagement

Introduction

In summer 2022, in response to discussions both on campus and [across academia](#) about student engagement and requests for course flexibility, the CCTL convened a [working group](#) of faculty and instructors from a range of programs along with staff from the [Chicago Center for Teaching and Learning](#), [Student Disability Services](#), and [Student Wellness](#). This working group considered approaches to student engagement and expectations in the context of the continuing consequences of the pandemic for student learning. This document summarizes the results of the working group, offering some principles for faculty and instructors along with a range of sample practices, references, and further reading.

The Chicago Center for Teaching and Learning is available to discuss anything related to your teaching, and you can schedule a time to chat through our [online portal](#) or be in touch by email at cct@uchicago.edu.

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Clearly Communicating Standards and Expectations

Central to any effort to set and maintain classroom standards and expectations is clear communication of these standards. Clear statements of expectation for the course and for individual assignments can help ensure that students are prepared to meet these expectations. Clarity on deadlines and learning objectives is also important for [Student Disability Services](#) to understand what kind of accommodations may be granted to students with documented disabilities.

Make Policies Clear from the Beginning. Setting clear policies at the beginning of class, discussing these policies, and reviewing them when appropriate can help to manage student requests and expectations and reduce the burden on the instructor. While some student requests may need to be assessed on a case-by-case basis, general policies can clarify many common cases.

Some policies to consider making explicit (see [below](#) for some specific ideas on crafting these policies):

- *Attendance.* Is attendance mandatory and/or part of the grade for the class? What are the exceptions? Is there a standard means of making up for missed classes or acquiring the skills and knowledge from that class period? (Supiano 2022)
- *Late Assignments.* Is there a penalty for late work? What is the procedure for requesting extensions, if any? Is there a standard “grace period” for late assignments? Are there certain assignments that cannot reasonably be accepted late?
- *Grades.* Intense concern about grades is common among students. Clear, thoughtful grading policies can help set student expectations and ease the task of instructors approached by students with grade concerns. Grades serve both students and instructors best when it is clear what they are communicating.
- *College Policies.* The College has a policy not to require doctor’s notes for absences in case of illness; be sure also to refer to the University’s policy on [religious accommodation](#) for missed classes, assignments, and exams, which among other things holds that:
 - Absences [due to observance of a religious holiday] may not be counted as a missed class in any course in which attendance is a measure of academic performance
 - reasonable extensions of time must be given, without academic penalty, for missed assignments due to religious observance; and
 - exams must be reasonably rescheduled without academic penalty.

Articulate Policies Frequently. In addition to including the policies above in the syllabus, consider explaining them verbally both at the beginning of class, when introducing assignments, and periodically over the course of the class.

Focus on Learning Goals. Whether considering class policies or individual student requests, it's useful to focus on the learning goals of the course, session, assignment, or activity. This focus can help assess requests for flexibility or accommodations. For example, if a problem set or paper outline is necessary for progressing to the following problem set or a paper draft, a limit on time extensions may be important.

Be Transparent about Reasons for Assignments, Work, and Policies. Clarifying not only the deadlines, expectations, and policies of the class but the reasoning behind them can be helpful both for students and instructors. Policies on attendance and assignment submission can be explained in terms of the learning goals of the class, rather than as arbitrary or punitive rules.

Examples:

- *Prompt submission of writing assignments is important for you to receive the feedback you need to develop and meet the objectives of this course.*
- *This problem set is an opportunity to practice _____. It provides the foundation for successful completion of both next week's problem set and the midterm exam.*

Students are more likely to effectively engage with and put more effort into assignments that they understand to be relevant and meaningful (Ambrose et al 2010; Hass and Osborn 2007). A brief explanation in class and/or on the syllabus can indicate why the assignment or requirement is important.

Talk With Students about How Engagement and Attendance Help Them Learn.

Flexibility on attendance, participation, and assignments can be misinterpreted by students as a message that these commitments are unimportant ([Yale Poorvu Center 2022](#)). It can be helpful to have a conversation about the unique form of learning and engagement that comes from class participation that cannot be made up for by getting the notes from a peer or reviewing the slides later. Make explicit the advantages of coming to class, including providing evidence for the correlation between attendance and grades (Karnik et al 2020) and describing the "hidden curriculum" of unspoken norms and practices that are a key component of student success (Margolis 2001).

Set High Standards and Communicate Confidence that Students Can Meet Them. In the syllabus and assignment instructions, and throughout the class, instructors can clearly communicate high standards and encourage students to see themselves as capable of meeting these standards through effort and engagement (Bain 2004).

The CCTL's [Syllabus Guide](#) contains more information and sample language about how these principles can be incorporated into a syllabus.

Addressing Student Requests for Flexibility

In the context of pandemic-era disruptions and challenges, faculty and instructors have perceived an increase in student requests for flexibility in meeting course requirements. Because classes and circumstances can vary widely, there is likely no one-size-fits-all approach that can be equally applied for every student. In any event, when considering what kind of flexibility to build into a course and/or responding to student requests on a case-by-case basis, it is important to focus on the learning purposes behind course policies and consider how individual decisions may unintentionally create inequitable experiences for students in the course.

Consider Benefits and Drawbacks of Flexibility Requests. Flexibility on course policies can:

- allow students who might otherwise not meet the goals of the course to do so,
- give instructors the opportunity to assess student needs individually, and
- allow students who might otherwise face barriers to participation [engage more fully](#) in the course.

On the other hand:

- Requests for flexibility can demand [large amounts of time and energy](#) from instructors and TAs.
- Extensions can create a snowball effect for students, impacting their ability to complete later work in the course or work in other classes.
- Exceptions can enhance inequities among students.
- An expectation of flexibility or leniency might [lower student engagement](#).
- Alternative arrangements (like make-up assignments or remote, hybrid, and “hyflex” modalities) require [thoughtful design](#) to be effective.

Often there will be a need to strike a balance—the concept of [“flexibility with guardrails”](#) may be helpful here. In all cases, attention to learning goals and a realistic understanding of the situations of both instructors and students can help all parties weigh benefits and drawbacks when assessing student requests.

Direct Students to Student Disability Services for Accommodation Requests Based on Documented Disabilities. Faculty are not expected to grant informal accommodation requests for students with disabilities. Formal requests for accommodation for students with disabilities are addressed through [Student Disability Services](#). Additionally, it is good practice to include language on your syllabus and Canvas site directing students to the procedures for requesting an accommodation with SDS and the implementation with the faculty. Below is sample language from the SDS:

Students with disabilities who have been approved for the use of academic accommodations by Student Disability Services (SDS) and need a reasonable accommodation(s) to participate fully in this course should follow the procedures established by SDS for using accommodations. Timely notifications are required in order to ensure that your

accommodations can be implemented. Please meet with me to discuss your access needs in this class after you have completed the SDS procedures for requesting accommodations. For more information, visit disabilities.uchicago.edu.

Make Use of Student Disability Services Tools.

- Consider using the [Guide to Assessing Accommodation Requests for Attendance Flexibility and Deadline Extensions \(PDF\)](#), which is a tool created by Students Disability Services, but is generally applicable for evaluating course flexibility.
- For eligible undergraduate students with disabilities in the College, faculty may complete the [College Student Attendance and Flexibility Accommodation Agreement Form](#) for use between a student and instructor to formalize arrangements for the use of attendance flexibility and/or deadline extensions approved as a disability accommodation.
- For eligible graduate students with disabilities, faculty may use the [Graduate Student Attendance and Flexibility Accommodation Agreement Form \(PDF\)](#).

Consider Building Flexibility into the Course. Building flexibility into the course lessens the need for adjudicating student requests on an ad-hoc basis and can strike a considered balance between flexibility and accountability. Approaches might include:

- A certain number of built-in “grace days” that students might use to excuse an absence or submit an assignment late without case-by-case review.
- A specific number of allowable unexcused absences
- Alternative methods of completing assignments

Create Procedures for Making up Work and Attendance. Clear policies and procedures for making up missed work and missed classes can help students meet the goals of the class when absences or other issues occur (University of Michigan CRLT, August 2022). Some options to consider include:

- *Lecture capture/recordings.* When appropriate to the learning goals of the course, there are benefits to providing recorded lectures to all students (University of Michigan CRLT, October 2001), but such recording is not suited for all classes and depends on thoughtful deployment and student use.
- *Study Groups or Buddies.* Consider having students form study groups or pairs who can be mutually responsible for providing notes or other information to partners who miss a class.
- *Grace Periods or Dropped Assignments.* Depending on the nature of the course, a 1- or 2-day grace period may be allowable for some assignments, or students may be permitted to drop 1 or 2 of their lowest grades, including missed assignments.

Creating an Environment for Engagement

Engagement in the class is the student's responsibility, but instructors can help create an environment where such engagement is facilitated, encouraged, and required.

Clearly Articulate Objectives. Having clearly stated goals for course requirements can make it clear to students what is expected of them and why, and how engagement with the course can lead to achievement of those goals. The CCTL's [syllabus guide](#) offers much more guidance and sample language for articulating learning objectives.

Engage Students in Meaningful, Authentic Work. Student engagement is higher when they understand their coursework to be meaningful and relevant (Ambrose et al 2010). In developing assignments, focus on embedding skills and information in authentic tasks that challenge students and spark curiosity, creativity, and ownership (Bain 2007).

Consider Multiple Pathways to the Same Goal. One way of building flexibility into a course is providing multiple pathways to participation (Tobin and Behling 2018). For example:

- If a component of a discussion session involves asking questions about the text, a student who misses class or does not speak in class could provide that question in a Canvas discussion post or email.
- If one goal of mandatory classroom attendance is learning to ask and answer questions with other students, students who have missed class could be asked to attend regularly scheduled office hours together.

Scaffold Student Activity. One way of making explicit that students are to be developing skills and knowledge during the class (while also requiring more frequent, lower-stakes engagement) is to scaffold assignments—building the component skills in discrete and cumulative ways, or moving from observation to assisted practice to independent work. For example:

- A research paper may be broken into parts—a bibliography, outline, draft, etc.—with the aim of practicing the component research skills.
- Students anxious about speaking in class may find it easier to share their thoughts with a peer or small group first and then report out. Eventually this can help develop both individual students' skills and the overall classroom discussion environment.

Employ Frequent Checks on Student Engagement. Frequent calls for engagement in class help set student expectations for participation and can help instructors identify individual issues and class trends.

- Especially if the size of a class makes it difficult to assess student engagement through questions or vocal participation, an in-class survey system like [Poll Everywhere](#) or [Slido](#) might be useful
- An after-class "[minute paper](#)" is an opportunity to encourage recall and metacognition, check student learning, and require participation at a minimal cost to instructor and class time.

- Low-stakes, ungraded, or completion-credit assignments (including [Classroom Assessment Techniques](#), weekly journal entries, short weekly quizzes, etc.) can both set an expectation for student engagement in the class and help instructors assess the degree to which individual students and the class as a whole are meeting course standards.

Build Relationships with and among Students. Relationships are an important factor in student learning, success, and flourishing (Felten and Lambert 2020). Consider employing strategies that make use of the limited time, energy, and resources of both instructors and students. These might include:

- *Getting to Know Students and Helping Students Get to Know Each Other.* Learn students' names, make use of [small groups](#) or think-pair-share activities, and facilitate the creation of reading or study groups.
- *Holding Creative Office Hours.* Office hours are an opportunity for students who may be struggling to meet the expectations of the course to consult with faculty and work through difficult material, and they are also an opportunity to build faculty-student relationships. Some strategies to make office hours more accessible, better attended, and more worthwhile include:
 - *Themed Office Hours.* Consider dedicating certain office hours to certain goals or concerns. Examples might include a “getting to know you” office hour session, a “research skills” session, or a “math anxiety” session.
 - *“Town Hall” Office Hours.* Whether online or in-person, consider an office hours session where students can come and go and listen to each other's questions.
 - *Informal “Office Hours.”* Consider making intentional use of the “informal” time before and after class to solicit student questions and concerns and build relationships with students.

Appendix A. Working Group Members

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- Charnessa Warren, Student Disabilities Services
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