

Designing for Flexibility: Adapting Policies on Student Work

Rationale: Why you might revise a policy about student work or participation

Although attendance, timeliness, and consistency are expected in students' current and future workplaces (e.g., "the real world") and so faculty are right to encourage these in our classrooms, most productive workplaces have also—especially recently—demonstrated that they allow for exceptions, particularly in exceptional times.

Even with a return to (new) normal, we do so with increased understanding of how students may have limited control over their workload, workspaces, and time management; they may still face emergencies at home, extended illness, or shared or unstable sites for doing class work. It can be helpful to have policies ready ahead of time rather than adapting on an individual basis.

Finally, you yourself may feel overloaded this semester as you work with new course designs. Often, creating policies with some official "give" can create more time for the faculty member: instead of negotiating with every student over every instance, you can refer students to your policy on exceptions.

Complications: Why you might not revise a policy

- You might not have permission to revise a policy (please check with your department or coordinator)
- Your policies might be necessary for your time management
- Your policies might be necessary to ensure academic integrity
- Your policies might be necessary to enable special projects, collaborations, or guests
- Your course or profession might rely very heavily on timeliness or consistency

Options: What revisions you might make to design for flexibility

Feel free to modify these suggestions as needed to match your course and students, or to create your own policies that address similar issues.

Note that many of these policies are "a rising tide lifts all ships" kinds of policies: while they specifically support students in a significant crisis, students who are experiencing less extreme difficulties often find they have lower stress and better performance when some flexibility is available. Policies **visible to all students** keep your class from being a "squeaky wheel gets the grease" class, in which only brave/experienced/argumentative students benefit from additional opportunities that they request.

- ***In synchronous online courses, revise a participation/visibility policy*** to allow non-video participation by students whose workspaces are not private or whose technology or family situations make live video streaming difficult
 - Students who add comments to a chat or poll, perhaps at the beginning and ending of a class, could be counted “present” even if they do not share video of themselves
 - Students who submit brief class notes could be counted “present” without sharing video (e.g., “Three major points and one question”)
 - Students who complete a “minute paper” to submit at the end of class could be counted “present” without sharing video (e.g., “The clearest point and the muddiest point for me from today’s class were ___”)
 - For more ideas about how to allow students to participate variably in synchronous web-conferencing, see [this short article](#) by faculty developer Karen Costa

- ***Revise a late-work policy*** to allow students clear options when they need a reasonable amount of additional time
 - A “Life Happens Pass” Policy can give any student an automatic 72-hour extension on a (major) assignment once per semester, no questions asked, as long as the student informs you in writing
 - A “Standard Deduction” Policy can indicate that any late assignment will earn a flat 10% grade deduction as long as they are completed within 7 days of the deadline
 - A “One Extension” Policy can give any student the option to propose a reasonable deadline extension, subject to your approval, once during the semester (perhaps as long as they provide a plan for how they will complete the work)

- ***Revise a policy about make-up or revision work*** to allow students clear options when they find that their access to or performance in the course is negatively affected by outside circumstances
 - A standard “Discussion Forum Make-Up” Assignment can indicate that students who have to miss a class meeting when their participation was expected can provide a summary, analysis, and/or additional contribution based on the day’s questions/materials, and post asynchronously by a reasonable deadline to earn equivalent credit
 - A standard “One Revision” Policy can allow any student to revise one (major) assignment within two weeks after it is graded, perhaps for a new grade or perhaps for up to a 15% increase on their prior grade provided that the revisions are significant (not just error corrections). Note that
 - Fewer students than you might expect tend to participate in these efforts, because revision is hard!

- Grading revisions can be quick, especially if you use something like MS Word's "Compare Documents" feature to spot changes, and provide very few comments along with any revised grade.
- **Revise a policy about credit** to allow students whose performance is suffering due to outside circumstances to demonstrate as much competency as they are capable of
 - Partial-credit policies on exams and short assignments can give students credit for making progress toward mastery even if their work is incomplete or not fully correct due to extreme circumstances
 - Bonus-credit policies can allow students who have a down-cycle at some point in the course to put in additional work at a different point
 - Very small bonus credit offered at several points throughout the course benefits learning more than a single large bonus opportunity at the end
 - Bonus credit offered for supporting other students' learning—additional research to share with the class, additional peer reviews of other students' drafts, additional leadership in groups or teams—or extending one's own learning (through tasks that ask students to "level up" on a common assignment) are preferable to more generic assignments ("write an additional short paper" or "do two extra homework sets")

Designing for Flexibility: Adapting the First Weeks to Support Under-Prepared Learners

Rationale: Why you might revise the focus, coverage, and/or resources in your first weeks of class

Despite everyone's best efforts, students in both college and high school classes sometimes are unable to complete the work originally planned for the semester—particularly as we are still in post-pandemic recovery. Reduced contact hours, new modalities, and external pressures on student and faculty time may have meant that even students who earned a passing grade in a course that is pre-requisite to yours either did not cover some material, or were unable to fully assimilate it.

Differential preparation is a basic condition of student groups: even when all students satisfactorily completed a prerequisite course, not all of them retain or can apply concepts with equal facility. We often expect that some students will start from behind and have to catch up on their own. When we acknowledge that students may be starting from behind due to *no fault of their own*—and that students from first-generation, lower socio-economic status, and/or minoritized communities may have been unduly penalized by a systemic lack of resources—we may find more reason to look for flexible course design.

Finally, learning science tells us that even when students have complete and accurate prior knowledge, they don't always *remember what they know*, or see how/why to apply it to a new course. Helping all students "activate" their prior knowledge improves everyone's outcomes.

You may thus find it useful, ethical, and/or efficient to change your approach for the first few weeks of your course to help a majority of students fill in any preparation gaps they have, rather than coping with individual students' confusions as they arrive.

Complications: Why you might not revise your first weeks

- You might not have permission to revise your syllabus or approach (please check with your department or coordinator)
- The topics you cover might be required for certification or accreditation, without much opportunity for flexibility
- Your course might not have clearly identifiable pre-requisite knowledge or skills
- Revising may require more up-front time than you have, given your own workload and resources

Options: What revisions you might make to design for flexibility

Feel free to modify these suggestions as needed to match your course and students, or to create your own policies that address similar issues.

Note that many of these revisions have “a rising tide lifts all ships” implications: while they specifically support students struggling with effects of a significant crisis, students who are experiencing less extreme difficulties often find they have lower stress and better performance when some flexibility is available. Resources *offered to all students* may be more efficient, even given some additional preparatory work beforehand, than trying to address multiple student questions individually.

- You might start with a diagnostic, checklist, or readiness review (as our the Stearns Center MMCD course does) to help students (and you) identify their understanding, recall, and/or capabilities relative to your expectations—perhaps using questions from an exam at a pre-req level or concepts commonly assigned in a pre-req course
- You might provide additional resources, short tasks, or problem sets for students to complete so that they can catch up in a more directed manner (perhaps for small amounts of bonus credit; see the handout on flexible policies)
- You might use your first class session or two primarily for a forward-looking review: addressing what concepts or skills from a pre-req course will be particularly important in your class, and showing how they will relate to upcoming material
- You might use a portion of each of your first several class meetings to identify a key pre-req concept or skill that is relevant, and ask students to (help each other) practice and then apply it to the main material or topic for the day

Designing for Flexibility: Creating More Deliberate Inclusion or Community Building

Rationale: Why you might deliberately build in more course events that address goals like inclusion, belonging, or community building

Some classes and disciplines seem “naturally” oriented toward community building, while others seem to be more about “just the facts” or the key concepts. Yet learning is a social endeavor; one reason that students come to college—or faculty take a pedagogy course—is that we learn better in a context that includes leaders and peers. We have learned a lot in recent semesters about the kinds of interpersonal interaction that fuel us, motivate us, and help us gauge our own progress.

Moreover, students from minoritized or under-represented backgrounds feel—and often *are*—less included in mainstream community events. Having that dis-inclusion occur in a learning environment when we are strongly focused on reducing institutional and systemic racism (and other biases) could have a strongly negative effect on student learning.

Even if “providing a social experience” doesn’t feel like it’s your job with your course, your efforts to help students connect with one another, with you, and with your course material is likely to improve their overall learning.

Complications: Why you might not adjust your approaches

- You might not have permission to change assignments, topics, or exams (please check with your department or coordinator)
- Your course already includes a high amount of community and inclusive practices
- Revising may require more up-front time than you have, given your own workload and resources
- **Please note that** all of the above rationales for not changing may be less defensible in the case of inclusion/community than they are for any other option in this series of handouts. Higher education has not shown itself to be free from systemic racism or bias, or to be particularly welcoming to and supportive of students who are not already “insiders”—and the options noted below can usually be applied to any course with fairly low effort and minimal change to required coverage.

Options: What revisions you might make to design for inclusion and/or community

Feel free to modify these suggestions as needed to match your course and students, or to create your own policies that address similar issues.

Note that many of these revisions have “a rising tide lifts all ships” implications. They do and should specifically support students who are from minoritized backgrounds or who are particularly isolated; however, students who are experiencing less extreme difficulties (or students who are outside dominant cultural institutions in ways that are invisible or multiple) often find they have lower stress and better performance when a learning environment is tuned toward inclusion.

- You can build or expand ***inclusion*** on any or all of at least three levels, both in the ***design*** and the ***implementation*** of your course:
 - Inclusion as REPRESENTATION: What views, communities, identities are visible to your students in your everyday examples, authors, and tasks? What can you change or add so that students from diverse backgrounds “see themselves” in your course and your discipline/field?
 - Inclusion as INVITATION: What strategies can you use to deliberately request—and make space for, and value—your students’ multiple views, voices, disagreements, & options? Where in a lecture, discussion, or assignment can you overtly solicit more viewpoints (“I’d like everyone to pause and think of four other communities / two reasons to disagree / three other applications of this concept, and post those to the chat box / anonymous poll”)
 - Inclusion as INTERVENTION: What approaches or plans can you envision ahead of time to help yourself be actively anti-racist as you teach, to identify microaggressions and call them out, to alter your own behavior/assumptions and require students to do the same as needed? Students in virtual spaces may say or type comments that they would not provide in a face-to-face room; when you have made initial efforts to establish clear norms for inclusive behavior, and created your own plan for how to respond quickly and firmly to biased or disinclusive behavior, you will be readier to act when that happens.
- You can help students feel as though they ***belong*** in your course and in higher education by being more transparent about how successful learning happens in your course. You can
 - Use your ***TILT expertise*** on any assignment or exam to show how it relates to important learning goals/outcomes for the course and explain the criteria students will be judged by, so that students see the context for learning
 - Identify problems or challenges that are ***typical*** with a concept or task, so that students don’t feel that their struggle indicates overall incompetence—perhaps by sharing some of the difficulties that you experienced as a student, or may even still experience as a professional

- Recommend strategies for successful studying, time management, writing projects, or group work, so that students can improve strategies as well as knowledge
- Add metacognitive opportunities for students to connect learning to their own goals or behaviors ([exam wrappers](#) and [exit tickets](#) are two common options)
- Directly invite students to acknowledge confusion and/or ask for help, through anonymous polls, invitations to (and/or bonus points for) your virtual office hours, and/or directions for group work
- You can work to overcome bias and build more **community** in your course by creating space for ideas and conversations that might initially seem to be “off task” or “off topic” (i.e., not related to the serious content of your course). You could
 - Make more use of “icebreakers” and introductions, not just in the first class but across the first week of the course (“Start your group conversation by introducing yourself and identifying your favorite/most recent ___”)
 - Model and request from students the sharing of more personal information: not just your professional qualifications, but your hobbies, pets, surprising experiences at the grocery store, and/or challenges in re-opening your lab
 - Create space within class time and/or within assignment time for the kinds of conversations that might happen “naturally” for some students in a classroom or hallway before and after class (“First tell your partner something that was difficult about this assignment and something you’d rather have been doing instead”)
 - Provide “low bar” first steps to any discussion or small-group exercise, in face-to-face or web-conferencing discussions, to help students move more easily past the awkwardness of interpersonal classroom dynamics: Ask a question that everyone can answer easily, provide a model and ask everyone to say something that caught their attention, ask for a show of hands or a quick poll answer to ensure everyone’s participation and contribution

Designing for Flexibility: Adjusting the Scope or Difficulty of Course Materials

Rationale: Why you might scale back on the amount of material you address and/or the complexity of assignments

It is always crucial that you design your course to help students meet the key learning goals or outcomes for the course. If “By the end of my course, students need to be able to **X**” is a key outcome, then you should have major assessments that measure **X**, and provide resources and activities to help students meet that expectation.

However, there are often many paths to **X**. Sometimes **X** requires doing 10 separate things, learning 10 historical elements, or practicing 10 different moves with equal depth and competence. But sometimes “10” is an optimal-but-not-required number.

Whether you are piloting a new course design, looking for ways to increase active or interactive learning, or using your experience to better estimate your own or students’ workload, you may find it helpful to systematically adjust the breadth and/or pace of your course coverage.

This can be a good time to look at your syllabus and see whether there is any way to create some breathing room, by covering slightly less content and/or creating assignments or exams that reduce everyone’s time-on-task a bit. Research shows that having more time for *in-depth learning* can sometimes compensate for any loss in breadth.

Complications: Why you might not adjust your curriculum

- You might not have permission to change assignments, topics, or exams (please check with your department or coordinator)
- Your topics or tasks might be required for certification or accreditation, without much opportunity for flexibility
- Your assignments might be necessary to enable special projects, collaborations, or guests
- Revising your course may require more up-front time than you have, given your own workload and resources

Options: What revisions you might make to design for flexibility

Feel free to modify these suggestions as needed to match your course and students, or to create your own adaptations that address similar issues.

Note that many of these revisions have “a rising tide lifts all ships” implications: while they specifically support students struggling with effects of a significant crisis, students who are experiencing less extreme difficulties often find they have lower stress and better performance when some flexibility is available.

Changes made to *the whole class structure* may be more efficient, even given some additional preparatory work beforehand, than trying to support individual students who get overwhelmed, or trying to re-do a schedule in the middle of the term.

- Revise breadth: If you can drop even one week’s worth of content material (one subtopic, one case study, one primary source, one style or aspect of an issue), you can schedule in some “bonus” days in your semester where you can spill over if some earlier material takes longer to address
- Revise depth: When you can assign one reading rather than two, six homework problems rather than eight, one summary handout rather than a whole article, you can hold students to a high expectation of competence in what they do complete
- Revise complexity: Although your *three-stage group project*, your *researched essay that requires 15 external sources*, or your *community-based project that includes interviews and on-site observations* was developed to give students a rich, challenging learning experience, you might be able to measure your core learning goal (X) with a simpler assignment that allows students to focus on the main outcomes

Designing for Flexibility: Increasing Student Focus and Engagement

Rationale: Why you might adapt to increase the ways for students to see and be motivated by the “relevance” of your course

One of the most common course-design values that faculty participating in Stearns Center events share with us is a goal of “connecting my course to the ‘real world.’” In any semester, that is a worthy goal for faculty: we know that one way that novices move toward expertise is being able to see how individual bits of knowledge relate to a larger, complicated picture.

Students in college courses often struggle to identify and stay focused on key course materials, or on understanding why learning about X is valuable to them in a world wracked by much larger problems.

Research tells us that students who can transfer Friday’s learning to Monday’s scenarios, who feel a sense of agency in choosing some of their learning tasks, and who see how the small task they are doing now prepares them for more complex professional tasks in their future will stay more focused on and engaged with course materials.

In addition to using the [TILT Framework](#) to increase the transparency and visible-relevance of your assignments and activities, you may want to take other steps to help students connect with your course.

Complications: Why you might not adjust your approach

- You might not have permission to revise your syllabus or approach (please check with your department or coordinator)
- The assignments you provide might be required for certification or accreditation, without much opportunity for flexibility
- Your course might cover abstract concepts that are difficult to explain to novices in terms of “real world applications”
- Revising may require more up-front time than you have, given your own workload and resources

Options: Revisions you might make to design for flexibility

Feel free to modify these suggestions as needed to match your course and students, or to create your own policies that address similar issues.

Note that many of these revisions have “a rising tide lifts all ships” implications: while they specifically support students struggling with effects of a significant crisis, students who are experiencing less extreme difficulties often find they have lower stress and better performance when some flexibility and support for motivation is available.

- Build “the real world” into your course from the start, and continuously: look for ways to use your weekly Announcements, the starts or finishes of lectures, examples or texts you include, or ongoing assignments (like a small-bonus-point “Find a recent related article online” option) to continue to remind students how their current work connects to larger issues
- Deliberately and regularly ask students to draw connections: call up their prior knowledge (from the previous week, a pre-requisite course, another field they may know, or their outside lives) through quizzes, surveys, chat posts, or assignment questions, so that you are actively engaging them in seeing how all that learning is relevant
- Deliberately and regularly ask students to predict challenges and/or foresee connections: when they can predict a future use for a skill, apply a concept to a different scenario from the one in which it was first presented, or speculate how changes to context would alter the current task or steps, they become more expert at big-picture, metacognitive thinking
- Where possible, design some assignments to give students opportunities for choice and connection, and encourage them to take advantage of those options: when their final project is grounded in a local business or an engineering project that could help their grandmother, or when they can choose among three readings or assignment options, they gain a stronger sense of control as learners and more motivation to stay focused on the task