

Designing for Flexibility: A Four-Part Series

As universities and faculty evolve, we do so with increased understanding of how adult and near-adult students may face unavoidable struggles in integrating higher education into their lives:

- they may have limited control over their workload, workspaces, and time management
- they may be coping with physical or mental disabilities, or with economic, cultural, or logistical limitations
- they may face emergencies at home, extended illness, competing responsibilities, or unstable sites for doing class work
- they may come to class with high motivation and yet with insufficient preparation

Unlimited flexibility does not help learners achieve their goals—and adding flexibility to a structured space within an institution doesn’t come without consequences or tradeoffs.

But research demonstrates that added flexibility in a learning environment can enhance learning, strengthen a sense of belonging, compensate for structural inequities, improve perceptions of fairness, and enable students’ agency in their own education and profession. Even when the workplaces and communities they inhabit or are aiming to join—“the real world”—may have less flexibility, creating alternative pathways *for people who are learning* is still a valid decision for faculty to make. (And really, many workplaces do have more flexibility than it may first seem, even if that flexibility has consequences.)

Expansions of flexibility can be like the proverb, “a rising tide lifts all ships”: while changes can 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.

This series addresses four kinds of flexibility:

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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.

As we evolve new expectations, 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 standards
- 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 it is 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 you 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 to all students 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) have more lasting and positive results than more generic assignments ("write an additional short paper" or "do two extra homework sets")

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—because students fully take up key background knowledge and practice field-related analysis skills that will help them learn additional information on their own.

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 interaction with guests or community partners
- 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 anxiety or disengagement, 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

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. 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—at GMU or their prior school—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. In addition, research suggests that "fast learners" aren't more talented, but simply have more (remembered) preparation in the field. Helping all students catch up on missed information and "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 limited prior resources, 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 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
- You might use office hours or “student hours” in the first few weeks as short, active review sessions to provide information and answer questions about crucial foundational concepts, and encourage students to attend as an investment in their own success (rather than a compensation for their shortcomings)