10 Course Policies to Rethink on Your Fall Syllabus

By Matthew R. Johnson

How to adapt your syllabi to better help students in what promises to be another complicated semester.

This month marks the start of the third academic year shaped by Covid-19. A combination of factors — the more transmissible Delta variant, the lagging vaccination rates, and the mixed support for masks and mitigation strategies — suggest that the fall of 2021 may look more like the fall of 2020 than many of us want to admit. Yet there are steps you can take, as you shape your syllabi, to better support students through what looks to be another thorny semester.

As faculty members, we've seen firsthand how students have struggled during the pandemic. Now, in addition to anecdotal evidence, several emerging studies show that the students who have been hit hardest are the same ones that higher education often underserved before the pandemic: students of color and of lower socioeconomic status and those with mental-health concerns and physical and learning disabilities. In addition, some unfolding evidence suggests that students who contracted Covid-19 experienced high levels of depression, anxiety, and food insecurity.

What follows is a list of 10 things to re-evaluate on your course syllabi. I first offered this list on Twitter in late July. I've elaborated on it here and submit the following ideas not as edicts but as opportunities to reflect on your current teaching practices and imagine alternatives that better support students.

No. 1: Attendance policies. Examining your attendance policy is a great place to begin. I know class is important. I know students do better when they show up to class. But I also know that a significant number of students will contract Covid-19 in the fall semester (this report estimated that 7 percent of students self-reported a Covid infection in the fall of 2020 — almost assuredly an undercount). They will feel pressure to attend your class so they do not lose out on those all-important

participation points or to avoid the penalties you have set forth for missing another class.

Instead, consider reworking your attendance policy in one of these ways:

- Expand the number of classes a student can miss.
- Develop alternative assignments to in-person attendance.
- Leverage technology to deliver content remotely and in person simultaneously.
- Drop your attendance policy altogether.

No. 2: Group work. As long as I am poking at practices that faculty members have really strong feelings about, let's talk about group work. Wonderful outcomes can occur from having students work in teams on projects. But it's worth thinking about the conditions needed to achieve those outcomes and whether those conditions will be possible in the fall semester. Students who are anxious about impending Covid-test results, battling the virus, taking care of family members, and/or working long hours to afford college will have a difficult — if not impossible — time coordinating group work.

Don't believe me? Survey your students about their group-work experiences during the previous semester. My guess is the negative group-work stories will far outnumber the positive ones. Consider offering students a choice: Work alone on a project or in a group. Perhaps even recast your course's "indispensable" group project into something less burdensome on students.

No. 3: Late assignments. No one has escaped this health crisis unscathed. During the pandemic, I split child-care duties with my wife, felt exhausted, and had trouble focusing. I had to ask for extensions from journal editors, co-authors, and colleagues. I dropped the ball on some things; I graded assignments later than usual. I received a lot of grace from others.

College students deserve that same grace and understanding when they have trouble meeting your deadlines for course assignments. So consider these alternatives:

- Set target dates instead of firm due dates.

- Have a "consequence free" late policy on one or more of your assignments (e.g., if an assignment is fewer than five days late, it will be considered as submitted on time).
- Offer incentives for early submissions (e.g., five extra points for an assignment submitted five days early, four extra points if it's four days early, and so on).

And if you refuse to budge on your late-work policy, you must publicly proclaim in class that you never asked for extensions on reviews, referee reports, revisions, or anything of the like during the pandemic.

No. 4: Workload. The pandemic has left many students more stressed than ever by physical-health, mental-health, and financial problems. Try to find places in your courses where you can achieve the same learning outcomes yet lessen the workload: Can some readings be optional? Can weekly written reflections become biweekly assignments? Can traditional 10-page essays become 800-word op-eds written for a local publication?

Bonus: Lessening the work for students also means that you — tired and stressed faculty member — have fewer assignments to evaluate throughout the semester.

No. 5: Where to find help. If you don't already, list resources on your syllabus for students who are struggling — things like a campus counseling office, teaching center, financial-aid program, or local food pantry. You should also link to those support services on the course website in the learning-management system. Talk about them on the first day of class and throughout the semester.

Your institution may have relevant language available that you can insert on your syllabus, or you might search the internet for that phrasing. I helped create several sample statements for my own campus, Central Michigan University, which you can adapt.

No. 6: Tone. Does your syllabus make you sound like the kind of person a struggling student would approach? Or avoid?

Most of us like to think of ourselves as approachable, but plenty of students don't see us that way. Someone remarked on Twitter that syllabi now bear more resemblance to software-user agreements than shared-learning agreements. Have someone else read

your syllabus to look for ways to make you sound less like a crotchety faculty member hardened by long years of service and more like a human being invested in your students' success and well-being.

No. 7: Office hours. Most students have no earthly idea what office hours are, and many fear them. Something I always do on the first day of class (more advice here on that subject) is ask students if they understand the concept of office hours. Most seem to think my office hours are the only time I will be on the campus that week or are a period of the week devoted solely to email and other paperwork. (Wouldn't that be a wonderful reality?)

Don't just list office hours on your syllabus. Be specific about their location and purpose. For example:

- Provide examples of why students might visit your office hours.
- Hold them virtually, in the student union, or outside (weather permitting).
- To convey their purpose, call them "student office hours," "student success hours," or "hangout hours."
- Use a free scheduling service like Calendly so students can book appointments with you automatically (to reduce the amount of email you get trying to schedule meetings with you).
- Remind students about your office hours each week as you end class.

No. 8: Course costs. College is expensive. (No kidding, Matt! Tell us other things we don't know!) Financial hardships worsened for many low-income families during the pandemic. So in fine-tuning your syllabus, take time to review the required reading materials to see if you can reduce their cost to students. Talk to your librarian about potential no-cost or low-cost alternatives. (open educational resources are plentiful on the internet.) Instead of asking students to purchase an expensive new edition of a textbook, see if a cheaper, older version will suffice. Make free copies of texts available at the library or in your office.

You might not be able to put much of a dent in a student's educational costs, but even small savings offer large benefits to anyone struggling financially.

No. 9: Camera policies. If Twitter is any indication, faculty members have lots of opinions about requiring remote students to turn on their cameras during class. I have read more than I care to admit about this divisive subject, and maybe you have, too.

However, given the theme of this column, I want to invite those of you who require students to keep their cameras on to reflect on why.

I have taught to countless blank screens during the past 18 months, and I don't want to relive the experience. Yet it's also nearly impossible to maintain any kind of eye contact with large matrices of glowing faces. More to the point, requiring cameras to be on presents a host of problems:

- Access to high-speed internet and quality cameras can be barriers to access for some students.
- Students often feel as though they are being surveilled and fret over superfluous things like their appearance or their surroundings that limit learning.
- Video streaming on Zoom and other such systems is also a bandwidth killer.

Rather than require all remote students to be on camera, find ways to incentivize and invite camera usage or other forms of participation (I personally love [Poll Everywhere](#)). And if you think that students pay better attention when their cameras are on, I can tell you most of the colleagues I interact with have perfected the art of doing other work or perusing the internet while seemingly "paying attention" in a Zoom meeting. Odds are, students are even better at that than we are.

No. 10: Grading policies. At some point this fall (or perhaps all semester long), your students might not turn in their best work. I have already discussed late-work policies, but grading involves so much more. Is there a way to provide constructive feedback without demoralizing them for the rest of the semester?

Some academics have opted for "[ungrading](#)," an approach that minimizes or eliminates grades in favor of other forms of feedback. If you're not ready to join the ungrading movement, you do have other options:

- Offer students a choice of assignment options that allow them to play to their strengths.
- Give students an opportunity to revise and resubmit their work.
- Consider dropping their lowest grade for an assignment or a test.

A little flexibility will go a long way in relieving both students' stress and your own, and may provide significant boosts to their confidence and learning.

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