From: Jonathan Eldridge
To: Jonathan Eldridge
Subject: Spring 2023 Faculty Information & Updates, Volume XVIII
Date: Monday, May 15, 2023 8:48:40 AM
Attachments: Course Correction.pdf
Weighing in on the syllabus.pdf

Dear College of Marin Faculty:

This week I've attached a short piece about getting feedback from students by asking them to annotate the syllabus at the end of the term. Some interesting approaches—and what faculty have learned—are shared. The second article describes the tension between pre- and post-COVID student needs and expectations as well as a number of faculty who are experimenting with how to best provide reasonable flexibility AND needed structure to help students succeed. It's on the longer side, but the questions posed and the solutions offered are good food for thought when you have the headspace to consider how to start Fall Semester on the right foot. That said, on page 5 there's some good content about deadlines, which is particularly relevant right now!

Somehow this is the last week of classes and next week we are in finals and then celebrate our students at Commencement on the 26th. If you have yet to rsvp for Commencement, please do so. We all can benefit from seeing the tangible outcomes of our efforts as students and their families come together to celebrate the milestone of college graduation and/or transfer.

One other item—Please see below for a message from our College Bookstore manager.

If you need anything at all as we proceed through these final days of the academic year, do reach out.

Thank you.

Jonathan

A message from our College Bookstore manager

Hello College of Marin community, I'd like to share with you an exciting update within the Follett structure that will positively impact your bookstore.

Over the past several months Follett has worked to reorganize the structure of our bookstores to better help support our Regional Managers, Store Managers, Team Members, and improved communications within our Campus communities. Regions have been broken down into markets which are overseen by Market Leaders and the Store Manager position is now titled Campus Store Leader. Campus Store Leaders will report to our Market Leaders and Market Leaders will report to our Regional Managers. In addition to the on-campus support, we have a newly created Course Materials Market Manager, taking your course adoptions - Nathan Howe and Accounts Payable Market Manager - Julie Swinson joining our Team.
Monday May 1st marked the official start of these organizational changes. the

College of Marin and Dominican University have been created into one of our markets and I have officially stepped into the Market Leader position.

What does this mean for the College of Marin Bookstore?
1. I will be able to split my time more judiciously between our Campus Store Leaders and Bookstore Teams within our market.
2. There will be a new face joining our bookstore team who will oversee operations on a full-time basis at the bookstore, working directly with our students and campus staff. I do need to hire 1 more Camus Store Leader. If you know of anyone who is looking for a Full-Time management position, there is one currently available in our market. Please have them reach out to me.
3. I will be able to spend more time at Dominican University as each location will have a dedicated Campus Store Leader.
4. You will have a dedicated manager to accept book adoptions and accounts payable. However, if you'd still like me to enter your adoptions or if you have pressing needs, I will always be available to assist. My personal cell phone is (707) 812-4566. Please don't hesitate to reach out if you need anything!
5. I will be able to communicate more effectively and timely to campus / department needs.

It has been a pleasure getting to know many of you, but this is not a goodbye. I will be more visible on campus helping our new Campus Store Leader and Bookstore Team (interviews currently taking place for the position here at the College of Marin) and will have a larger presence to support our campus community in this new elevated role. I'm sure Nathan and Julie will also be reaching out soon to introduce themselves as well. I still look forward to meeting more of you in the coming weeks and days.

GO MARINERS!

Thank you.

Mike Raymond

Market Manager, Marin County

Dominican University of California

College of Marin

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Course Correction

Students expect ‘total flexibility’ in the pandemic-era classroom. But is that really what they need?

By Beckie Supiano

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For all the well-known frustrations of remote instruction, Mark A. Sarvary anticipated that moving back to the classroom could prove just as challenging. Students, after all, had grown accustomed to a different course format — and to a whole different set of policies, too.

So Sarvary, a senior lecturer of biology at Cornell University, surveyed his students in “Investigative Biology.” The inquiry-based lab course for biology majors, with a lecture component and smaller lab sections taught by graduate students, is taken by around 900 students each year. Like most college courses, it made an emergency pivot online in the spring of 2020.

Before the course went back to meeting in person, in the fall of 2021, he wanted to know: Which aspects of the online course did they want to keep?

The survey, completed by about 230 students, found that a large share saw value in some aspects of face-to-face learning: 83 percent preferred that their smaller lab sections meet in person, and 61 percent wanted group work to occur in person so that they could prepare their class presentations together.

But it also found that many of them wanted to keep many components of the online format. Ninety percent of students wanted to submit assignments online. Seventy-six percent wanted to take their exams online with flexible deadlines. And 68 percent wanted recorded, asynchronous lectures to be made available.

Office hours were another example of changing norms. When “Investigative Biology” was online, the instructional team noticed that more students attended office hours. Anecdotal feedback Sarvary received as chair of his college’s committee in support of teaching and learning suggested that students disliked trudging uphill in the snow of Ithaca, N.Y., just to ask a question or two. Popping into Zoom was much easier.

So when classes went back to meeting in person, he incorporated what he’d learned from the students’ feedback. The course continues to offer online office hours. After all, why would students want to go back to an old version of college that felt harsher?

Sarvary's findings speak to the challenge professors now face: how to provide something like a normal college education when students' expectations have really changed. When *students* have really changed.

Everyone keeps telling professors to "meet students where they are" — even if it takes more time and effort. But where are they, exactly? Covid has shaped students' lives, but not all in the same way. Some are living with health problems or have lost loved ones. Others are recovering from the isolation of the early pandemic, or are making sense of the polarization it has deepened. Their social skills have grown rusty, their concentration limited.

On top of that, many students are struggling with their mental health, with rates of anxiety and depression being especially high. Some have picked up extra shifts at work, reducing the time they have to study and complete their assignments, and interfering with class attendance. Others are asking for exemptions in situations where they would have made do before.

Professors have found that students are not where they left them back in the first part of 2020. Many seem unmotivated, disengaged. They struggle to come to class, to keep up with the work. But they expect professors to work with them, and they assume they'll pass their classes anyhow. That, after all, is what they're used to.

Students aren't the only ones with these expectations, either. On many campuses, faculty members face growing pressure from administrators looking to shore up retention and graduation rates, too.

Increasingly, though, professors aren't so sure that this level of flexibility is working. For one thing, juggling frequent absences and requests for recordings, extensions, and other forms of flexibility is exhausting for already-drained professors. But that's not their only concern. Many professors suspect the extensive flexibility students now expect might also be undermining their learning.

Back in the first chaotic weeks of emergency remote instruction, most professors agreed they had to let go of their expectations. So they threw out some of their rules. They stopped taking attendance, subtracted readings and assignments, rethought exams, and accepted late work.

What choice did they have? Classes were online, but not all students had reliable internet access. Students were stranded, sick, and stressed out. It was an emergency.

Despite the optimistic pronouncements of college leaders, there was never one clear moment when that emergency ended. That complicated professors' decisions about whether and when to return to pre-pandemic policies and expectations.

Classes resumed meeting in person, but they were not back to normal. Precautions like masks and social distancing forced professors to reinvent once again. Students kept getting exposed to and infected with

Covid. The weight of living through the pandemic and the weirdness of going to college in it changed students in ways that everyone is still sorting out.

To professors, some of the flexibility they extended during the past few years might have felt like a short-term deviation. But for students, it's just how things are done now.

Students now seem to have "this expectation of endless flexibility."

Students now seem to have "this expectation of endless flexibility," says Sarah Rose Cavanagh, senior associate director of teaching and learning and an associate professor of practice in psychology at Simmons University, in Massachusetts. Cavanagh sees it in her own teaching. She has long assigned "flash presentations," in which students take turns finding an article about an experiment on a topic they're covering in class that week, and give short presentations to the class as if they were researchers. In the past, students sometimes asked for make-ups because of illness or other reasons. But things changed this past semester; students have asked ahead of time to reschedule their five-minute presentations. When Cavanagh, who moved to Simmons in 2021, compared notes with colleagues, they agreed this sort of request is a recent change. Students seem to assume that due dates aren't set in stone; they can move them if they feel the need.

"I don't want to use the word 'entitlement,' because I don't mean snotty entitlement," Cavanagh says. "But just a matter-of-fact-ness kind of entitlement, like, Oh, well, I am not going to be able to present on this day. What are the dates that I can present?"

As the parent of a high-school student, Cavanagh has an idea why students have landed here. When classes were remote, she says, "it was just like, Get your stuff in when you can." Zoom school, Cavanagh says, extended a lot of grace, as it should have. But this was the result: "The nature of academic deadlines changed during the pandemic."

It remains unclear, Cavanagh says, whether students' new expectations are a temporary aftershock that will work itself out in time or part of a broader cultural shift, the same kind of boundary-setting behind workers' quiet quitting and resistance to return-to-office plans.

There have always been situations when students can't get to class or hand in something on time, and some level of flexibility has always been called for. Even before the pandemic, an influx of first-generation and low-income students and growing recognition of the student mental-health crisis pushed many — though not all — professors toward flexible policies. The question is *how* flexible. But as professors have given students lots of flexibility, they've watched them struggle to meet the basic expectations of a course. So something very different — structure — is *also* called for. Here again, the question is how much.

Taking a college course is not the only way to learn something. Someone who's curious about a topic could always read a textbook or find lectures on YouTube. But the standard structure of a course — the presence of classmates and an instructor, showing up to class, participating, handing in assignments at particular times and responding to feedback on them — motivate students and help them follow through on their intention to learn.

Cavanagh's flash presentations are a good example of the tension between structure and flexibility. The assignments, she says, work well when presentations occur right at the end of a particular topic or piece of content. "Otherwise we end up having presentations about positive psychology when we're discussing mental-health struggles, or the brain regions when we're talking about facial expressions," she said in an email. "It gets kind of scrambled."

Attendance is another example of the benefits of structure: Evidence suggests that stricter policies are correlated with better attendance, and absences negatively correlate with grades.

And structure, research shows, is especially important for students who come to college with fewer advantages, who haven't been as challenged academically, who don't have well-informed guides outside of their professor. Part of the challenge, then, is that some of the students whose life circumstances require flexibility are the same ones who benefit from added structure.

Some professors have found ways to restructure the way their courses unfold during the term so that they meet their pedagogical goals while also adapting to the needs of their students.

In his introductory broadcast-writing course at Jacksonville State University, in Alabama, J. Patrick McGrail wanted to pace the class so that he could give thoughtful responses to writing assignments. At the same time, McGrail, a professor of communication and broadcasting, thinks students simply need more time to complete their work. Many of his students work full time, or close to it, and he knows many face mental-health challenges, too.

So recently McGrail has started letting students work on their major assignment — writing a 25-page script for a television episode — during class time. That's meant shifting his lectures to the first two-thirds of the term so that later class periods are available for students to write during time they've already blocked off, with both computers and McGrail at their disposal.

The conversation around flexibility versus structure is often focused on the extremes. Karen Costa, a faculty-development facilitator who also teaches as an adjunct, describes those poles as "toxic rigor," where students have to provide a doctor's note or obituary to miss class, and "total flexibility," which serves only those with excellent executive-functioning skills.

Neither extreme, Costa says, supports learning. The challenge for professors is striking a balance. That work, she says, depends on context, with no perfect answer and no finish line.

Some teaching contexts make that balance harder to strike. “Things compound if you have a lot of flexibility in a large class,” says Viji Sathy, an associate dean of evaluation and assessment in the Office of Undergraduate Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she is also a professor of practice in psychology and neuroscience.

Another challenge, Sathy says, is that implicit bias leads students to perceive policies differently, depending on who has set them. So if an older, white male professor is very flexible, students might take that as a sign that he trusts them. But if the flexible professor is a young woman of color, she says, they might assume “she has no idea what she’s doing.”

College leaders, Sathy says, must consider such nuances when they evaluate teaching. Adding flexibility is much more work in some courses than in others, and professors can set the exact same policies and see different results.

Professors are feeling this tension between structure and flexibility in many parts of course design, but nowhere so much as in how to handle deadlines.

Deadlines are an inescapable fact of college courses. The term will end; professors will submit grades. At one extreme, professors can decide that all the work of a course is due when the term ends, and nothing is late until then. The drawbacks are real: Such a policy can leave professors with a mountain of grading at the end and deprive students of the chance to learn from feedback along the way.

At the other extreme, professors can set a series of hard deadlines without extensions, except, say, for serious illness or a death in the family. Students have to ask, and maybe provide evidence, which puts an extra burden on the students — some of whom will be more comfortable asking for an exception than others. And it puts the professor in the uncomfortable position of wading into students’ personal business to decide what merits an extension.

There is, of course, a great deal of space between those poles to do something, and many professors are exploring different options. One approach that’s gained popularity through pandemic teaching is offering “oops tokens,” which allow students to turn in a certain number of assignments late without penalty and without having to provide a reason.

Michelle Pacansky-Brock has put a lot of thought into the design of the community-college courses she teaches online. Each assignment is meant to take students one step forward in their learning. Students who fall behind are more likely to drop the course, or fail it.

At the same time, she knows that perfection is impossible.

In an informal video message — shot in her backyard, with her dog’s tail wagging behind her — Pacansky-Brock, a faculty mentor for online teaching and learning in the Foothill-De Anza Community College District, in California, tells her students that deadlines are like a bull’s-eye. “Your task,” she says,

“should be to try to aim for that bull’s-eye every time. But if you miss it, just pick up the dart and throw it again.”

In the video, Pacansky-Brock explains that she’ll follow up with students when they miss the target. Not to punish them, but to help.

I feel like we really neglected the well-being of our faculty during remote learning.

Covid has complicated how professors think about extensions, says Nicha Otero, an associate professor of psychology in the human-sciences department at the University of Arkansas at Fort Smith. When students test positive for Covid, some are still able to complete their assignments from home, and others are too sick to get out of bed. What policy accounts for that?

Otero has rethought her approach in recent years, settling on a system with two hard deadlines: one at the midpoint and another at the end of the semester. This creates a bit of a grading backlog, she’s found, but at least it coincides with breaks.

To keep students motivated and on track, Otero provides progress reports that let students see the assignments they’ve completed so far and how many of the points available in a course they have earned.

“Most students respond to that progress report,” Otero says. “Like, Oh my gosh, I didn’t realize that three weeks have passed, and I have done nothing. I thought I had time!”

For some professors, though, students’ ability to hit deadlines *is* important to measure. Gayle Miller is in that group. Miller, the department chair of legal studies at the College of Lake County, in Illinois, teaches students who are pursuing careers as paralegals. In that profession, “deadlines are meaningful, and delays have significant consequences,” Miller wrote in an email.

So Miller’s policies take deadlines seriously. Late work is penalized, and the penalties escalate with the lateness. Eventually, work is so late that students won’t get any points for it — but she still requires them to do every significant assignment in order to pass.

Miller thought the policy was clear, but during the pandemic, students were confused. They didn’t realize they could turn in work late. She didn’t alter her policy, but she changed how she described it, saying first that late work would be accepted, and then explaining its consequences. That led more students to turn things in — but fewer to hit the deadlines.

That created new problems. Managing late work is a major time suck, Miller says. Grading an assignment from earlier in the term pulls Miller out of the flow of her other work, and leaves her with less time to focus on the students who are keeping up with the work. Those challenges, Miller notes, are especially acute at community colleges like hers, where instructors have heavy teaching loads and do not have teaching assistants to help with grading.

A good way for professors to think about deadlines, and to navigate the tensions between flexibility and structure, is to think through what their goals really are, says Costa, the faculty-development facilitator — and whether or not their course policies are in concert with them. Otherwise, students' grades will be driven by factors that aren't tied to their learning. "Are you interested in measuring and supporting students in learning about Maslow's theory of psychological development," Costa says, "or are you interested in measuring their executive-function skills?"

Even as professors try to set sound, sustainable course policies, they know that those policies can do only so much. Sometimes students don't succeed, and it has nothing to do with the way a course was designed, Miller says. "As an instructor, I want to be very mindful," she says, not to be "a barrier to [students'] success. But I can't change [their] whole world."

That's a message Andrea Aebersold emphasizes in her conversations with instructors. At the University of California at Irvine, where Aebersold is director of faculty instructional development, student absences are presenting a significant challenge. "Some faculty are like, Oh, my God, I feel for the student, but this is also taking a toll on me, trying to meet all these different needs," says Aebersold. "It is just so complicated. And so much of it is beyond a student just not wanting to come to class."

When professors talk to students about *why* they can't come to class, Aebersold says, figuring out what to do only gets messier. During emergency remote instruction, some students picked up work shifts during their scheduled class times, since they could do their coursework asynchronously or half-listen on Zoom. Not all of them stopped double-booking themselves when classes went back to meeting in person. Some students miss class because they're working during it.

Other students live far from campus, where housing is more affordable. But then the commute to campus is expensive and time-consuming, and students are unwilling or unable to make it to each class.

Those situations may be on the extreme end, but they put professors in a bind. It's hard to do well without coming to class, but students' financial needs are real. When professors bring such cases to her, "I hate it," Aebersold says. "I don't know what to tell them."

So Aebersold counsels professors to do their best in setting policies and interacting with students. She reminds professors that they cannot solve all the problems students face — and encourages them to flag those cases for their chairs and deans.

“I’m trying to balance what’s good for the students, but also what’s good for the professors,” Aebersold says, “because I feel like — I’ll speak for my own university — I feel like we really neglected the well-being of our faculty during remote learning.”

That neglect extended beyond UC-Irvine. Professors muddled through remote instruction, many of them with little guidance. At the same time, they were suddenly many students’ only point of contact with the college, just when students needed an unprecedented level of support. And college leaders kept saying it would all work out.

Things have changed since then, but that doesn’t mean faculty members have recovered. After all, most colleges haven’t given them the extra time they need to change gears or even catch their breath. Teaching has been hard. The fun parts have been cut out. Students don’t seem to want to be there. Administrators keep saying things are fine.

But neither professors nor students are fine.

Students need flexibility, but they also need structure. Their professors, though, will be hard-pressed to meet either need as long as they feel depleted — and unsupported — themselves.

Beckie Supiano writes about teaching, learning, and the human interactions that shape them.

Weighing in on the syllabus

Student feedback is built into most courses, through end-of-semester evaluations. But many professors find those to be unhelpful because they may focus more on student satisfaction and opinions about the instructor as a person.

What if you could get more-targeted feedback, by asking students to review the syllabus after they've done the work? I spoke to a couple of faculty members who use that strategy. And judging from responses to this Twitter thread, in which a professor advocated such an approach, many people seem intrigued by the idea.

Sarah Woulfin has tried end-of-semester syllabus reviews in a couple of her graduate-level classes. An associate professor in the department of educational leadership and policy at the University of Texas at Austin, she teaches a mix of master's and doctoral students.

At the end of the semester, Woulfin shared a Google doc with a list of the weekly readings. Then she asked her students to mark it up with comments, wanting to know what resonated or proved particularly relevant to them. She carved out time in the classroom for the exercise, she says, and explained that their feedback could help her improve the syllabus for future classes.

I asked Woulfin if she felt her students were candid about the readings. She noted that because it's a shared document and her classes are small, students might pull their punches a bit. (They can comment anonymously if they prefer.) So she looks for other clues: If nobody says anything about a particular reading, that suggests to her that it wasn't as useful as others.

Her students' reactions have shaped her teaching. They might say they wished a topic was discussed earlier or later in the semester, or that they wanted to spend more time on a particular issue. So she has adjusted accordingly.

Woulfin has found the exercise more helpful than traditional evaluations, she says, because it's frankly hard to remember everything that happened otherwise. "By the end of the term, folks have their eyes on the prize and realize the end of the semester is coming," she says. This approach says, "let's take a moment and pause as a group and go back to, What the heck did we cover the first few weeks of the semester?"

Woulfin has heard of other intriguing forms of syllabus review. She recalls reading about one example in which an instructor created a series of posters, each representing one week of the syllabus, then taped them up on the walls, asking students to write comments on them after each class. What did they learn, notice, like, or dislike each week?

If she were doing this exercise with undergraduates, particularly in a large class, Woulfin said, she'd want to think carefully about how to set up the exercise and whether it should be a shared document or

an individual review of the syllabus. But overall, she thinks the collaborative element of syllabus review is a great idea. “It breaks down some of the ‘sage on the stage’ stuff and models that we’re learning together, and I’m listening to you and thinking about things for future iterations.”

Lindsey Meeks, an associate professor in the department of communication at the University of Oklahoma, takes a slightly different approach to syllabus review. Every week at the end of her graduate course on media and civic life, she asks students what they thought of the readings. Because her course is topical she updates as many as two-thirds of the readings each semester. So she wants to know: Did any of the readings feel tired, or tell students things they already knew? Did some readings help them realize things they hadn’t thought of before? What spurred new or deeper thoughts?

“I won’t remove something because it’s not ‘of the moment,’” she said. “But I want to get a sense from students of what to really hold on to, whether it’s a piece from 30 years ago or just came out last year, and why I should hold onto it.”

She has a range of students in her class, from first-year master’s candidates to those earning their doctorates. She says it may take a while for some of the younger students to feel comfortable expressing an authoritative opinion. But as they gain their footing and start to see themselves as scholars, she finds that they begin to weigh in more.

Informally, she does something like that in an undergraduate class where students share, in a group discussion, which readings they thought resonated the most and which seemed dated.

Beth McMurtrie is a senior writer for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, where she writes about the future of learning and technology’s influence on teaching.