Best Practices for Student Engagement

Developed at Associate Dean and Department Head Meeting, October 15, 2020

Introduction

This guide is the product of a collaborative group session amongst Department Heads, Associate Deans, and Directors from across the University. Its intent is to supply a reference of best practices, techniques, and lessons learned from the fall for student engagement and community building in response to an uptick in online learning. It is the hope that this crowdsourced reference material will supply ideas and support to faculty members as we plan for the spring semester.

Please also reference [CETL's resources for teaching preparation](#).

Collaborative Tools and Apps

- Class discussion boards
- Microsoft Teams pages
- Online breakout rooms via WebEx or Blackboard Collaborate
- GoogleDocs
- [Sli.do](#)
- Toucan
- [Flipgrid](#)
- [Gather Town](#)
- Wix blogs
- WebEx polls
- Video assignments

Facilitation and Curriculum

- "Bring the outside world into the classroom in any way possible; a reading, a discussion, a problem, a video that addresses the here and now." – Maria Chrysochoou, Civil and Environmental Engineering
- Invite guest speakers from industry or academe, which break up class time and make connections to current events and industry. Some faculty have found success with integrating scholarly literature directly into class by having students read an article and then meet virtually with the authors.
- Mix modalities to reach different learning styles. Provide at least two options for reference material or assignments to help students engage with material in ways they prefer. Offer a recording and an article, block text and an infographic, a deliverable as a paper or a video.
- After the first two weeks of class, ask students to help design the course moving forward – choosing assignments, reflecting their interests, etc.
- Do the assignments yourself and use your example to kick off group sharing.

Create Opportunities for Discussion

- "Develop as part of the course a reason to talk (virtually) one-on-one with each student to help them understand their strengths and how to develop these strengths." – Kimberly Rollins, Agricultural and Resource Economics
- Allot 10 minutes at the start of class for non-classwork check-in or response to a reflective question.
- Take time for icebreakers beyond the first day.
- Make it easy for students uncomfortable with sharing via video chat to participate with technical features like breakout rooms, polls, and chats.
- Create a space for students to ask questions of the professor – many faculty utilize a "Questions for the Professor" discussion board on Blackboard where students can ask questions about the course, the professor's background, etc.
- To increase student interactions, set the expectation that each student in the course respond to two students' weekly posts or assignments and then respond to two different students the following assignment.
- Learn your students' strengths – have them complete a strengths assessment or personality test and create breakout or project groups based on these strengths.

Clarify Expectations

- Set clear standards in your syllabus or at the beginning of class by establishing a class charter – Should students turn video on during class? What standards do students have for discourse? What do they expect from you and what do you expect from them?
- Set clear expectations in your syllabus about communication – after sending an email, when can a student expect to hear back from you? Do you prefer email, a discussion board thread, or text message?

Solicit and Give Feedback Early and Often

- Develop a GoogleForm where students can share formative feedback on the class or concerns. These evaluations can also be helpful when conducted at the start of the course to assess expectations, mid-course to allow for course correction, and at the end of the course for future application. Develop an action plan based on reflection of the student feedback. Some recommend asking for student feedback once a week.
- When grading student assignments, share a few comments via the feedback section. Ask a few students each assignment to share their feedback on the course. The faculty member isn't asking every student each assignment, but over the course of the term, they will connect with each student about how the course is going.
- Assign a syllabus quiz which will let both students and the instructor know where further clarification is needed.

Make Your Class a Safe and Inclusive Place

- "I find myself constantly reminding our faculty that our realities and the realities of our students are different and they need to ensure that their engagement strategies take into account the

social and economic disparities that exist among our students. We need to be aware that our students might not have the private space, technology, signal strength, and quiet environment that we do in our own homes." – Mohamad Alkadry, Public Policy

- Start the class with a few minutes of reflection to center back to what we are about to start doing in the classroom. This might include some meditation or anything that helps orient to the task we are about start.
- It can be difficult to stay engaged with students in synchronous classes when they're reluctant to appear on video. Never require students appear on camera if they aren't comfortable, but work to explain the value in creating enriching forms of engagement/participation.
- Review syllabi to ensure that there is no off-putting commentary, no implicit bias. Pay attention to racial justice and diversity as you write your syllabus.

Create Opportunities for Additional Conversation

- "Develop as part of the course a reason to talk (virtually) one-on-one with each student to help them understand their strengths and how to develop these strengths. One goal is to make sure students feel a sense of connection with us, and that connection is in the context of hearing POSITIVES, as opposed to the first contact being about a poor grade or missing assignments or something "negative." A second goal is that students may feel less stress about later approaching instructors with their questions and concerns." – Joanne Corbin, Social Work
- "Build relationships and bonds with students while engaging them in authentic and meaningful approximations of real world pursuits in the classroom (e.g., in science classrooms engage students in the construction and critique of explanations of things that happen in the world or the iterative refinement of solutions to problem of consequence)" – Todd Campbell, Curriculum and Instruction
- Arrive 10 minutes early and linger at the end of your synchronous online class time – this creates an easy opportunity for students to speak with you.
- Fostering student engagement in mixed modalities is difficult and may require added effort and a learning curve for both the students and the facilitator. Communicate your difficulties with students and reiterate your commitment to making the course work for all of you. Seek help from colleagues, your Department Head, CETL, your students, or others.
- For an asynchronous class, setting up an optional weekly check in for 10-15 minutes online or incorporating optional guest speaking events can build in connection for students who are looking for it.
- Ask students to keep a journal of thoughts, feelings, how they are spending time on assignments, etc. Journaling can be an effective way to reduce and focus time on projects, give a sense of how students are balancing their time and obligations with other classes, and can help faculty help students do their best work.

Make it Fun

- Create a short video for your introduction and share personal elements about yourself if you're comfortable doing so.
- "In my class of 50, I have each student post a 3-minute video of themselves discussing their intended career path and what experiences informed their interest in a health-related

career. The videos are posted to the discussion board where I and other students can comment and ask questions." – Justin Nash, Allied Health Sciences

- Ask students to introduce themselves by developing a collage or some other alternative graphic way of getting to know them without requiring being on video.
- Send a video of the week or a meme about the course subject area to lighten the mood.
- Break up classes with music, art, images, video clips, recordings, etc.
- Use gamification by building in friendly competitions between students or groups working on a problem set.
- Have students create a short video or presentation on an upcoming class topic. Students will find it refreshing to engage in the topic in a different way and engage with each other differently while switching up the presenter each class.