

Classroom Management Roundtable

D·PREP
SAFETY DIVISION



Classroom Management Roundtable

The following questions come from a training we did with a community college in Northern California. They address issues that affect instructors nationwide in all types of classrooms. Our team of experts were asked to address each questions and provide guidance to instructors working with students in the classroom.

Our panel has decades of combined experience in undergrad and graduate classrooms, at four-year institutions and community colleges. They each offer a unique perspective with practical advice for addressing these challenges.



Amy Murphy, PhD, serves as an associate professor of student development and higher education leadership at Angelo State University. She is also the program coordinator for the M.Ed. in student development and leadership in higher education and the graduate certificate in academic advising, both fully online programs. Amy has over 20 years of experience in higher education and student affairs. She is formerly the dean of students and managing director of the Center for Campus Life at Texas Tech University. Her experiences include being the chair of the school's behavioral intervention team, overseeing prevention and response activities for gender-based violence and discrimination as the deputy Title IX coordinator for students, and having administrative involvement in student conduct, disability services, counseling, and enrollment management.



Lisa Pescara-Kovach, PhD, is a professor of educational psychology at The University of Toledo, where she also serves as the Director of the Center for Education in Mass Violence and Suicide and Chair of the Mass Violence Collaborative. Lisa's international and national level peer-reviewed and invited presentations include, but are not limited to, the topics of suicides and homicides related to bullying victimization, behavioral threat assessment, and school, campus, and workplace shootings. Lisa co-authored *White Supremacist Violence: Understanding the Resurgence and Stopping the Spread*. Her most recent publications address media contagion in connection to suicides and targeted shootings, as well as the mental health and mass shooting myth.



Chris Taylor, PhD, is the President of the International Alliance for Care and Threat Teams (InterACTT) and a consultant with DPREP Safety. He formerly served as the Dean of Students and Chief Student Affairs Officer at Wright State University. Chris has over 30 years of experience in higher education, including residence life, Title IX investigation and adjudication, student conduct, threat assessment, and chairing behavioral intervention teams. His research interests include masculinity and gender and he is the author of a variety of publications.



Tammy L. Hodo, PhD, is the owner and lead consultant for All Things Diverse. Tammy earned her Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in Urban Studies, with a minor in Sociology, specializing in Race, Class, Gender, and Ethnicity. Tammy worked in academia for over 18 years in a variety of positions, including faculty and university administrator. She established All Things Diverse LLC in 2018 to educate the masses about the value of diversity, equity, and inclusion. All Things Diverse, LLC provides consulting services to businesses, academic institutions, non-profit organizations, and government entities that value diversity and want to develop a high-performing, inclusive workforce. All Things Diverse, LLC is dedicated to helping organizations realize the full potential that can only be achieved through deliberate action. The company is committed to helping its clients create a workplace culture of belonging where everyone can thrive.



Jeanne Clifton has over a decade of experience in education, ranging from classroom teaching to one-on-one support. She is currently the reading & study skills coordinator for the TRIO SSS program at Salem State University, a federal grant supporting first-generation/low-income students and students with disabilities. She holds master's degrees in teaching and English and is a licensed high school teacher. Jeanne also hosts the popular podcast, *Actually Autistic Educator*, which aims to amplify autistic voices and perspectives to educators, mental and physical health professionals, and allies. As an autistic adult with a joint disorder that creates limitations around walking, stairs, and standing and frequently requires the use of mobility aids such as crutches, a cane, or a wheelchair, advocacy is a passion, especially as it relates to education and mental health access.



Brian Van Brunt, EdD, is the Director of Behavior and Threat Management for D-Prep Safety and the President of the Workplace Violence Prevention Association. Author of over a dozen books, Brian has spent time as a child and family therapist, university professor, assistant deputy director of training at Secure Community Network, partner at TNG, and president of the National Association for Behavioral Intervention and Threat Assessment (NABITA). He is an internationally recognized expert in behavioral intervention, threat assessment, crisis preparedness, mental illness, and instructional design. Brian has provided consulting services to schools, colleges, and universities across the country and abroad on a wide variety of topics related to student mental health, counseling, campus violence, and behavioral intervention.



1

What are your thoughts on out-of-office and well-being messages? Some examples include:

"I observe evening and weekend hours; please keep this in mind when reaching out to me. I will respond to all emails within 24-36 hours."

"Well-Being Notice: Receiving this email outside of normal business hours? Managing work and life responsibilities is unique for everyone. I have sent this email at a time that works for me. Please respond at a time that works for you."



Amy: Being responsive is important to build rapport and communicate clearly with students. If an out-of-office message helps students and others understand that you value their email and explains when they can expect a response, then YES, please use them. It would be much better for a student to know your response may be delayed than for the student to receive no response and shut down future communications. Consider including common referral points in your message as well. For example, online faculty may want to share a 24-hour number for technical support.



Lisa: I have information on my syllabi regarding why I don't respond to emails on weekends. They know I value time with family, and I encourage them to check deadlines in advance/early in the week to ensure they, too, can take a breather on weekends. I like giving students the link to our distance learning chat support and reminding them it's for tech-related questions rather than course content.



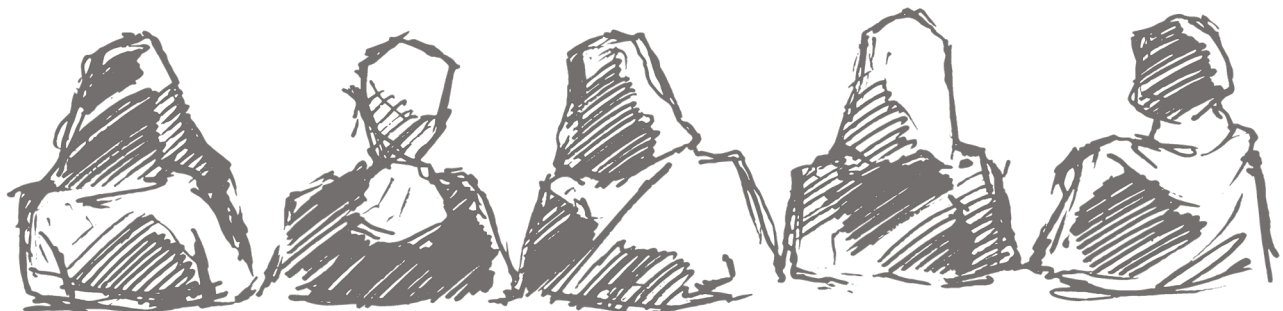
Chris: I think a well-crafted out-of-office message, as does a well-being notice, makes a lot of sense. "[The Art of the Autoreply](#)" from Inside Higher Ed offers some great pointers.



Tammy: I attempt to be as responsive as possible with students as I understand many of them are stressed out about school, work, family, life, etc. I am always willing to respond to an email since I ensure I access my university email on my phone. When I am away, I ensure I have notified my class and put an away message on my email stating that my response may be slower than usual as I am away and have limited access to the internet.



Brian: I saw the above well-being notice on TikTok and now use it on my signature line. It captured how I work at unusual hours (and time zones) and that while I may email in the evening or on weekends, there is no expectation for anyone to respond to me immediately. If you are away during the semester, I also think it can be helpful to have a backup person identified in your out-of-office or away message.



2 What responsibility does a student have to discuss complaints or concerns with their instructor as a first option rather than jumping to higher authorities?



Amy: In training administrators and staff, I would discuss different strategies for encouraging dialogue between the instructor and student when complaints or concerns arise. However, I would do this with an eye toward why interaction with the instructor may not be appropriate or helpful. We can help students know how to approach faculty about concerns and suggest ways to communicate with them. Keep in mind that the opposite should also be true, in that we hope faculty will discuss concerns directly with students when behavior or conduct issues arise and not just refer these out to another office without communicating with the student. We would want faculty to consider the appropriate time, place, and manner for having these discussions and when this is beyond the scope of what they can do on their own.



Lisa: I think they need to feel comfortable with instructors. As a professor, I humanize myself and let them know I accept feedback and suggestions. I talk to them a bit about who I am as a person (without oversharing). I think issues occur when they are fearful or intimidated by faculty, so they skip above to share concerns. We also have to remind ourselves to be open to criticism. We're not perfect, and, at times, it's necessary to be humble and truly listen to our students.



Chris: Ideally, it would be great if we all solved issues directly with the person involved at the lowest level possible. There are a variety of reasons why that doesn't happen, many of them appropriate. I think a clear discussion on the first day of class and a mention in the syllabus about contacting you is appropriate. I also think, however, it's okay to acknowledge that other processes, such as grievance procedures, are options for students. I've had faculty colleagues say that it's inviting trouble, but I think we have a duty to inform students about their rights in our system.



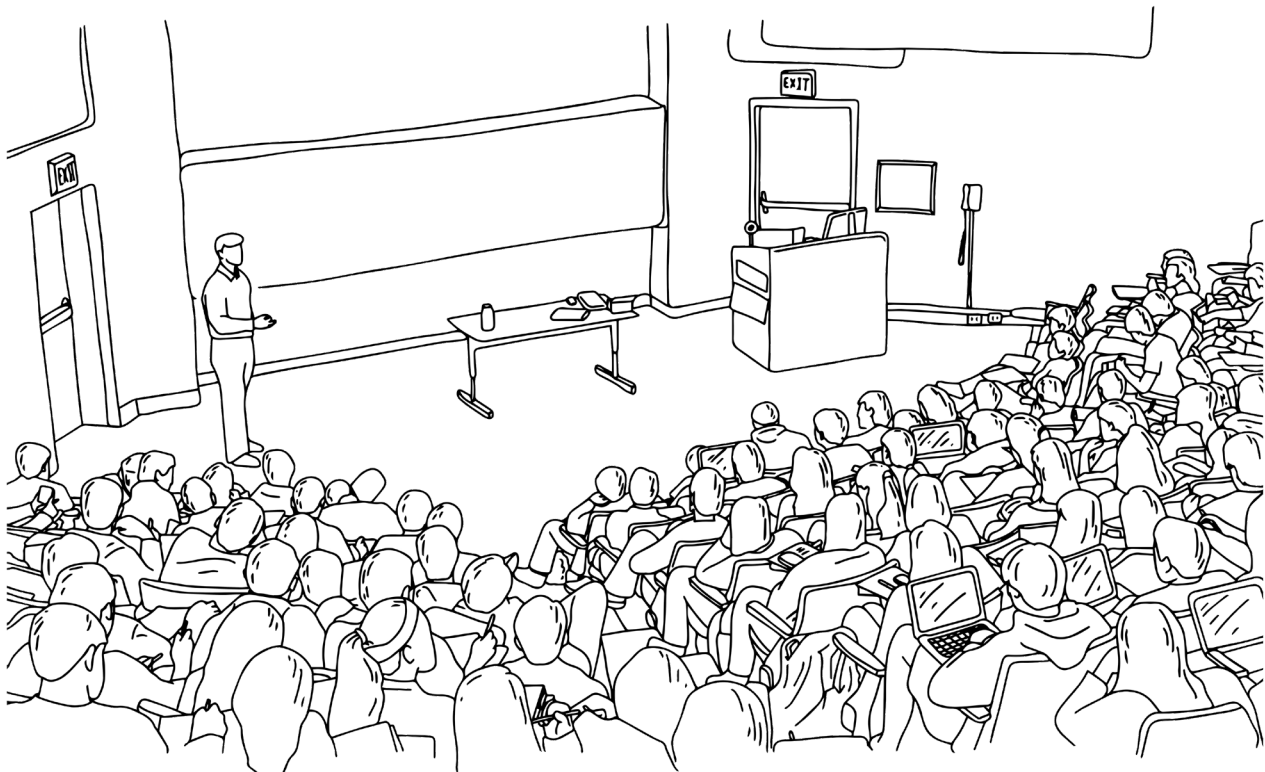
Tammy: It is in everyone's best interest if the student attempts to engage with the professor before going "up the chain of command" to higher authorities unless it is something related to discrimination/ Title VII or Title IX that has taken place in the classroom by the instructor. Cultural mistakes happen often as we are diverse individuals with different lived experiences. I recommend that students set up a time during office hours to talk with the instructor, and if they feel more comfortable, bring a friend with them. If they feel that I have offended them in some matter that they don't feel comfortable enough with me to address, then I would recommend they speak with the head of the department, who I hope would then loop me into the conversation and set up a meeting for all three of us.



Jeanne: It's important to remember that there are countless reasons why a student may be uncomfortable bringing up a topic directly with their instructor—students who have experienced violence or verbal abuse may be very shy around possible conflict, students with various disabilities or who are neurodivergent or students from different backgrounds may likewise be unsure about how to address a potential issue and want to seek out a support person for help. It's never fun to find another person has been added to a conflict, but if a student is unsure how to broach something, it can be helpful for both parties to have that third party present. I have often worked as, essentially, a translator to help the student understand why another instructor is saying/doing something that the student felt was targeted/unfair. I will also acknowledge I had a student bring a complaint to someone above me a few years ago, which felt horrible and frustrating because if they had come to me, I could have cleared it up easily. But as unpleasant as it was, I'm very glad the student had someone they could reach out to for support because that support is what allowed us to figure out a solution and have good interactions going forward. Most student behavior is more a product of the challenges they have faced in their life rather than a reflection of their feelings about me. I find my interactions with students are more effective when I keep this perspective in mind.



Brian: I'd say there is none. While this might not seem fair and equitable, there is a power differential at play here between the instructor and the student. Requiring them to approach the professor first (imagine a Title IX concern, a concern about something that was said in class that upset them) can create a barrier to sharing information. In some cases, say requests for a grade appeal, it would be reasonable to ask the student to approach the professor first, but in other matters, there should be an awareness that forcing the student to address things with the person they may be in conflict with could have a chilling effect on students bringing concerns forward.



3 Can faculty request medical documents or a doctor's note from students who miss classes or assignments? Should faculty even see these if students send them as part of their communication with the instructors?



Amy: In general, instructors should not be asking for medical documentation or doctor's notes. Those types of requirements should come from disability services when needed as part of an accommodation request. Instead, faculty can have clear guidance in the syllabus about how absences and late work will be handled without including a judgement call on "why" a student missed coursework. Those judgement calls can quickly become subjective, inconsistent, and potentially discriminatory. Students miss class or submit late assignments for a variety of reasons, and faculty want to be careful about seeing one justification as more valid than another.



Lisa: Disability offices are best suited to collect and assess a student's needs and then convey them to the instructor in general terms. Faculty are to accommodate and ensure the best and least restrictive experience for all students. We need to understand how best to help our students, but we need to trust disability services and understand they know what and how to communicate a student's needs. What I do think is important is that we remind students that we accept all students, and I even share our discrimination policy to be sure they know their rights.



Chris: If students send them, we have no control over that, but I agree that it's not appropriate to ask for them. If we receive them, re-directing them to disability services or another appropriate office makes sense. Again, noting how absences, late work, etc., will be handled should absolutely be in the syllabus as well as part of a discussion in the first class session.



Tammy: I have had students provide me with doctor's notes or proof that they attended a funeral. I think the note shows the instructor that the student was not misleading them about why they missed a course or an assignment. While it may not be required, I do think it helps instructors and students build vulnerability-based relationships. When a student shows me their willingness to be transparent, it makes me trust what they say when other absences occur. While we must have a plan in place in the syllabus that discusses how we deal with late or missed assignments, I do understand that family emergencies take place, so I ensure I put information about expectations, such as emailing me and letting me know ahead of time, if at all possible



Brian: I'm not a fan of receiving or asking for these kinds of notes. While it's tempting to take a note for an excused absence, some professors may not be comfortable accepting and reviewing these documents for relevance and/or authenticity. While I'm rarely a fan of inflexible policies (my colleagues can affirm this), this is one of those times where routing all of these requests through a central office helps reduce bias and ensure fair, equitable, and professional processes on the part of the college.

4 How flexible should we be when a student asks to miss a class, turn in an assignment late, or reschedule a final? Are there some requests we might consider (e.g., unforeseen illness or conflict with work/family) versus others that we might not (e.g., family vacation)?



Amy: The pandemic forced me to adopt a level of flexibility I had not previously had in my teaching. With few exceptions, this flexibility did not impact my instruction or students demonstrating mastery of the course outcomes. I think it is rare for us not to find times when flexibility is needed in personal or professional life. The classroom is no different. As I mentioned earlier, I do not think it is good practice to judge one student's excuse as more valid than another student's. Ultimately, I think decisions around expectations for students need to be considered in a larger decision-making framework: 1) how has the expectation been communicated, 2) what supports and resources are available to help the student meet the expectation, 3) why is the expectation important to meeting course or program outcomes, 4) what is the impact of the behavior on the student's work in the course, other students, or the faculty member, and 5) is this a reoccurring behavior that has been previously addressed?



Lisa: I allow students to miss class for whatever they deem necessary—they are paying, after all. However, I am clear that the best experience is for them to be present. It's also an alarm bell if a very good student disappears or misses an exam or assignment. When this happens, I reach out to see if the student is okay. I even communicate that I will work with them to make up the work if they are in crisis or are having a family/friend issue. When that's the case, I provide a referral and the link to our campus' care report. In terms of pre-planned vacations, I have no problem at all with them as long as I know ahead of time. Life is short.



Chris: I wholeheartedly agree with Amy. The pandemic really opened us up to what's possible in terms of flexibility. I had a similar experience and think it doesn't make sense to go back to the same old way of doing things. I have had to cancel class on occasion for things that come up, and students have rich outside lives, including jobs, family, illness, and other issues. To Amy's point, be very cautious about giving weight to the validity of one student's needs vs another.



Tammy: Considering that the syllabus, which lists when assignments are due, is given out and posted on day one of the class, I believe students, who are adults, should be responsible for handing in assignments and taking tests on time. I understand that emergencies happen and am always open to being flexible during those times, but other than that, I believe it is up to the student to communicate with the instructor what is taking place that may cause them to hand in work late—that is if they don't want points deducted. If a student misses a class, I am not very concerned as long as they are up to date on their work. Depending on the class size, I may not be able to take attendance when we meet. I've had classes of up to 150 students, so there was no way I could take attendance without missing out on the content for the day's lesson.

5 What are your thoughts on this comment: “Starting last semester, I’ve implemented a ‘digital detox’ with students. Except for special circumstances, I require that all phones be put away while other students and I are talking and during activities. I noticed a huge improvement in connections between students and understanding the material.” What are your thoughts on phones in the classroom?



Amy: Managing technology in the classroom starts with good communication and discussions with the class. We also need to consider what we know about students and their use of technology. Phones can be an important way for students to access course materials or take notes. Phones also relate to different resources and supports students have outside the classroom (needing to be available for child/school emergencies, caregiver needs, etc.). My preference would be to identify times when using technology is appropriate in the classroom, share guidance on how to handle receiving urgent communications during class, and identify specifically when technology is distracting or an obstacle to the academic goals of the course.



Lisa: My students have always been permitted to have their cell phones in class. We often use them as a learning tool, especially when talking about the critical consumption of research. Specifically, we discuss .gov, .org., and other sites as opposed to some of the .com sites that present information as “facts” but are actually opinion-based. For example, there remain websites dedicated to autism spectrum disorder that allow the MMR vaccine myth to proliferate despite no evidence and an admission of falsifying data by the key researcher. Of course, there are other uses. In terms of where they keep their phones during class, they are permitted to keep them within reach, providing that their ringer is off. I guess I think of the big picture. What if there’s a family emergency or they’re waiting on a medical test result? Some things simply can’t wait.



Chris: It’s interesting. Since I started working from home, I’ve discovered that almost everything I do from my phone I can achieve on my laptop as well (texting, browsing, social media), and it seems laptops are pretty ubiquitous and necessary in the classroom. To me, that speaks to addressing the use of technology and then treating students as adults. There may be a need to address individual issues later, but that’s true of most expectations.



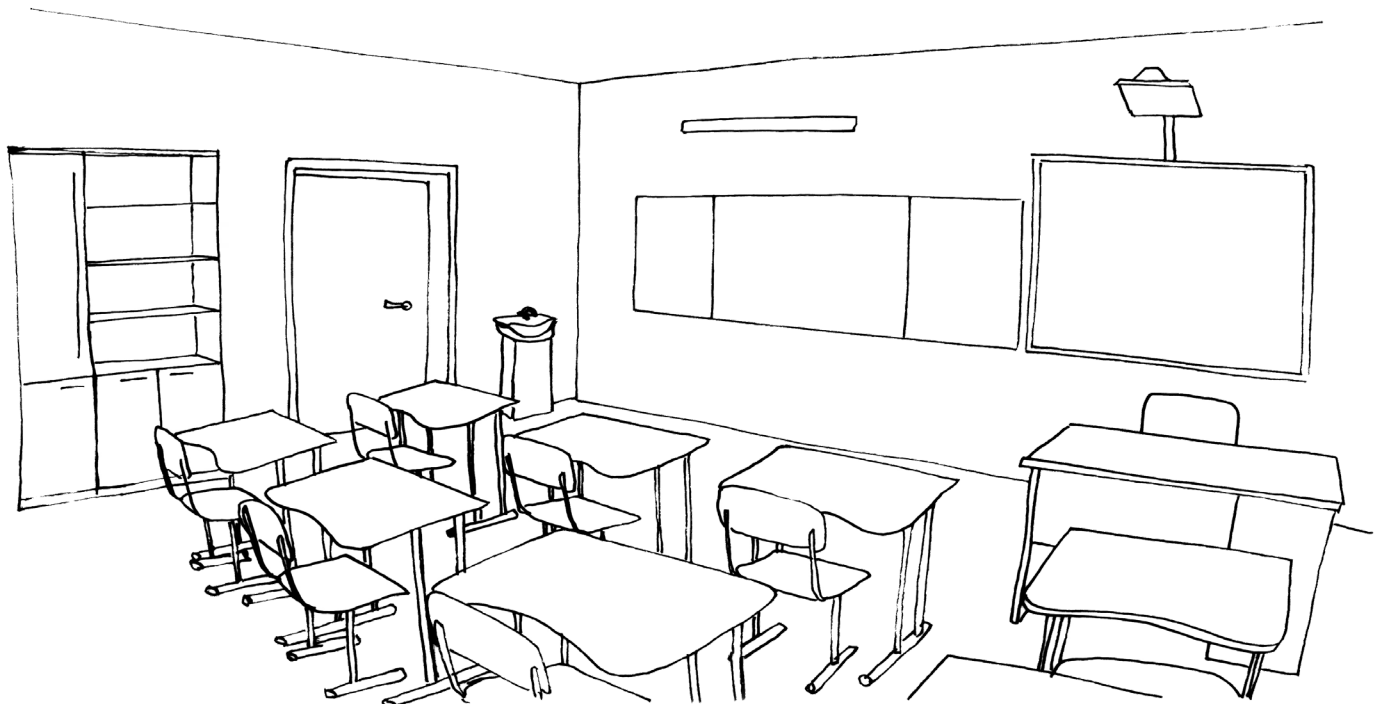
Tammy: I understand that many of our students are parents, taking care of elderly parents, etc., so if they let me know that in advance, I completely understand the need to have their phone out. I do not like to have my students surfing the web while we are in a learning environment. I always let them know my expectations, but I add that if they have things going on and they need to keep their phone close, please do so, but take any calls outside of the classroom.



Jeanne: The worst fight I ever saw in my graduate education degree happened over this; we were all professional teachers with classroom experience but had entirely opposite views, split about down the middle, which heavily reflected our own learning styles. Several people insisted that the only way for students to learn was to allow zero distractions—no use of phone/laptop, no doodling/drawing, nothing that could draw attention away from the lesson. For several of us, though, that was a recipe for disaster. My brain runs fast; I do exceptionally well when skipping levels/prerequisites or with intense professors who deliver content quickly with little to no repetition, but I severely struggle to stay engaged in classes that move at more reasonable speeds. For those of us in that crowd (especially common with several neurological differences), having something to occupy at least part of the brain is needed to be able to continue to absorb information. I regularly do sudoku puzzles or sketch, another classmate shared they wrote poems, while another admitted they hid an earbud under their hair and had music going—because otherwise, our brains turn off, and we miss essential things. All of us were well-known in the class for being active participants and clearly were engaging with the material, but several people insisted it must be making us worse off because it was so removed from how their brains worked where distractions meant disengaging. I like to focus on specific behaviors I want and then structure my class around them directly, such as using frequent non-graded thumbs up/down polls to check comprehension/engagement and including classroom participation in grades. This gives students options to figure out how they want to achieve those goals depending on how their brain functions best.



Brian: Honestly, I'm not a huge fan of this policy. I think many of us multi-task, and for students not paying attention, there is a natural consequence that they will fall behind in learning the material for the course. I would suggest two exceptions to this rule. First, if the class is a lab or has an element of dangerousness, safety, or expensive equipment, then having some additional policies about the use of technology would seem reasonable. The other exception would be if the use of technology is distracting or disturbing other students in the class. There would then be a requirement for the instructor to set a limit on that use.



- 6** Some instructors like to point out that college helps prepare students for the “real world.” For example, an instructor commented, “I never had a job where the timelines for manager summaries and reports were ‘flexible.’ I’ve always felt like the students are forming habits for life while in college. They do not suddenly change up because they graduate.” What are your thoughts on the idea of preparing students for the world and the idea that there is less flexibility in the workplace?



Amy: I’d caution about any insinuation that our students are not already in the “real world.” Students balance many responsibilities alongside their educational ones, including working. An asset-based mindset would instead consider how the experiences a student already has informed what they are learning. More often, I think deadlines and rules are set for the benefit of the individual instructor and less with student learning in mind.



Chris: I 100% agree with Amy, and while there are jobs where deadlines are inflexible, there are plenty, including university jobs, where there is flexibility. Those in a community college setting are even more likely to be balancing a variety of things. I have come across many situations where I didn’t get grading done in as timely a fashion as I’d like, and I hoped for flexibility from my students. I hope I can return the same.



Tammy: I believe college is a place where we transfer knowledge. While I expect students to be on time for class, hand in assignments on time, etc., I am realistic in that many of them work while taking classes. I don’t necessarily agree with the idea that we are preparing them for the workforce in the sense of expectations. I think we are preparing them for their chosen career field by giving them the tools they need to be successful.



Brian: My colleagues covered this well above. The only other thing I might add to this question is the importance of running any requests for accommodations and support through the disability service or accommodation office at your campus. This helps the college stay consistent with the accommodations they offer and documents the needs students may have in a broader sense. Faculty do so much related to their teaching and supporting of the students in their classes. Consider this a time when leaning into the appropriate department for advice and guidance is an important way to set yourself and your students up for success.



7

How can faculty approach reactions to the upcoming presidential election results within the classroom? Do you have any advice on how to handle those situations in a way that respects boundaries with a trauma-informed approach?"



Amy: With structure and planning. Any sensitive or difficult dialogue should have a framework that provides some direction around the topic being discussed, encourages good information literacy and evaluation of sources of information, and integrates campus resources as supports for the students.



Lisa: Always set ground rules in advance. I do so on the syllabus for every class. You will find good examples that lend themselves to encouraging respect and acceptance in all circumstances. If you lay the ground rules and expectations right away, you are less likely to get heated interactions in class. Albright College offers some [sample syllabus statements](#) that might help. Stress that all opinions should be respected and there are to be no personal attacks. Ensure the students are using facts rather than expressing conspiracy theories. In addition, be sure to facilitate the dialogue and not allow one position to dominate. ALWAYS let them know there is no room for hate. Faculty need to understand there will be emotional reactions, but we need to know how to de-escalate should the need arise.



Chris: One place to start is Higher Education Today's article, "[Cultivating a Culture of Civility and Meaningful Dialogue on Campus During Elections](#)."



Tammy: There is a positive way to have discourse about tough topics. We have to establish the guidelines within our syllabus and through our engagement with students that we expect them to show grace and understanding to others. We do not have to agree on every topic, but we do have to be respectful. Unless the class is a political science course where we discuss the three branches of government, electoral college, etc., I do not think we should really discuss politics in the classroom. For me, I don't want my own personal bias about whom I voted for to come out; that is something I prefer to stay neutral on. As a sociology instructor who deals with the forms of government in a chapter of the Introduction to Sociology, I think it is best to establish guidelines in which we cover political discussion, as our country is very polarized around a variety of political topics.



Brian: One issue that comes to mind is being careful whenever an instructor engages in a topic that they have strong feelings about. The potential here is the instructor ends up displaying a bias that alienates students who do not agree with their perspective. While sharing personal ideas about current events may be helpful in some classes related to politics, psychology, sociology, and other related fields, a more useful approach would be for the instructor to serve as a neutral host for the discussion.

8

What are your thoughts about setting limits on AI use in the classroom? Are there online tools that work well to detect this?



Amy: In general, there are not yet reliable AI detection tools. By developing tailored and specific learning activities where a student needs to incorporate aspects of themselves and their individual perspectives into them, we can create some limitations on their ability to just turn to AI. Using and managing AI is also a competency students will need to learn. I am looking forward to incorporating AI into assignments and having students use AI in different ways. For example, they can critique how well AI summarized an article or resource—what did it get right and what did it get wrong.



Lisa: I have a simple AI-related statement on all my syllabi. It reads:

Let's be honest, there is no way for me to prohibit your use of Chat GPT or other AI tools for class assignments. AI can be a useful resource for students and faculty alike. However, you might find yourself in future situations in which you don't have access to Chat GPT and instead must think independently.

Now that it is available, you will be tempted to turn to it for assignments. But you should try not to depend on it. There are aspects of your work that just might benefit from its use, but because it isn't always detailed, accurate, and current, I want your use to be limited. Trust me; there are many times the facts provided in Chat GPT are outdated and simply incorrect. By now, you have accomplished a great deal toward earning your degree. Congratulations! You did it WITHOUT Chat GPT.

You're welcome to use the statement. However, it might not be something that represents your thoughts on Chat GPT or other AI tools. You have to do what best fits your philosophy of teaching.



Chris: AI is a great tool, though I know there is a lot of concern about its misuse. Amy's points about embracing AI as a competency students (and faculty) need to learn are well said. Mixing the variety of assignments and creating assignments that require deeper synthesis and self-reflection are useful ways to prevent AI use.



Tammy: AI is here to stay, so we need to learn how to detect if a student has utilized it to write an assignment. I believe that within certain online platforms, we may be able to detect if a student has used AI to write their paper. Students will cheat themselves out of learning opportunities by using AI instead of doing the work themselves. However, AI can be beneficial in helping generate ideas for paper topics.

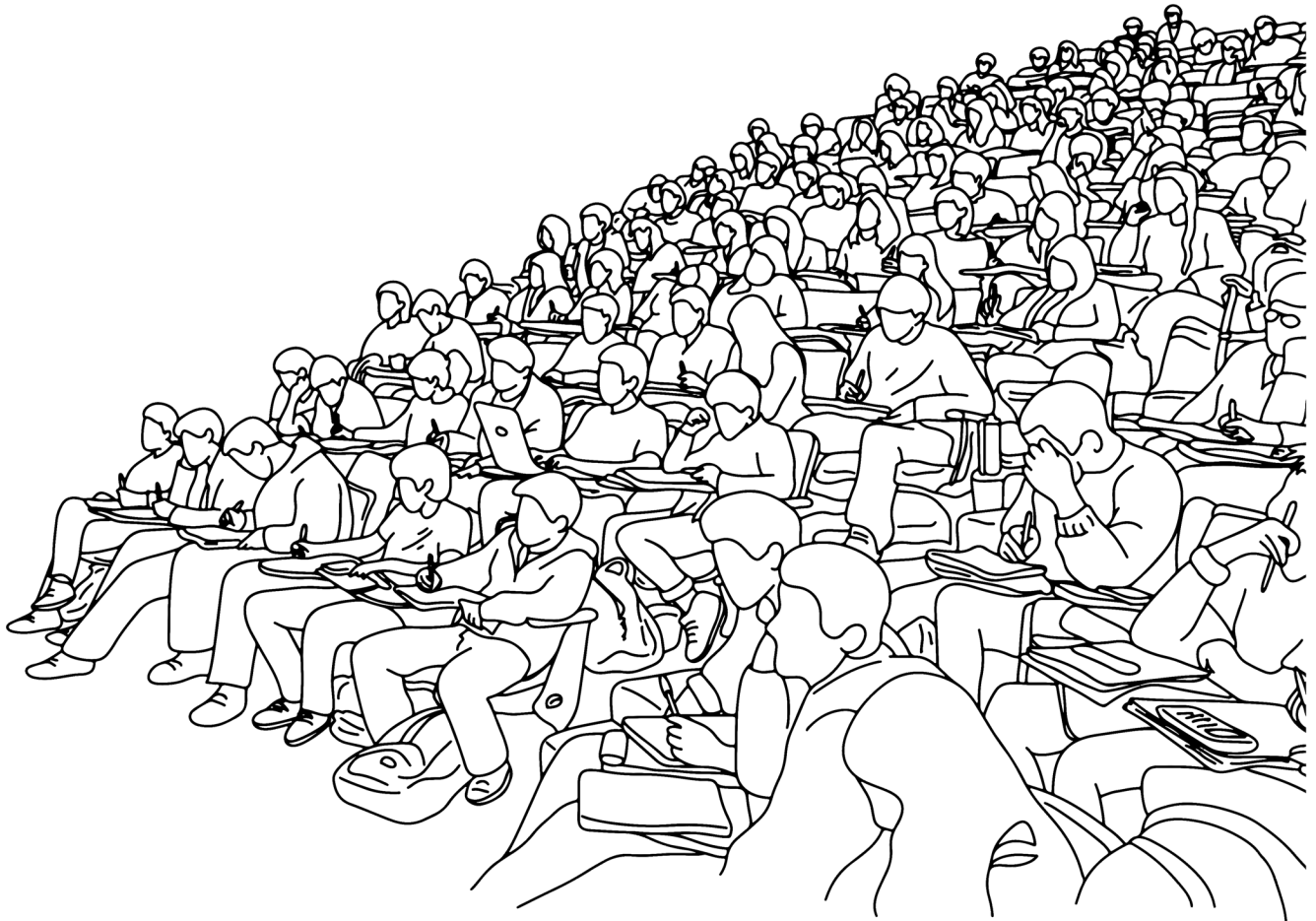




Jeanne: I am extremely wary of the existing AI check tools and have found them to be highly unreliable in my own testing, and I absolutely would not attempt to penalize students over the scores. However, I think this teaches an important lesson I have not seen enough about AI—just because a technology claims to do something and appears to be doing it to an inexperienced eye does not make it true or accurate. Many students and faculty are putting a lot of trust in the hype of AI, both in reliance on these ineffective tools to catch it and also on the other side when encouraging students to use it to check their work or for initial research. Generative AI (AI that is designed to create responses such as ChatGPT, which is distinct from the AIs trained to do specific things like analyze test results for cancers and such) draws on an expansive collection of written material and makes guesses based on the patterns seen there. Unfortunately, because the system is designed primarily to mimic human word patterns rather than to be an accurate research tool, it is especially good at writing something that sounds correct but falls apart under scrutiny or fact-checking. Most of the ways I have seen faculty attempt to use it in the classroom so far show a fundamental misunderstanding of how large language models work and the very real issues they have, both around generating false results that sound plausible and how they perpetuate the biases present in the initial data set while being pitched as fair and equitable. Technology like AI can do a lot of things, but it's essential to gather a solid understanding of the way it actually works versus how it has been advertised before bringing it into the classroom.



Brian: I'm with Tammy on this one. I think we need to think about creative ways to accommodate and lean into AI as an aid to supercharge our assignments and learning. There were instructors who were upset when laptops started coming into the classroom; I believe AI will remain a tool that we need to work with moving forward.



9 How does one address everything in appropriate detail, set clear and realistic expectations, and include all the boilerplate material the college requires while keeping the course syllabus from turning into a dissertation-length document?



Amy: The syllabus document is what it is, but in your discussions with students and your overview of the syllabus, try focusing on the broad values you hold as important. Even better, start with a class dialogue discussing shared values that all can agree on as important to the class learning environment. My bet is those conversations will better reflect and communicate the expectations and policies than any syllabus document.



Lisa: I've found that students appreciate the detailed information at their fingertips, so I do write a syllabus dissertation. My syllabi are often ten pages long due to the need for the course calendar, due dates, a detailed description of assignments, grading criteria, student learning objectives, my philosophy of teaching, and everything the university wants us to include. Like Amy, I review the syllabus on the first day and explain the "why" of the content. I let them know there are important campus-wide resources that they can look at when they have time outside of class.



Tammy: The syllabus is what lays the foundation for the course. We are required, rightfully so, to include information about accommodations, Title IX, etc. I believe it is best to develop the syllabus with a list of class dates that includes what assignments or readings will be covered, the textbook required, and any additional resources (readings). We also should include details about papers, what our expectations are, and how students can excel in the course by reflecting on the syllabus throughout the semester.



Jeanne: I am a huge fan of a table of contents with a long syllabus, ideally with all assignment info and deadlines included. As someone who helps students get support from places like tutoring and their university writing center, I have run into so many struggles where the information for a project is buried three pages into Canvas in unexpected places, or worse, split between multiple pages with essential information only on one or two of them. A single thorough syllabus with a clear outline/layout is much easier for everyone to navigate. And realistically, even when it's only one page, the students who need it will most likely not have read it anyway or will have forgotten. Being able to say, "Check the table of contents on the syllabus," makes life easier and encourages them to try troubleshooting instead of asking when office hours are, despite them being on page one and accurately labeled.



Brian: I think Amy said it well. I'd stick to broad categories and consider referencing other departments, websites, and materials that support the points you are making in your syllabus. For example, it isn't necessary to explain each possible reason why a student might need an academic accommodation, but I might write a sentence or two about how to access the accommodation office, that I very much support this idea, and that accommodations cover a wide range of challenges including major environmental stressors, mental illness, learning differences, and physical disabilities.

10 What are some ideas you have about setting expectations for an online or Zoom-based class? For example, consider the comment, “I am having an issue with students letting friends sit in the class, and sometimes that ‘friend’ knows people in the class, so there are some FERPA issues.” Other things to consider are whether to require the camera and mic to be on, students with inappropriate backgrounds or background noise, students not participating in discussions, students wearing pajamas, etc.



Amy: Explain the impact of these behaviors on the learning environment and other students in the class. Students understanding why these expectations exist will help them more consistently work to meet those expectations. Online learning is still new to many students and faculty, so some of these behaviors occur just because the student has seen these behaviors modeled by others and has not considered the larger impact.



Lisa: I talk about FERPA when explaining that they are to be the only ones on camera. Related to this, having a “camera always on and mic on when speaking” syllabus statement sets the standard right out of the gate. As far as background noise or wardrobe, as long as it isn’t offensive, I’m okay with whatever makes them comfortable and willing to attend class. Noise that is distracting to others, of course, needs to be addressed, but if it’s a brief sound of a child or pet, the student is probably mortified, so I don’t make it an issue. If something happens more than once, make a general statement before the next interaction so you aren’t singling anyone out.



Chris: Great comments from my colleagues. I would just echo that forcing a camera to be on can be an issue for some students. I think about the students who may have concerns about where they live or don’t have a quiet space to work in.



Tammy: Establish guidelines at the beginning of the course about expectations when engaging in an online class. I request that cameras be on to ensure that students are actively engaged. We are in a learning environment, so I would ask that when a student isn’t speaking, they should mute themselves so we don’t hear any background noise, as we may all become distracted.





Jeanne: I'll admit that I take a slightly different approach, but I've found it very effective in my interactions with students. For all of these elements, I try to analyze why something feels strange/inappropriate to me and check if there is a legitimate concern or if it's just my own emotions/expectations.

If the issue is practical, like background noise making it hard for others to hear, then that's a reasonable request that is easy to manage—keep microphones off unless speaking. I have been in a few meetings where the person leading wished everyone to stay on to build community, but as a person with a mild audio processing and sensory disorder, I struggled to understand anything said and have since declined to attend such programs in the future. Not every student has access to private, silent study spaces; this is often an equity issue for my low-income commuter students taking online classes.

Other issues are less obvious—does wearing pajamas actually impact student learning? If a student is wearing PJs but still participating and clothed enough not to be explicit, is my issue actually the clothing or that I associate it with a lack of respect for me as an instructor or with students still being half-asleep for class? Setting expectations around active behavior and participation is likely to be more important than making rules about clothing. Students can absolutely look professional in class and still not be listening. We're just less likely to notice.

Likewise, cameras and mics can be helpful for trying to judge student engagement but can also be inaccurate—autistic students have reported multiple instances of being accused of not paying attention in Zoom rooms because their natural facial features don't match what a non-autistic person expects. On the reverse, just because their camera is on and they are looking at the screen doesn't mean a student isn't actually scrolling social media or watching YouTube. If the concern is student engagement, then direct check-ins like having students give thumbs up/down using Zoom or drop a very short answer in the chat can be a more accurate way to ensure students are actually paying attention while also not disproportionately harming neurodivergent students, or even just students with not great internet.

Regarding discussions, some students are less comfortable speaking in front of others, which has been a known issue long before Zoom, but crafting your grading system to include participation and providing clear expectations for how that needs to be met can make it easier to handle with students—especially if there can be multiple options. I had a student with a strong stutter who was very uncomfortable speaking in class due to past bullying. We agreed he would type up a few thoughts on his phone and would send them to me as an email instead. This was so effective I regularly now give this as an option—most students would vastly prefer just to answer one question verbally than have to send an email, but the accommodation is there for whatever reason they may need it.



Brian: I think offering a review of your expectations at the start of a new class is always a good place to start. Borrowing from Dweck's book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, we should also have a willingness to look over our "start of class" overview and try to find ways to improve it each time it is offered. There will certainly be lessons learned from previous classes that you can work into to meet your expectations. In terms of my "must haves," I really like the idea of setting some clear expectations about screen names and ensuring the background image is either a set color or the school logo. On this last point, I also appreciate how hard it can be to swap out those images on Zoom, but leaving it open to personal expression will likely end up with some images that offend or cause problems in the class. I'm not someone who forces the camera issue, but I definitely appreciate that Dr. Hodo would require that in her classes, and I'd support that.