Recommendations from the Ad-Hoc Committee on Online Teaching Excellence

Extract

(Submitted May 15, 2020)

**Purpose and Scope**

In April 2020, Provost Debbie Prentice constituted an ad-hoc Committee on Online Teaching Excellence to address ways to make online instruction more engaging, dynamic, and interactive. This was part of the University’s contingency planning process and is one of several committees charged to look at different options for the University in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. The committee met seven times between April 23 and May 14. We discussed the support and guidance students and faculty will need, new and emergent technologies, and course staffing models, among other topics.

**Committee Members**

- Jay Dominick, Vice President for Information Technology and CIO (co-chair of the committee)
- Katherine (Kate) Stanton, Ph.D., Associate Dean and Director of the McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning (co-chair of the committee)
- Sigrid M. Adriaenssens, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering, Director of Mechanics, Materials and Structures Program
- Oliver D. Avens, Ph.D., Associate Dean for Academic Affairs
- Patrick W. Caddeau, Ph.D., Dean of Forbes College
- Elizabeth L. Colagiuri, M.P.A., Deputy Dean of the College
- Cole M. Crittenden, Ph.D., Deputy Dean of the Graduate School
- Asif A. Ghazanfar, Ph.D., Professor of Neuroscience & Psychology; Director of Undergraduate Studies
- Meredith Martin, Ph.D., Associate Professor of English; Director of the Center for Digital Humanities
- Maria A. Medvedeva, Ph.D., Director of Studies, Rockefeller College
- James C. Sturm, Ph.D., Professor of Electrical Engineering; Director of Undergraduate Studies
- Janet Vertesi, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Sociology
- Stacy E. Wolf, Ph.D., Professor of Theater; Director, Program in Music Theater

**Departmental Preparation**

1. Examine and adjust course offerings.
2. Allow faculty, in consultation with Dean of the Faculty, to exercise flexibility with leave schedules.
3. Commit to equitable distribution of teaching.
4. Allow faculty to propose a “Princeton challenge”: A credit-bearing, research-intensive, project-focused and/or community-engaged experience focused on COVID-19 or as well as other community-focused problems.

5. Enhance faculty-student interaction by:
   a. Limiting precept size to between six and nine students.
   b. Allowing faculty to precept for one another for teaching credit.
   c. Encouraging tenure-track faculty to team-teach (this may be especially useful for new topical, interdisciplinary courses).
   d. Allowing credit-bearing “tutorial”-style courses with two to three enrolled students to receive teaching credit.
   e. Holding regular department office hours, staffed by faculty and/or department staff to check in with one another and with their students.

6. Review teaching budgets with the DOF and request additional AI hours or teaching support (which might include hiring postdoctoral fellows, graduate students in ET/DCC status, or lecturers), allowing for the reduction of precept size or increased instructional support.

7. Encourage faculty, in consultation with the Registrar, to adjust their course meeting pattern if possible (i.e., for upper-level courses). Faculty might choose to meet twice a week for 80 minutes rather than once for three hours or hold two hours of class and one hour of asynchronous learning.

8. Engage students in planning efforts.

9. Use department or central funds purposefully to support instruction—for instance, to pay students to help faculty prepare for virtual teaching.

10. Actively engage with the McGraw Center and the instructional task force we call for below to collaborate on preparing for virtual teaching and learning.

**Instructional Resources**

We recommend that the University immediately form an Instructional Task Force, led by the McGraw Center and including all relevant resources, such as the Office of Informational Technology, the Council on Science and Technology, the Center for Digital Humanities, the Art Museum, and the Library. The task force might be named the “Advisory Board for Distance Learning Excellence,” or ABLE. It should respond to the need for guidance that our faculty expressed, and minimize the divergence in course technologies, techniques, and expectations that made for a fractured experience for students.

1. Develop five or six course templates, ready-made to serve different class types (for example, seminar, lecture, lab) as well as curricular and pedagogical goals. This work should be done in consultation with faculty members.

2. Send McGraw staff or a related expert to give an overview of the relevant templates at individual department faculty meetings; have a trained consultant available to work 1:1 with faculty to implement their specific courses as a follow-up.

3. Create dedicated working groups, with staff support, to develop guidance for hard-to-virtualize course types.

4. Develop resources for faculty and for graduate student AIs on how to build community, recognize student distress, and make appropriate referrals.

5. Develop workshops and short guides for faculty and graduate student AIs on how to use the interactive tools of Zoom.
6. Develop a set of workshops that allow faculty and graduate student AIs to learn and experiment with digital tools.
7. Develop a set of workshops that teach faculty and students to record and edit video for student performances and projects.
8. Create a “digital toolbox” that allows faculty to identify and select digital tools by pedagogical need.
9. Host regular faculty and graduate student AI “meetups” to discuss best practices.
10. Prepare a plan for improving technological support for instruction.

Course Design Recommendations

1. Design courses in several distinct modules or segments.
2. Design interactive elements into courses, drawing on a menu of choices in the above-mentioned course templates.
3. Select technology based on pedagogical need.
4. Consider “flipping” courses by prerecording lectures.
5. Minimize the risks of academic dishonesty through assessment design.
6. Share best practices within and across departments (via Canvas, discussion boards, repository Slack channels, department meetings, etc.).
7. Implement community-building practices into courses at the start of the semester: for instance, peer-mentorship, research, or evaluation, threaded forum discussions, etc.
8. Consult with Instructional Task Force or instructional designers on creating the course to optimize learning outcomes, pre-record lectures professionally, understand instructional tools, and implement tools to gauge student understanding on the go.

General Recommendations

1. Create a task force to study child-care needs and resources.
2. Create a transparent and simple process by which departments can request centralized resources.
3. Consider how to award money to faculty for course redesign or innovation.
4. Establish safe, socially distant lecture recording (Instructional Support Services).
5. Define “instructional hour” in the virtual context (Office of the Dean of the College).
6. Clarify whether faculty can use the 4:30 – 7:30 p.m. slot for teaching (Dean of the College).
7. Establish a new course component, the “flipped lecture,” for faculty to use as a non-standard meeting time, decongesting course scheduling (Dean of the College).
8. Clarify how the Library will make resources available for research and teaching.
9. Work with Labyrinth Books to determine how to supply books to students in time for fall semester (Dean of the College).
10. Examine in more depth how to “virtualize” labs and studios.
11. Set grading policy (Committee on Examinations and Standing).
12. Refine guidance on academic accommodations (Office of Disability Services and Office of General Counsel).
13. Determine the equipment that faculty, graduate AIs, and students will need for virtual teaching and establish a process for making it available (Office of Information Technology).
14. Develop guidance on questions of safety, privacy, and mental health (Dean of the College and General Counsel).