



COVID-19 Academic Experience Focus Groups and Surveys: Statement for the BFA

Prepared by Boulder Faculty Assembly Student Affairs Committee

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has imposed significant challenges on our campus community—not the least of which are barriers to providing engaging and meaningful learning experiences for our undergraduate and graduate students. In an effort to better understand these barriers, and to identify practical ways in which faculty can strive to better meet the diverse needs of their students during the pandemic, the BFA Student Affairs Committee (SAC) facilitated a series of focus groups with CU undergraduate and graduate students, and administered a questionnaire to attendees of these focus groups and the broader CU student population. The aim of this report is two-fold. The first is to highlight insights about areas for improvement that students consistently noted in the focus groups. Drawing on these insights, the second is to draft a short-list of strategies during the pandemic that may help faculty make reasonable adjustments to their curricula, course delivery, formative assignments, and metrics of evaluation—in order to enhance the academic experience of our students in the Spring 2020 semester.

This statement highlights the concerns students raised in the focus groups and open-ended survey questions, as well as the practical suggestions that either student respondents or the faculty members on the Student Affairs Committee proposed to help to address these concerns. The Committee recognizes that these recommendations may not be feasible or even suitable for all courses, depending on the size, level, content, etc. Nevertheless, we hope that the insights gained from learning about these students' experiences and recommendations will present new and useful information for faculty to consider as they prepare for the spring semester. [The full report is available on SAC's website.](#)

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Problem-Area 1: Organization. Many students reported that

- Canvas is often under-utilized in their classes (especially the calendar function in Canvas),
- course syllabi can lack detail on reading schedules and assignment deadlines,
- reminders and consistent communication from faculty are often lacking,
- impromptu changes to the schedule of readings or deadlines are often not reflected in syllabi, and
- this lack of organization clouds learning goals and how class sessions relate to course objectives.

Recommendations for faculty to consider:

1. Create syllabi with detailed reading schedules, and examination and assignment deadlines.
2. Move course content onto Canvas and utilize the calendar function for all assignments.
3. Create announcements in Canvas to remind students about approaching deadlines.
4. Limit changes to schedules and assignment deadlines, and ensure those changes are reflected in the syllabus and are communicated to students with adequate advance notice.
5. Include links to your Zoom classroom space and syllabus at top of each Canvas homepage.
6. Walk students through your Canvas course so they understand how the class is organized and reorient them to Canvas as major deadlines approach.
7. State and maintain clear expectations—both for your students and for your TAs.

Problem-Area 2: Workloads and Workspaces. Many students reported that

- faculty are assigning more work than in usual semesters,
- workloads seem to overlook the significant personal obligations students bear (e.g., many students are working part-time or full-time jobs, or caring for family members),
- workday boundaries are being blurred—with both faculty communications and deadlines,
- substantive feedback from faculty is limited or non-existent,
- there is little physical separation between home and work—given small living and study spaces,

- the significant amount of sitting is physically demanding and emotionally taxing, and
- long durations of staring at computer screens are physically taxing.

Recommendations for faculty to consider:

1. Consider whether course adaptations are leading to increased workloads for your students,
2. Adjust for the possibility that some work takes longer to complete in this format than in traditional in-person settings,
3. Build flexibility into deadlines for assignments, provide adequate time for completion, and offer a longer range of hours to complete exams.
4. Avoid scheduling deadlines for assignments and exams outside of reasonable work hours.
5. Provide consistent feedback to students throughout the semester—even if brief—to give them a better sense of their standing and progress.
6. Diversify office hours to better accommodate the diverse availability of students.
7. Incentivize attending office hours to motivate students to proactively connect with faculty.
8. Be mindful of the limited and often shared physical space that students have available: e.g., provide brief breaks during class when possible, institute a flexible policy with class participation and the use of cameras during face-to-face webinars.

Problem-Area 3: Course Delivery and Student Engagement. Many students reported that

- synchronous webinar lectures (via Zoom, Google Meets, Microsoft Teams, etc.) move too quickly—especially in larger classes,
- internet connection problems interrupt class sessions and undermine the learning experience,
- the absence of live captions with synchronous webinar class sessions can make following lectures and class discussions difficult,
- learning is more difficult when faculty do not provide recordings of webinars or copies of lecture slides or lecture notes,
- asynchronous, pre-recorded (audio and video) lectures are too long and unengaging,
- synchronous webinar class sessions lack opportunities for student involvement and interaction,
- larger remote-learning classes offer no face-to-face experience—as students’ cameras remain off,
- large remote classes that lack adequate numbers of TAs make breakout rooms unfeasible, and
- faculty and TAs often seem unapproachable, and some faculty and TA’s neglect to respond to emails and hold limited and inconvenient office hours.

Recommendations for faculty to consider:

1. Record synchronous webinars to allow students to access it in the case of illness, technology failures, or other disruptions.
2. Organize asynchronous, pre-recorded (audio or video) lectures into a few, shorter lessons—segments that are generally no longer than 10 minutes.
3. Post copies of lecture slides or lecture notes on Canvas for students to be able to reference.
4. Explore utilizing captions to make synchronous class sessions more accessible: platforms like Zoom, Google Meets, Microsoft Teams, Webex, and Adobe Connect, all offer closed-captioning options and third-party providers offer live captioning services (contact captioning@colorado.edu for information on free or low-cost tools).
5. Increase incentives for greater student participation. For example,
 - a. offer brief, but consistent opportunities for students to interact with each other in small groups (in the absence of TAs, faculty can briefly join small discussion groups—with their video and audio turned off—to unobtrusively create a standard of students staying on task).
 - b. build incentives into the grading criteria for students to leave their cameras on for synchronous webinar class sessions (without penalizing those whose internet connections, workspaces, or other circumstances prevent them from doing so).
 - c. build incentives into grading criteria for students to ask questions or engage in discussion.

- d. utilize the chat function in your webinar platform to give students an alternative to verbally engaging in class discussions.
- e. use polls during lecture to slow down the delivery of material, engage students, and encourage attendance.
- 6. Diversify office hours to better accommodate students' availability, and incentivize attending office hours to motivate students to proactively connect with faculty.
- 7. Augment regular office hours by staying connected for 5-10 minutes after synchronous webinar class sessions, to offer students brief opportunities to connect.
- 8. Occasionally check-in with students to gauge their experience in the class, and to identify reasonable, real-time changes you could make to the course.
- 9. Provide more training for and consistent communication with TAs, who were occasionally described as being unsympathetic or inflexible.

Problem-Area 4: Inconsistent Course Delivery. Many students reported that

- switching between in-person and remote learning is challenging—students desire predictability,
- the combination of synchronous (face-to-face) and asynchronous instruction creates a disjointed learning experience and often results in increased workloads—students desire consistency,
- lecture slides or notes, and pre-recorded (audio or video) lectures, when expected, were occasionally missing, and
- faculty sometimes made impromptu changes to course syllabi, assignments, or class sessions (such as changing the meeting time or space for a class session) in ways that presented hardships for students or that did not come with enough notice.

Recommendations for faculty to consider:

1. Maintain a consistent schedule of synchronous and asynchronous class sessions.
2. List this consistent schedule of synchronous and asynchronous class sessions in the syllabus.
3. Prepare a detailed syllabus and minimize changes as much as possible: include a link to your webinar classroom space, keep meeting times and places consistent, clearly articulate reading schedule, etc.

Problem-Area 5: Isolation and Stress. Many students reported that

- larger remote classes offer no face-to-face experience (cameras remain off)—creating a highly impersonal learning environment,
- smaller remote classes allow for face-to-face interactions, but opportunities are still sparse,
- there are significant barriers to getting to know classmates or faculty,
- they lack a sense of community or belonging in the class, and
- the lack of organization, increased workload, lack of communication and substantive feedback, constraints of physical workspaces, and lack of available resources, all spur and amplify mental health challenges.

Recommendations for faculty to consider:

1. Provide an explicit statement in syllabi on student mental health services and resources at CU, and remind students of these services throughout the term.
2. Afford a few minutes after remote classes to answer questions and connect with students.
3. Expressly empathize with your students: e.g., ask them how they feel, how they are doing, and acknowledge that we are going through a difficult time. (Some examples that surfaced included creating brief polls in your webinar platform, encouraging students to add an adjective to their name in Zoom (or your equivalent platform) that conveys their mood, or creating small discussion groups during the semester based on students' interests.)
4. Create opportunities for small-group discussions or activities to build a sense of community.
5. Strongly encourage (or require) 1-2 office hour visits per semester (either with you or your TAs) to motivate greater one-on-one connection.