|  |
| --- |
| University of Colorado Boulder |
| Guide for Establishing Course Expectations and Managing Classroom Dynamics |
|  |

|  |
| --- |
| Office of Institutional Equity and Compliance4-3-2024 |

Table of Contents

[Background 2](#_Toc161906899)

[Clarify your Rules and Expectations 4](#_Toc161906900)

[Introductions 4](#_Toc161906901)

[Course content 4](#_Toc161906902)

[Course logistics 4](#_Toc161906903)

[Writing and communicating 5](#_Toc161906904)

[Course standards of evidence (when applicable) 5](#_Toc161906905)

[Academic honesty 6](#_Toc161906906)

[CU Discrimination, Harassment, and Sexual Misconduct Policies 7](#_Toc161906907)

[Collaborate on Creating Community Norms 7](#_Toc161906908)

[What kind of classroom culture do we want? 7](#_Toc161906909)

[Be clear about what students can expect from you. 8](#_Toc161906910)

[Work to reach consensus on classroom values and norms. 9](#_Toc161906911)

[The Fumble Framework 9](#_Toc161906912)

[Freedom of Speech 9](#_Toc161906913)

[When Problems Arise 10](#_Toc161906914)

[Disruptive Student Behavior 11](#_Toc161906915)

[Example Syllabus Statement 12](#_Toc161906916)

# Background

Quote from a CU graduate:

*“I cannot forget the racist and ignorant comments made by students in my class, and what a distraction it was since I was then left to deal with microaggressions in the classroom by myself. This left me feeling like I was not safe to speak up, and I decided to disassociate from my academics, to ‘just get the grade’ and keep it going. I am saddened to have missed the entirety of my schooling because I felt unsafe or uncomfortable in my classes.”*

Data collected in the CU 2021 Campus Culture Survey (CCS) indicate that a substantial proportion of students from all race/ethnicity groups had concerns about their classroom leaders’ ability to navigate challenging classroom dynamics, including effectively responding to offensive comments and managing discussions of sensitive or difficult topics:

|  |
| --- |
| “Offensive comments have been challenged by course instructors in class discussion.” |
| Race/Ethnicity Group | **Percent of students who do not *agree* or *strongly agree* with this statement**  |
| American Indian or Alaska Native | 54% |
| Asian or Asian American | 46% |
| Black or African American | 54% |
| Latine or Hispanic | 42% |
| Middle Eastern or North African | 53% |
| Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander | 49% |
| White | 40% |

|  |
| --- |
| “Instructors successfully manage discussions about sensitive or difficult topics.” |
| Race/ethnicity Group | **Percent of students who do not *agree* or *strongly agree* with this statement**  |
| American Indian or Alaska Native | 30% |
| Asian or Asian American | 30% |
| Black or African American | 40% |
| Latine or Hispanic | 27% |
| Middle Eastern or North African | 32% |
| Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander | 38% |
| White | 26% |

The 2021 CCS composite variable for *Instructor Effectiveness* is positively and significantly correlated with scores on *Sense of CU Belonging* for undergraduates across all race/ethnicity groups (all r’s ≥ .33, p-values < .001); this relationship is strongest for Black/African American undergraduates (r=.51, p < .0001). The close link between classroom leader’s skills for navigating challenging dynamics and students’ sense of fitting in and feeling valued, accepted, and included isn’t surprising. [“When students walk into a campus, they don’t know who the provost is. They don’t even know what a provost is. … Students, when they walk into a class, whoever is at the front of the class, that is the institution to them.”](https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-colleges-can-support-the-mental-health-of-students-of-color?emailConfirmed=true&supportSignUp=true&supportForgotPassword=true&email=julie.volckens@colorado.edu&success=true&code=success&bc_nonce=b7drj0802cba2uh0zorbn&sra=true)

As a follow-up to the original analyses of the 2014 Undergraduate Social Climate Survey, the relationship between first-year students’ *Sense of CU Belonging* (measured in mid-fall 2014 in the Social Climate Survey) and the likelihood of being retained at CU to the spring 2017 semester was examined. A first-year student’s sense of belonging strongly predicted their probability of still being enrolled in spring 2017, no matter what their pre-matriculation predicted grade point average, or PGPA (a metric based on high school GPA and SAT/ACT score)[[1]](#footnote-1).



Overall, the results of these analyses suggest that students with more effective classroom instructors feel a greater sense of belonging at CU and are more likely to remain enrolled at the university. Given these findings, providing opportunities to support classroom leaders to continue to enhance their skills for managing logistics, dynamics, and difficult situations in the classroom is an important area to target for improving our culture and retention.

# Clarify your Rules and Expectations[[2]](#footnote-2)

Communicating upfront what you expect in as much detail as possible is foundational for creating an inclusive and productive classroom. Build out your syllabus to be thorough and explicit to reduce the possibility for misunderstandings that can derail your relationship with a student and the class.

Invest time on the first day of class reviewing your syllabus and consider a syllabus quiz during the second week to ensure students have also reviewed it outside of class, understand the goals and content of the course, and agree to your rules and expectations. Key details to cover on the first day might include:

## Introductions

* Ask students to introduce themselves to one or two other students including sharing something about themselves (e.g., where they’re from, their favorite place on campus to study, favorite dinosaur, etc.)[[3]](#footnote-3).

## Course content

* Invite students to share what they hope to learn in your course and clarify whether that content will be covered. Fully informed, students then have the option to switch to a different section or choose a different course.
* When possible, consider whether it’s feasible to add other content/materials to address their specific interests if they are consistent with your course content/goals.
* Share your goals for the course and what new skills or knowledge you want them to have by the end of the semester.

## Course logistics

* What counts as participation and how much is expected?
* Strategies to increase participation:
	+ Send discussion questions ahead of time to help students prepare to participate.
	+ Pose a question during the class and give students a few minutes to write down their thoughts *or* have them pair off to discuss with each other and then share out.
	+ Post discussion questions in Canvas, which often brings shy students into the conversation.
		- These strategies support *all* students and are especially valuable to those who struggle to speak up and contribute.
* What is your policy on being late to class or leaving early?
* How/when should students ask you questions outside of class (*right after class, during office hours, by email, it depends*)?
* How/when will you respond to email? (*Give a timeframe for responding, such as within 48 hours. What about answering on weekends?)*
* Can students post for help with homework from you or other students in your virtual classroom platform (Piazza, Canvas, etc.)? If so, what are the rules for asking for help? For instance, should students elaborate on where they are stuck and share their work up to that point rather than simply post asking for the answer?
* How/when will homework be turned in?
* Do you accept late assignments? If yes, will there be penalties for being late?
* What kind of feedback can they expect on their graded assignments and tests?
* What is your timeframe for returning corrected assignments and tests?
* What is the timeframe for requesting an accommodation for a religious observance? Point out important dates to alert students to pay attention to potential conflicts and ensure advance notice.
* Other logistics specific to your course

## Writing and communicating

* What counts as proper writing style and in which contexts? (Papers, online posts, etc.)
* What are your expectations for spelling, punctuation, grammar, proofing, and neatness on graded assignments?
* Be clear about whether and when students can use casual language (swearing is okay if it’s not *at* someone), or use slang, especially related to the course content (e.g., when talking about images of human bodies use breasts, not boobs or tits).

## Course standards of evidence (when applicable)

* What sources or source materials are considered reliable and valid for the topics you will cover in the course (e.g., NYTimes, Reddit, journal articles in your field, a student’s favorite newsfeed)?
* Do you expect students to cite sources and to distinguish well-supported facts from opinions?
* Let them know that a sample of one (n=1) is information but will not count broadly as evidence in your class (i.e., “We had a black president, so racism doesn’t exist anymore”).

## Academic honesty

* To what extent are students allowed/encouraged to help each other with graded assignments? When appropriate, consider incorporating structured peer review to build skills for self-assessment and giving feedback.
* Provide specific and clear instructions about what resources are allowed or are not allowed for assignments and exams. For example, do not say “electronic resources are allowed,” rather specify “Canvas resources are allowed” or “One page of notes is allowed.”
* Proctoring software won’t prevent cheating. Making all tests and quizzes open book and open note is one option for addressing the problem. If allowing open notes or books, create assignments and exams that require unique critical thought and application of course material.
* Although it’s a swiftly shifting landscape with exponential improvements occurring over just months and even weeks, Generative Artificial Intelligence (or AI) challenges all classroom leaders to reimagine how and what they teach, what kind of assignments they assign and exams they administer, and how they evaluate their students’ work. We strongly recommend that if you haven’t already, you need to become familiar with AI resources such as ChatGPT. Research shows that most of your students are, to different degrees, employing chatbots to write papers, calculate math equations, program/code, and answer essay questions. You may already be a cutting-edge AI user, or you may be at the beginning of your journey. The links below provide some ideas and resources for gaining or expanding understanding and expertise at navigating AI resources:
	+ <https://www.colorado.edu/center/teaching-learning/teaching-resources/teaching-learning-age-ai>
	+ <https://www.colorado.edu/center/teaching-learning/teaching-resources/teaching-well-technology/ai>
	+ <https://cep.barnard.edu/generative-ai-college-classroom>
	+ <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/usable-knowledge/23/07/embracing-artificial-intelligence-classroom>
* Find information about how AI-related CU Honor Code violations are addressed here: <https://www.colorado.edu/orientation/2023/12/07/3-things-know-about-ai-and-honor-code>.
	+ Note: detecting whether a student has used ChatGPT or other generative AI system is notoriously difficult and software that claims to identify work done by AI is unreliable at this time. A better strategy is to incorporate these tools into your teaching and redesign your assignments.

## CU Discrimination, Harassment, and Sexual Misconduct Policies

* Let your students know that you are a [mandatory reporter](https://www.colorado.edu/oiec/reporting-resolutions/who-required-report) and that you are required to inform the Office of Institutional Equity and Compliance (OIEC) of any situation or any incident of alleged unwelcome or offensive behavior that you witness (*or that is brought to your attention*) related to campus policies on discrimination, harassment, or sexual misconduct.
	+ Direct students to the [Don’t Ignore It](https://www.colorado.edu/dontignoreit/) website for a comprehensive list of on- and off-campus resources.
	+ Familiarize yourself with the Provost’s [required syllabus statements](https://www.colorado.edu/academicaffairs/policies-customs-guidelines/required-syllabus-statements) that address disability accommodations, classroom behavior, preferred student names and pronouns, Honor Code, the Sexual Misconduct, Discrimination, and Harassment Policies, and accommodations for religious observances and include them in your syllabus.
	+ Become knowledgeable about your obligation to ensure that your course is [accessible to students with disabilities](https://www.colorado.edu/disabilityservices/resources/faculty-staff-resources), including in the virtual environment.

# Collaborate on Creating Community Norms

Consider the classroom norms that would lead to a welcoming and engaging learning environment and build time into the first class to generate these norms together. This should include what is expected of them and what students can expect from you. Collaborating with students to establish the classroom ground rules and behavioral norms increases the likelihood for a more collegial and productive classroom culture and provides both classroom leaders and students with explicit guidelines for navigating classroom dynamics. By creating the expectations together, it will make it easier for you and your students to respond to problematic comments and derailed conversations. Classroom leaders are encouraged to document expectations for engagement in their course syllabus once the norms and guidelines have been agreed upon.

## What kind of classroom culture do we want?

* Guide students towards identifying explicit behavioral expectations to operationalize shared values and norms. If someone volunteers that students should “treat each other with respect,” press them to identify the behaviors that convey respect (*giving others the benefit of the doubt, not interrupting, not monopolizing the conversation, trying hard to be curious about someone else’s point of view, etc*.). Likewise, have them identify what would constitute a lack of respect (i.e., *name calling, sarcasm, cutting someone off, talking over other people, eye rolling, not trying to understand*).
* Ask what norms (or rules) the class will need to engage in rigorous critical and intellectual discussions but not drift into personal attacks.
* How will members of the class respond when they disagree with what someone is saying (including you)?
* Determine how you and your students will respond when things go wrong (when classroom norms are violated or feel violated). Refer to the resource, Calling People In – Responding to Problematic Behaviors and Comments.
* If applicable, ask them to consider how virtual class-related contexts (discussion threads, emails, texts, Zoom meetings and chats) should be different from other online contexts? (i.e., how is posting in a course discussion thread not like/like posting on social media?)
* What behaviors will be out of bounds?

## Be clear about what students can expect from you.

Possible things to suggest include:

* Assure them that you are invested in what they have to say even if you don’t agree with it, and that you expect students to support their arguments with evidence (and establish what will count as evidence in your course.)
* Express commitment to address concerning behaviors that come up in the context of the class (either in the moment or the next time the class meets) and let students know that you may follow up with them outside of class time.
* Make them aware that if a conversation strays off topic, you may need to cut them short to get the discussion back on track.
* You reserve the right to remove any posts in discussion forums that are outside the course topic area or that you consider a violation of course rules, community norms, or CU policy without notifying the student.
	+ After removing a post, it’s essential to let the student know and set aside time to discuss your action.
	+ You could also consider *not* removing a problematic post and use it as a teachable moment, depending on the content and context.
* Be thorough and transparent about your course content in the syllabus and well in advance of assignments, readings, video, etc. This gives students the opportunity to make an informed decision on whether to remain in your class or choose a different section or course. Encourage students who have concerns to make time to meet with you.
	+ Recent research has shown that trigger or content warnings have no effect on affective responses to negative material or on educational outcomes[[4]](#footnote-4).

## Work to reach consensus on classroom values and norms.

* Review the list of behavioral norms and agreements together and ask what’s missing.
* Encourage students who seem hesitant to express their ideas or concerns and try to address those concerns together with the class; invite anyone who isn’t comfortable speaking up to your office hours.
* If possible, by the end of the first class, get verbal confirmation that everyone can support and abide by the list you’ve generated together.
* Allow for adding to or revising the community agreements. Issues may come up during the semester that haven’t been properly accounted for in the original list.
* Once the class has reached consensus during the first week or two of classes, *add these norms to the syllabus prior to the next class meeting*.

## The Fumble Framework

Donna Mejia (Faculty Fellow, Renee Crown Wellness Institute and Associate Professor in the Theater and Dance Department) has developed a framework for approaching difficult conversations in the classroom called, “[fumble forward](https://www.colorado.edu/crowninstitute/fumble-forward).” Students make a social contract to extend the benefit of the doubt to each other. A student who wants to share a comment or question that they worry might not come across well asks to “fumble with their words.” The class responds with “fumble forward” agreeing to suspend judgement and work together to address the comment with an expectation that evidence may be needed to move the problem forward. To clarify, this good will is not extended when the intent is to do harm. When someone makes an out-of-bounds comment without anticipating the harm it could cause, members of the class can respond with something like, “that comment feels like a fumble,” to get the process back on track. Watch Professor Mejia explain how this approach can be used in the [classroom](https://youtu.be/fCFXzL_JRQg?feature=shared).

## Freedom of Speech

Help students understand that freedom of speech is the right of a person to articulate opinions and ideas without threat or reprisal. Unless it rises to the level of discrimination or harassment, speech that is hurtful, biased, or offensive in nature is generally protected by the First Amendment. However, this doesn’t mean that students are allowed to personally insult or harass other members of the class *or you*.

* This is a primary goal of collaboratively creating classroom norms that allow ideas, especially difficult ideas, to be expressed while maintaining a civil space.
* Encourage your students to review the campus guidance on [navigating freedom of speech vs. discrimination and harassment](https://www.colorado.edu/oiec/2024/02/16/navigating-freedom-speech-vs-discrimination-and-harassment-campus).
* Consider how you would respond differently to norm transgressions versus direct, identity-based attacks that require [reporting to the Office of Institutional Equity and Compliance (OIEC)](https://www.colorado.edu/oiec/reporting-resolutions).

*The faculty member or graduate instructor leading the class determines the broad parameters of engagement* including which topics will be considered relevant to the course. *Faculty and graduate instructors must also abide by these expectations*.

# When Problems Arise

* Refer to the community agreements when norms get violated to re-center the class and get back on track; if the class collectively agreed to these norms, the norms can be your touchstone for addressing problematic behavior.
* It is never too late to add new expectations to the community agreements. If something unexpected happens that wasn’t addressed in the original document, propose an addition or amendment and work with the class to fine tune the goal and wording.
* Have a plan for when to address, when to diffuse, and when to delay. If you’re caught off guard, it’s appropriate to say so (“I did not see that coming. I need time to think about what just happened and consider our next steps. We’ll take this up the next time we meet.”) Students don’t need you to have a perfect and immediate response. What’s important is that they see you leading on the issue and making time to address concerning comments or behaviors in alignment with your community agreements.
* Think about when to redirect a student who is rambling or taking up too much class time and how you will do that (e.g., “We need to move on, so if you still have questions or feel like you haven’t been able to make your point, we can talk more after class.”)
* If a student violates the agreed upon norms, you’ll need to follow up with that student individually; it is also important to address what happened at the next class meeting to let other students know that you have handled the situation. Ideally, revisit the classroom norms and discuss how to move forward. Invite anyone who wants to discuss this with you further to your office hours.
* Here are suggestions for handling conflicts and modeling productive discussion:
	+ If a student is challenging evidence or sharing an opinion that is not supported by evidence, you might say, “I hear what you’re saying, and I’m wondering how you’ve come to this conclusion. Can you say more about the evidence you’re using to support your argument?” When possible, pull up other stats that address the issue (you can then ask, “What are your thoughts based on this additional evidence?”)
		- This strategy only works if you approach the situation with authentic curiosity and kindness.
	+ Provide specific feedback about a student’s idea and where it may be flawed and actively engage them to clarify their argument (again, with curiosity and kindness). You have the right to move on from the discussion when the class needs to proceed.
	+ If a student has inappropriate images in the background in a virtual class or meeting, you could say, “These images/symbols/materials have value for you and it is your right to have them in your personal space. The classroom is not your personal space though and having them in this environment is not appropriate. I need you to move so that they are not visible.” You could also follow up with the student to discuss how these materials/images might affect other people in the class.

# Disruptive Student Behavior

The [Student Classroom and Course-Related Behavior Policy](https://www.colorado.edu/policies/student-classroom-course-related-behavior) applies to both in-person and virtual teaching. However, even with safeguards in place to minimize problems, students may still find ways to disrupt the teaching environment. [Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution](http://colorado.edu/sccr) (SCCR) is your CU Boulder resource for enforcing the *Student Classroom and Course-Related Behavior Policy*, consulting on how to respond to disruptive behaviors, and helping you set course behavioral expectations. If you would like to consult about how to respond to any disruptions, please email SCCR.

Highly disruptive students often have a pattern of escalating disruptions. It’s important that you document these instances from the beginning to establish a pattern. If the student’s disruptive behavior continues, or if a single instance of disruption is egregious enough to warrant it, you may want to [file a report](https://cm.maxient.com/reportingform.php?UnivofColorado&layout_id=2) with SCCR Documentation is required if you report a student to SCCR.

Upon receipt of the report, SCCR will work with you in setting further behavioral expectations and holding the student accountable for the disruption.

If a situation becomes unmanageable, consider dismissing the class early and focusing directly on the problematic student.

According to the policy:

* If a student is disruptive, you and/or SCCR may ask the student to stop the disruptive behavior and warn the student that such behavior can result in academic or disciplinary action.
* You are authorized to ask a student to leave the classroom or other academic site if you deem it necessary. In this case, you will need to report the matter to SCCR within 24 hours. Your department and/or School/College may also have guidelines about how to report the matter to your Chair or Dean.
* If you feel threatened or worry for the safety of you or your students, call or text the CU Police Department at 911.

If the disruptive incident includes sexual harassment, other protected-class harassment or discrimination, or retaliation related to these issues OR if you become aware that a student may have experienced other forms of identity-based harassment or sexual misconduct (including sexual assault and sexual exploitation), intimate partner abuse (including dating and domestic violence), or stalking you must report it to the [Office of Institutional Equity and Compliance](https://www.colorado.edu/oiec/reporting-resolutions). TTT and teaching faculty, GPTIs, and TAs are [required to report such incidents to OIEC](https://www.colorado.edu/oiec/reporting-resolution-options/who-required-report).

# Example Syllabus Statement

*One of the primary goals of this course is to enhance our skills in scientific argument (modify based on course goal) and to develop sufficient self-awareness to recognize when we are making non-scientific arguments.*

*These topics have been deliberately chosen to stimulate disagreement and much of that disagreement can feel very personal. I will regularly remind us, whenever needed, that our goals center on thoughtful examination of controversial biological ideas, techniques, opportunities, weaknesses, and strengths, but never on individual persons. If I describe my perspective on, say, prenatal genetic screening in connection with abortion options and you disagree with me, it is your job to argue about the strong and weak points of my ideas, but certainly not about me as a person holding ideas that you think are wrong. Persuade me, convince me, show me how my ideas are wrong with thoughtful, evidence-based positions of your own.*

*Students in the class come from different backgrounds and different parts of the country and the world. We aim for a rich mix of perspectives emanating partly because we come from different places, partly because we have different religious and non-religious views, partly because we have different interests, etc.*

*This class aims to encourage you to regularly examine your own views about the topic at hand:  Why do you have this view? Where did you get this view? Is this view open to revision? If not, why not? If yes, how? Throughout the semester, we want to strictly adhere to the principle of making thoughtful arguments, using respectful language, and avoiding personal attacks. Be enthusiastic about your ideas, but don't demean those who disagree.*

*Some of these topics will have been part of your personal experiences or part of your family’s experiences. We will always respect your privacy, and criticism of a particular topic, even if it has affected you personally, will not be directed at you individually. We do want to engage in spirited discussion and arguments where those arguments rest on relevant evidence. If such evidence contradicts or undermines your particular view, are you open to revising your view? Be participative, be authentically curious, and be knowledgeable and thoughtful. And have some fun!*

1. These results control for both student race/ethnicity and gender. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Challenges that happen in the classroom are exponentially amplified in the virtual environment. For online teaching, clarity and thoroughness about your expectations are even more important. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [2021 Campus Culture Survey Study Peer results](https://viz-public.cu.edu/t/Boulder/views/CUBoulderCultureSurvey2021/FriendsMentors?:embed_code_version=3&:embed=y&:loadOrderID=0&:display_spinner=no&:showAppBanner=false&:display_count=n&:showVizHome=n&:origin=viz_share_link) show that only 21% of CU undergraduates find it *easy/very easy* to get to know other students in their classes and 56% find it *difficult*. Statistical analyses (see pages 33-38) reveal that difficulty making connections with classroom peers is significantly negatively related to Sense of Belonging at CU. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bridgland, V.M., Jones, P.J., & Bellet, B.W. (2022). A meta-analysis of the efficacy of trigger warnings, content warnings, and content notes. Clinical Psychological Science, 21677026231186625. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)