

University of Colorado Boulder

Guide for Establishing Course Expectations and Managing Classroom Dynamics

Office of Institutional Equity and Compliance
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Background

Quote from a recent CU alum:

"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 2014 Undergraduate Social Climate Survey indicated that a substantial proportion of students from all race/ethnicity groups had concerns about classroom leaders' ability to navigate challenging classroom dynamics, including helping students build skills for disagreeing with peers and successfully managing discussions of challenging topics:

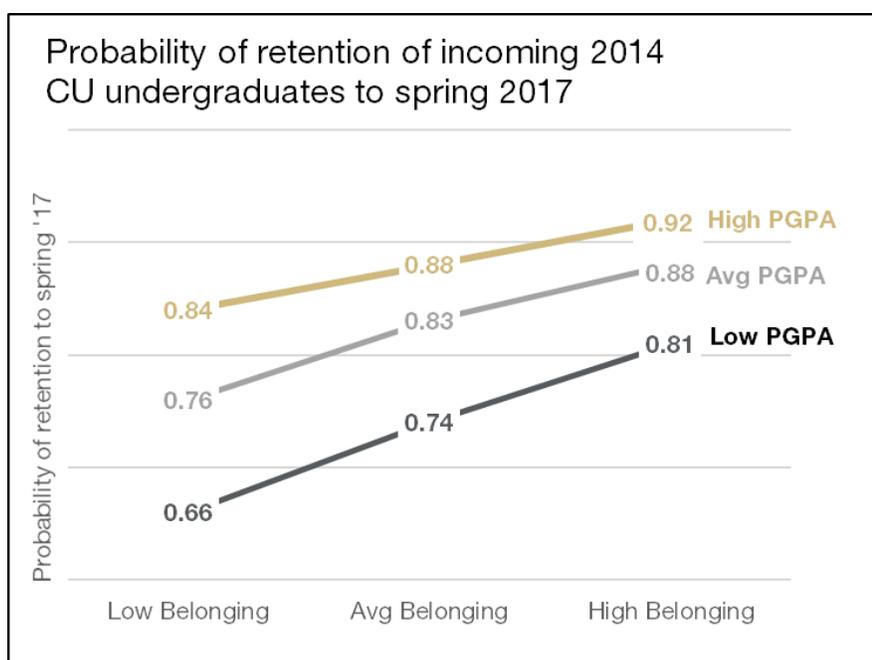
"Instructors help students improve their ability to take seriously the perspectives of others, especially those with whom they disagree."	
Race/ethnicity Group	Percent of students who <u>do not agree</u> or <u>strongly agree</u> with this statement by race/ethnicity group
Asian	35%
Black	48%
Latinx	40%
International	37%
Native American/Pacific Islander	39%
White	36%

"Instructors successfully manage discussions about sensitive or difficult topics."	
Race/ethnicity Group	Percent of students who <u>do not agree</u> or <u>strongly agree</u> with this statement by race/ethnicity group
Asian	31%
Black	49%
Latinx	35%
International	37%
Native American/Pacific Islander	38%
White	32%

These and other "instructor effectiveness" survey items were combined into a composite variable. Correlations were tested between this variable and composite variables to assess other underlying themes in the survey questions, such as "sense of belonging at CU," in order to understand the relationships between the topics covered in the survey. The "sense of belonging at CU" variable included student's responses to items such as "I have a sense of community at CU" and "I am proud to be a student at CU". Within every race/ethnicity group, the "instructor effectiveness" and "sense of belonging at CU" factors are significantly correlated, and this relationship is strongest among Black students.

Correlation between “Instructor Effectiveness” and “Sense of Belonging at CU” composite variables		
Group	Correlation (r)	p-value
Asian	.35	< .0001
Black	.51	< .0001
Latinx	.33	< .0001
International	.35	.004
Native American/Pacific Islander	.34	.0005
White	.33	< .0001

As a follow-up to the original analyses of the 2014 Undergraduate Social Climate Survey, the relationship between first-year students’ sense of belonging at CU (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 in fall 2014 strongly predicted their probability of still being enrolled in spring 2017, no matter what their level of academic preparation (indexed by their pre-matriculation predicted grade point average, or PGPA)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 the campus and classroom cultures.

¹ These results control for both student race/ethnicity and gender.

Clarify your Rules and Expectations

Challenges that happen in the classroom are exponentially amplified in the virtual environment. Communicating what you expect in as much detail as possible is critical for creating an inclusive and productive class. Be thorough and explicit. This reduces the possibility for misunderstandings that can derail your relationship with a student and with the class.

You don't need to cover everything in the syllabus on the first day of class, but consider a syllabus quiz during the first week to make sure students have reviewed it outside of class and agree to your rules and expectations. Consider spending the first class period covering the following issues:

Mask wearing and other health practices (if meeting in person)

- Start the class by restating the university policies on mask wearing, social distancing, and hand washing. Clarify that not wearing a mask is a violation of the [Student Code of Conduct](#).
- Clearly state your own policy on wearing masks during in-person meetings:

For example: I require 100% compliance with the CU mask wearing policy by all students in my courses as required by the CU Student Code of Conduct. You must wear a mask when entering this class and keep it on until you leave the room when class is over. I understand that you may not agree with this policy, but we need to do our part to prevent the spread of the virus. If you will not be able to commit to mask wearing, I encourage you to find a different section of this course or take the course with me at a future time once the pandemic has passed.

Course logistics

- If/when are they expected to watch videos, or live sessions?
- What counts as participation and how much is expected?
 - In Zoom, the chat string can be saved which makes it easier to track what students are contributing. Are students expected to have their camera on in Zoom sessions for class participation points?²
- What is your policy on being late to class or leaving early (in-person or virtual)?
- How/when should students ask you questions?
- How/when will you respond? (*If they email you at 2:00 am, when should they expect a response? What about weekends?*)
- Can students post for help with homework from you or other students in your virtual classroom platform (Piazza, Coursera, etc.)? If so, what are the rules for asking for help?

² Students may have legitimate reasons for not using their camera or participating in the chat. Invite students to share their concerns outside of class; if appropriate, offer alternative options for demonstrating their engagement with the course.

- How/when will homework be turned in?
- Do you accept late assignments?
- How/when will you give feedback and return corrected homework and tests?
- Other logistics specific to your course

Writing and communicating

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

Course standards of evidence

- 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?

For example, a sample of one ($n=1$) is information, but will not count broadly as evidence in this 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?
- Provide specific and clear instructions about what resources are allowed or are not allowed for assignments. For example, avoid "electronic resources are allowed," in favor of more specific guidance, such as "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 an option. If allowing open notes or books, create assignments and tests that require unique critical thought and application of course material.

CU Discrimination, Harassment, and Sexual Misconduct Policies

- Let them know that you are a [mandatory reporter](#) 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. *This is true for behavior that happens in person and online, regardless of where or when the behavior occurred.*

- Direct students to the [Don't Ignore It](#) website for a comprehensive list of on- and off-campus resources.
- Familiarize yourself with the Provost's [required syllabus statements](#) that address disability accommodations, classroom behavior, preferred student names and pronouns, Honor Code, the Sexual Misconduct, Discrimination, and Harassment Policies, and religious observances and include them in your syllabus.
- Become knowledgeable about your obligation to ensure that your course is [accessible to students with disabilities](#), including in the virtual environment.

Collaborate on Creating Community Norms³

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 as well. By creating the expectations together, it will be easier for you and your students to respond to problematic comments and derailed conversations.

Donna Mejia (Associate Professor in the Department of Theatre and Dance and Director of Graduate Studies in Dance) uses a model of “fumbling forward” in her classes. 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,” in order to get the process back on track.

Students' First Amendment speech protections are limited in the classroom environment or other course contexts such as Zoom meetings and chats, discussion threads, and office hours. The first amendment protects people's speech from government censorship. It does not mean there aren't consequences for comments students make in the classroom. *The faculty member, instructor, or graduate student instructor determines the parameters of engagement*, including which topics will be considered relevant to the course⁴.

³With thanks to faculty members Donna Mejia, Lisa Flores, and Liz Skewes for their important contributions to this guide.

⁴ Faculty and graduate students must also abide by these expectations.

Classroom leaders are encouraged to document expectations for engagement in their syllabus. That said, collaborating with students to establish the classroom ground rules and behavioral norms increases the likelihood for a more collegial classroom culture, and provides both classroom leaders and students with explicit guidelines for navigating classroom dynamics.

- What kind of classroom culture do we want? Guide students towards identifying explicit behavioral expectations in order 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, letting people finish making their point, sharing 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 making an effort to understand, etc.*).
 - Determine how you and students will respond when things go wrong (when classroom norms are violated or feel violated). Refer to the handout, [Calling People In – Responding to Problematic Behaviors and Comments](#)
- Help students understand that there isn’t a right to *not* feel offended, but that doesn’t mean that individuals are allowed to personally insult or harass other members of the class.
 - Ask what norms (or rules) the class will need in order 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)?
 - Classroom norms may uphold a standard of a “safe” space, but that is not necessarily enforceable. 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).
- Ask them to consider how the virtual classroom should be different from other online contexts? (i.e., how is this course not like/like Twitter?)
 - Consider finding consensus on additional details such as virtual meeting dress code (please wear clothes), slogans and images on t-shirts that might have impact, profile name (full preferred name, but not nickname or obscenity), profile picture (required?), backgrounds (keep it neutral), camera etiquette (for instance, “Camera use is expected; contact me if this is a problem”⁵), recording (let them know if you plan to record a meeting) or whether engaging in other behaviors is permitted (vaping, preparing food, exercising, etc.).

⁵ If you have a “cameras on” policy, please make exceptions for students who have limited internet access, bandwidth issues, lack of privacy, or technology limitations among other concerns.

- What behaviors will be out of bounds?
 - Make some agreements about what to do if someone says or writes something that is derogatory about another person in the class.
 - In order to limit opportunities for students to target other members of the class, restrict the Zoom chat feature that allows students to privately message each other during a session. Instead, allow students to chat with the entire group (Everybody) and directly with you (Host) only.

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; you also expect students to support their arguments with evidence according to the standards you've laid out for the course.
- Express commitment to swiftly address concerning behaviors and comments that come up in the context of the class (in person and virtually) and let students know that you may follow up with them outside of class time.
- Label course material that may elicit strong personal feelings.
- Make them aware that if a conversation strays off topic, you may need to cut it short in order to get the discussion back on track.
- You reserve the right to remove any posts in chat threads or 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. *Even so, problematic comments provide teachable moments that you can use to help students learn how to navigate and engage with challenging issues more skillfully.*

Work to reach consensus on classroom values and norms

- Review the list of behavior norms and agreements you've created 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. Slow the process down if necessary and invite anyone who isn't comfortable speaking up to connect with you outside of class.
- Agree on a procedure for adding to or revising the list.
- If possible, by the end of the first class meeting, get verbal confirmation that everyone can support and abide by the list.
- Once the class has reached consensus during the first week of school, *add these norms to the syllabus prior to the next class meeting.*

Considerations for Problems that Arise

- Refer to the community agreements when norms get violated in order 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.
- When things go sideways, there may be an impulse to rush in to correct. Instead consider slowing down and taking time to ponder what should come next. If the problem occurs at the end of class, assure students that you'll revisit the issue at the beginning of the next class meeting. Invite anyone who wants to discuss this with you further to your office hours.
- If a student violates the agreed upon norms, you'll need to follow up with that student individually.
- 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 is acting in a way that is disruptive to the learning environment, you have a range of options for addressing the problem. You can ask them to stop and if the problem continues, alert them that your next step will be asking them to leave the classroom.
 - If you direct them to leave, be sure to set the expectation that they need to follow up with during your office hours.
 - If it feels like there is an immediate threat to safety, call CUPD.
 - Contact Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution to assist with follow up.
- 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 can 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 or bring evidence to the next class meeting and encourage the student to do the same. You can then ask, "What are your thoughts based on this additional evidence?"
 - In response to a problematic statement (for instance, "*It's true—women just aren't as good at math as men*"), consider a spontaneous class assignment asking students to gather evidence about the issue to share at the next class meeting.
 - Another option for responding to a highly problematic comment might be, "I don't think that statement came out the way you wanted it to. That shut me down. Let's take some time to unpack your comment."
 - Provide specific feedback about a student's idea and where it may be flawed and actively engage them to clarify their argument. You have the right to move on from the discussion when the class needs to proceed.
 - As part of norm setting, encourage students to join the class meeting with a neutral background. If a student, nevertheless, has an inappropriate

image in the background during a virtual session, you could say, “We have an agreement to have a neutral background when we meet on Zoom. Perhaps you could move your computer or add a virtual background.”

Managing disruptive behaviors during a virtual meeting

The [Student Classroom and Course-Related Behavior Policy](#) is still in effect for remote 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](#) (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 setting course behavioral expectations. If you would like to consult about how to respond to any disruptions, please email [SCCR](#).

If a student disrupts a virtual meeting (in Zoom, Google Hangouts, etc.), the instructor/faculty member should take the following steps:

- Instruct the student to cease the disruptive behavior
- If the student does not comply, mute the student’s mic and turn off the student’s camera. Information on how to do these actions in Zoom can be [found here](#).
- Follow up with that student via email detailing how their behavior is disruptive and reaffirming your expectations for future behaviors.
- If the student’s disruptive behavior continues or if a single instance of disruption is egregious enough to warrant it, remove them from the Zoom meeting and [file a report](#) with Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution.
- Document problematic comments or exchanges that happen in writing or during a virtual meeting (use the record function) so that you will have evidence of the interaction. Documentation is required if you report a student to Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution.

Upon receipt of the report, SCCR will work with you in setting further behavioral expectations and holding the student accountable for the disruption. 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 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](#). Instructional faculty, including GPTIs and TAs, are also [required to report such incidents to OIEC](#).

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 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.

We aim for a rich mix of perspectives emanating partly because we are located in different countries, 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 civil arguments, using civil 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 civil, and be knowledgeable and thoughtful. And have some fun!