

Designing an equitable online course

One of the advantages of having students attending classes at a physical campus is that we, as an institution, can at least mitigate disparities among students. In the online learning environment, the institution can no longer provide a more level playing field for all students. All the inequities that exist between them will be emphasized by online learning. In such an environment, designing your course to reduce the impact of these disparities between students is critical for students' success, but also for their wellbeing.

There are a few areas where inequities between students will be highest in online learning:

- Access to reliable, high-speed internet
- Access to an individual (e.g., not shared) device for course use
- Access to a private space for extended periods of time to devote to participating in a course

For example, **synchronous learning** is one area in which disparities between students are sharpened. It demands that students have the following:

- An individual device to use (e.g., not one that they must share with others in their households)
- Uninterrupted time and space to devote to the synchronous meeting (e.g., not smaller, shared spaces that others in the household may need to use)
- Access to high-speed internet

When classes require a **great deal** of synchronous learning, all of these demands are made sharper for students who may not have all of the requirements necessary to be successful, particularly now that these students cannot simply escape to Starbucks to use public wifi. This is not to say that there should be **no** synchronous learning, but simply to suggest that professors be sensitive to the possibility that some students may have difficulty with meeting the demand for several hours a day of web conferencing.

An alternative for synchronous learning is to use a tool like Slack, which does not require video or audio, but which would allow students to communicate with one another and with you in a more immediate, text-based medium than an asynchronous, online discussion.

File downloads are another area where disparities become obvious. If you are planning to require students to stream or download large files frequently, students who are sharing devices or who may not have high-speed access to the internet will be disadvantaged. Even if eighteen students in a class are able to download or stream the files but two are not, the inequity of access in such a case makes such learning objects inequitable.

To make your course accessible to students with a range of levels of access to internet, devices, and time and space to devote to the course, consider doing the following:

Include a statement on your syllabus about the technological demands of the class. For example, "This class will require students to meet synchronously for 2 hours 3 days a week and assumes that each student can procure access to a laptop, tablet, or smartphone for these meetings. If you do not have a device that will allow you to join these meetings, ITS can arrange to ship a laptop or tablet to you prior to the start of the block." Such a statement will help students to decide whether they (a) should take the class and (b) what preparations they will need to make to be successful in the class.

Include language on your syllabus and in an announcement about how students may be able to gain access to reliable, high-speed internet. Many internet service providers are, for the duration of the many stay-at-home orders currently in effect in most states, providing service or increased service for free. A list may be found here: <https://www.coloradocollege.edu/offices/its/guides/connect-from-off-campus/student-resources-for-distance-learning.html>

Include language about support services—academic and emotional—on your syllabus. For many students, their academic wellness, or how well they're doing in your course, is connected to their emotional wellness. For many students, participating and succeeding in your course will provide critical stability and a sense of normalcy during a time that may be deeply traumatic for them. A list of academic support resources for students may be found here:

<https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/coronavirus/teaching-learning-support.html>

A list of wellness & mental health resources is available here:

<https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/coronavirus/wellness-mental-health.html>

If you have concerns about any of your students during the block, please send those concerns to Teresa Leopold. She will ensure that they are sent to the correct support center on campus.

Allow students to join Zoom meetings using Zoom backgrounds. These backgrounds can be a way for students to maintain privacy in general, but for students who are uncomfortable allowing their professors and peers to see their homes, they're particularly useful. If you prefer, students can use a solid-colored, plain background rather than some of the more distracting ones available, or students can upload a photo of their choice to serve as a background. Note that Zoom backgrounds would not protect the privacy of other people entering the student's screen.

Allow students to join Zoom/synchronous calls by phone, rather than over their computers. All synchronous web conferencing tools allow participants to join by phone rather than using voice over the internet (VOIP). If students join the synchronous class meeting by phone, the demand for high-speed internet and potentially for device are reduced considerably. Such a provision may require that you consider "flipping" your lectures—e.g., recording a short video lecture that students can watch before they attend the synchronous session—in lieu of using the synchronous meeting time for your lectures or presentations.