

ACS Inter-Campus Collaborative Working Group:
First-Year Experience / Seminar Courses
RESOURCES

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Surveying Your Students Before the First Week

Why Send a Survey?

When a course will involve remote learning in some capacity, it is recommended that you reach out to your students prior to the beginning of the course (2-3 weeks) to assess their capabilities and needs. This information will help you plan your course accordingly and connect students with resources.

How to Send a Survey?

You can ask these questions by sending them in a document to your student email list, however many instructors find it useful to use an online survey tool that summarizes the results for you. Surveys can be administered through a variety of platforms, including learning management systems (e.g. [Moodle](#), [Blackboard](#)) and online survey sites (e.g. [Google Forms](#), [Survey Monkey](#)).

What Sort of Questions Should Be Asked?

Below you will find examples of questions that you might find useful to ask your students. These questions are meant to convey information you might want to learn about your students at the outset of the course, but you may want to continue surveying your students with other questions as the semester progresses to check in with how they are handling remote learning. These questions should be adapted to the specifics of your course and institution. It could be wise to add a comment box after each question so students can elaborate on their responses or concerns regarding that topic.

- How do you anticipate participating in the course this semester? (See the policies of the institution to understand your options.) [insert the link to your institution's policies if possible]
 - In-person
 - Mostly in-person
 - Mostly online
 - Entirely online
- In which time zone will you be located during the semester?
 - Pacific
 - Mountain
 - Central
 - Eastern
 - Other
- Which type of device will you be using for online learning?
 - Desktop computer
 - Laptop computer
 - Tablet
 - Smart phone
- What will your access in terms of *data* be like on this device?

- Limited
- Unlimited
- What will your access in terms of *time* be like on this device?
 - Limited
 - Unlimited
- Indicate which of the following you will have access to during the semester:
 - Webcam
 - Microphone
 - Video recording capability
 - Audio recording capability
 - Textbook
 - *Learning management system* [insert your institution's LMS here, e.g. Moodle, Teams]
 - *Video conferencing platform* [insert your desired platform here, e.g. Zoom, Teams, etc.]
 - *Software required for the course* [insert required software here, e.g. Microsoft Office]
 - Private space for joining online lectures, discussions, etc.
- Will you be able to attend synchronous meetings online during the normally scheduled class times?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Sometimes
- Do you anticipate having new/additional demands on your time (e.g. employment, family care, etc.)?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Maybe
- Do you have previous experience with remote or blended learning?
 - Yes
 - No
- If you responded yes to the question above, which of the following did you find most conducive to your learning? (mark all that apply)
 - Synchronous activities with instructors and classmates
 - Asynchronous activities/assignments
 - Pre-recorded video lectures
 - Online discussion forums
 - Other [open response]
- Please share any concerns or recommendations you have about remote or blended learning. [open response]

More resources regarding surveys

- [Bryn Mawr College - Online learning surveys](#)
- [Education Dive - How to survey college students about the shift to online](#)
- [Visualizing Your Learning - Distance learning data: Survey early, survey often](#)

Creating a Culture of Care

Frequent, clear, and caring communication and establishing consistent, transparent procedures will help new students manage uncertainties. Important forms of communication, especially early on in the semester, include the syllabus, iterative check-ins, mindful ways of addressing trauma and stress, acknowledging the diversity of your students' experiences, providing constructive feedback, and working toward increasing bandwidth.

Syllabus

Research shows that the syllabus is an important tool in clarifying course expectations, setting the tone, motivating students, and helping students navigate the logic and components of a course. How can we develop a syllabus that functions as an effective communication tool? How can we make sure that the syllabus is accessible and cultivates an inclusive environment? What kinds of features might make the syllabus more usable in helping students navigate course readings, assignments, and activities?

Working with an existing syllabus, consider adjusting elements to increase a culture of care. You might want to work with students or colleagues to receive feedback on questions like: What is the general tone of your syllabus? Do negative commands overwhelm positive invitations? Is the premise of the syllabus that students are untrustworthy? Are your policies designed to punish more than to support? Does the language reflect this? (Questions from Mathew Cheney's *Toward Cruelty Free Syllabi*)

Sources:

Cia Verschelden, author of *Bandwidth Recovery: Helping Students Reclaim Cognitive Resources Lost to Poverty, Racism, and Social Marginalization* (2017)

[Examples of "High-hope" Syllabus Features](#)

Matthew Cheney, Director of Interdisciplinary Studies, Plymouth State University.

His stated goal: To use the syllabus as a tool for supporting students as human beings. To recognize that students have complicated lives beyond my classroom. To help. Sample syllabus: <http://bit.ly/cheneysyl>
Work on elements of a "Cruelty Free Syllabus" [Toward Cruelty-Free Syllabi](#)

Janice Carello, PhD, LMSW, Edinboro University, Pennsylvania. Trauma informed teaching syllabus with annotations [School of Social Work Syllabus Template Guide](#)

Useful [Syllabus Rubric](#) developed by UVA Center for Teaching Excellence. Palmer, M. S., Bach, D. J., & Streifer, A. C. (2014). [Measuring the promise: A learning-focused syllabus rubric](#). To improve the academy: A journal of educational development, 33 (1), 14-36.

Survey - Frequent Check-In

As suggested above, use quick surveys at the beginning or before classes - to get a general sense of where students are. Checking in early and frequently signals concern and care. A simple poll or short open answers will help teachers and learners adapt and correct.

Sample Check-In:

Please answer the anonymous survey.

Which elements of the course are going well for you? Why?
Which elements of the course are not going well for you? Why?
What could the professor do to improve the course?
What could the students do to improve the course?

Trauma and Stress

It is essential to acknowledge that we are currently teaching and learning in a pandemic. Teachers and learners can increase mindfulness, compassion, and self care. You could integrate regular check-ins on stress management and emphasize the support services students can access on your campus. Cathy Davidson and others suggest antidotes to the trauma. You could practice, model, or integrate into class some grounding techniques: [GROUNDING](#).

The [original trauma-informed principles](#) (safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment) were developed by Roger Fallot and Maxine Harris, the pioneers of trauma-informed care. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), home of the [National Center for Trauma-Informed Care](#) (NCTIC), [adapted the principles](#) and added a sixth (cultural, historical, and gender issues).

Sources:

Cathy Davidson reminds us in her blog post: “We need to build our courses thinking about empowerment and agency, designing ways for students to interact with one another and with us. We need to think about meaningful activities beyond the screen that extend the lessons of the course, building in ways students can be co-teachers as well as co-learners, actively contributing to the course. We need to think about what we all can offer one another--curiosity, imagination, knowledge, power--as antidotes to the present disruption and trauma, as tools towards building a future.”

Cathy Davidson. “[The Single Most Essential Requirement Designing Fall Online Courses](#),” www.hastac.org, 05/11/2020.

Mays Imad, neuroscientist and the founding coordinator of the teaching and learning center at Pima Community College, where she studies stress and emotions and their effect on students’ learning. [Seven recommendations for helping students thrive in times of trauma](#)

More on trauma-informed teaching and learning: [Principles for Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning](#)

More on building communities of belonging: list of ways to engage students Active Learning, Louisiana State University: [Active Learning while Physically Distancing](#)

Anita Chari and Angelica Singh - using trauma-informed pedagogies, the neuroscience of mental health, and pedagogies of social justice and diversity to create connection and embodied presence in the online and in-

person classroom, at a moment when higher education is called upon to face profound social problems that cannot be walled off from our classes and that produce anxiety, stress, and burnout among students, staff, and faculty. [CREATING RESILIENCY ONLINE: For Professors](#)

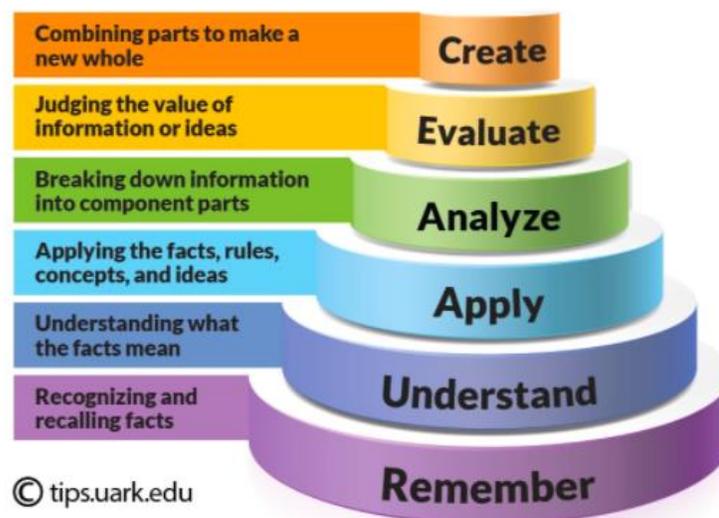
You Have to Maslow before You Can Bloom / Fink’s Taxonomy of Significant Learning

Consider using “you have to Maslow before you can Bloom” visuals in a class discussion and emphasize the importance of foundational well being and safety for learning. Connect students explicitly to resources on your campus that support “Maslow” ([Gotta "Maslow" Before You "Bloom"](#)). Consider offering a model or visual to enhance transparency and understanding of how learning happens (e.g. taxonomies by Bloom and Fink).

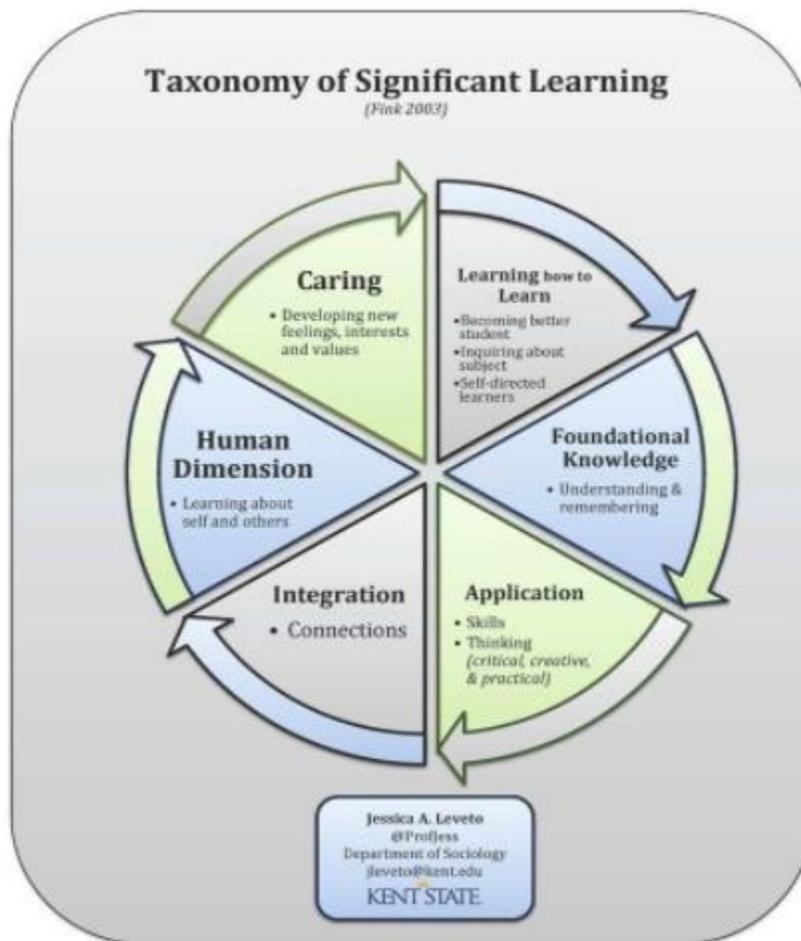
Visual: Maslow’s hierarchy of needs



Visual: Bloom’s Taxonomy



Visual: Fink’s Taxonomy of Significant Learning



Feedback: Be Kind, Give Praise

Frequent feedback is key. Consider sharing observations about what is going well in classes, assignments, and performances. Help students see where they are on their learning path by pointing out what they can do and where and how they can improve. Keep the courses challenging and encourage growth.

[Research](#) indicates that employees need an ideal praise-to-criticism ratio of 3:1 to be most effective, and healthy relationships have a 5:1 ratio of [positive-to-negative interactions](#). You can improve your work and home atmosphere, and your kind word might make someone's day.

Increase Bandwidth

Cia Verschelden, author of *Bandwidth Recovery: Helping Students Reclaim Cognitive Resources Lost to Poverty, Racism, and Social Marginalization*. Presenter in the March 27, 2020, AAC&U [Webinar: Safeguarding Quality, Equity, and Inclusion as Learning Moves Online](#)

Verschelden uses the metaphor of “bandwidth.” Each of us has a finite amount of mental bandwidth — attentional resources — for all the tasks in our lives. The realities of this public health crisis distract all of us and threaten our ability to concentrate our cognitive resources on school and work. These are uncertain times and uncertainty is a huge bandwidth stealer.

To help students recover a bit of bandwidth for learning, we need to acknowledge that the regular learning challenges that were already unequal are now even more so. When students are fearful and uncertain, the bandwidth available for learning is severely limited.

Develop strategies that can be used in classrooms and by the university in support of students to increase certainty and help students recover bandwidth.

From: AAC&U Resources from webinar [Safeguarding Quality, Equity, and Inclusion as Learning Moves Online](#). One of Cia Verschelden’s slides lists strategies for increasing certainty for our students:



The slide features a dark teal background on the left with the title "Increasing Certainty for Students" in white. Below the title is the AAC&U logo, which consists of the letters "AA" above "CU" in a stylized font, with the text "Association of American Colleges and Universities" to the right. On the right side of the slide, there is a light gray background containing a bulleted list of eight strategies.

- Communicate often and consistently
- Be patient and kind – to students and to yourself
- Daily check-ins using a variety of modalities
- Use LMS to clarify expectations and access to resources
- Frequent feedback – with offers of support and connection
- Don't assume all students have access to technology
- Assurance that you're there to help students succeed
- Give grace – maintain learning goals

First Day Interactions

The first day can be crucial for setting the tone of your course and introducing first-year students to their new community of learners. With students in varying modalities, it may be more challenging to integrate all of them into the same shared experience. Here are some readings and strategies that might be useful.

Readings

Essential

- Wesch, Michael. "[Welcome Students.](#)"
- Sharon O'Malley. "[Ideas for Building an Online Community.](#)"
- James M. Lang. "[How to Teach a Good First Day of Class.](#)"

Optional Additional Readings

- Lyons, R., McIntosh, M., & Kysilka, M. (2003). *Teaching college in an age of accountability*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Robert Talbert. "[Student Video Presentations.](#)"
- Al Infante. "[A Dozen Strategies for Improving Online Student Retention.](#)"

Setting Expectations

One way to open the class might be to acknowledge the differences between this semester and other semesters and recognize the ways that students will be participating in the course. You might work with the students to develop shared guidelines and expectations for behavior for both synchronous and asynchronous discussion. You could solicit suggestions for ways to best incorporate participation of synchronous online students alongside in-class students, such as adding longer pauses for answers and waiting for people to raise their hands.

Once you have established guidelines, make an artifact of some kind that can be shared with students and referred to and/or edited throughout the semester.

Introductory Discussion Board Activities

Online discussion boards could be helpful for establishing a stronger sense of community and shared purpose. Rather than simply introducing themselves and moving on, the goal is to have students introduce themselves and then engage with each other's introductions. There are many ways to do that, including modifying introduction techniques you have used in the past, but here are a few examples.

1. Shared Terms

- Write down the first five terms that you think of when you think about the topic of this class.

- Read your classmates' terms, and find one person whose terms are similar to your own and one person whose terms are different from your own.
- Write 2-3 sentences in response to the person whose terms are similar to your own, explaining the connections you see between your own terms, their terms, and the topic of the course.
- Write 2-3 questions in response to the person whose terms are different from your own, asking for clarification about the terms that they have chosen.
- Follow up by responding to any comments or questions you have received from classmates.

2. Directed Thinking Activity.

- List everything you can think of that might be in a book entitled [your textbook, or the name of the course if you don't have a textbook].
- Share your ideas with a partner, and then put those ideas into categories.
- Give each category a name.
- Combine your ideas with another pair, and then arrange the categories as a table of contents for this book and post yours in the discussion forum. [Lyons et al. (2003, p. 87)]

3. Video Introductions

- Record a short (1- to 2-minute) video introducing yourself.
- Watch [a subset of?] your classmates' videos and respond to at least two of them. [Talbert]

4. Preparing

- Besides your loved ones, pets or family, what are three things you would take with you if you had to escape from a real Zombie Apocalypse (ZA)?
- Briefly, tell us why each thing you are taking is important to you. You can provide text descriptions, images, a video or audio post, whatever helps you describe your ZA survival kit.
- Read your other classmates' posts in this discussion to find out what they are planning to take with them. See if you can find 2-3 others who have items that complement or add to the items you've chosen for survival. Comment on their posts and explain why you think it would be a good idea for the two of you to work together against the zombies.

Alternative scenarios: "you are traveling back in time to the [period and place we are studying]"
 "you are going into space/to live on Mars" "you are stranded on a desert island" "you are going on a scientific expedition to [remote part of the world related to what we are studying]"

Out-of-Class Learning & Engagement Activities

Bringing the World into the Classroom When We Cannot Take the Class into the World

Many first-year seminar programs strive to make connections between their courses and the world at large, a process which often involves actually taking students outside the classroom. But how do we offer students experiences which normally occur outside the classroom when travel is impossible and we are confined to digital environments? Although online courses have been the exception rather than the rule for many of us, such classes have been in existence long enough for scholars to point to best practices and most effective procedures.

Field Trips

Many museums, zoos, concert halls, and theatres offer digital tours or experiences. Although the educational wings of these institutions often focus on K-12 students, they also offer effective educational experiences for college and university students. There are too many institutions to cite, but as one example, here is a compilation of virtual tours for 75 museums (art, natural history, science and technology, history):

[The 75 Best Virtual Museum Tours - Art, History, Science \[2020\]](#)

Guest Speakers

When bringing guest speakers into the virtual classroom, many of the preparations are the same as if they were going to be physically present. Are there clear expectations? Does the guest presenter understand the topic to be covered? Is the guest cognizant of time constraints?

In an online situation, are both host and guest familiar with the technology they will be using? Is there an opportunity for a practice session?

Although it is possible to pre-record a guest lecture and then post it, experience and research point to the value of synchronous encounters. Interview, chat, and question/answer formats are often more effective than straight lectures. Some sample articles exploring the effectiveness of online guest speakers include:

Hemphill and Hemphill, 2006. [Evaluating the impact of guest speaker postings in online discussions](#)

Merle and Craig, 2007. [Be My Guest: A Survey of Mass Communication Students' Perception of Guest Speakers](#)

Fulton, Crystal, 2020. [Collaborating in online teaching: inviting e-guests to facilitate learning in the digital environment](#)

Service Learning

Many of us prize the benefits of service or community engaged learning, and this topic is often introduced in first-year seminars. The current pandemic requires us to rethink community engaged learning. Instead of face to face contact, students can still contribute to their communities through conducting research and assessment for community partners, or by creating deliverables such as educational content and social media material. The University of Denver's Center for Community Engagement to advance Scholarship and Learning is a particularly rich resource for thinking about how to proceed with online community engaged learning. See:

[Community Engagement and Remote Teaching: Reflections and Resources](#)

[Online Community-Engaged Class Resources.](#)

As with guest speaking, there is already a literature concerning the efficacy of online service/community learning. Sample articles include:

- Strait and Sauer, 2004. [Constructing Experiential Learning for Online Courses: The Birth of E-Service](#)
- Guthrie and McCracken, 2010. [Teaching and Learning Social Justice through Online Service-Learning Courses](#)
- Waldner, McGorry, and Widener, 2010. [Extreme E-Service Learning \(XE-SL\): E-Service Learning in the 100% Online Course](#)
- McGorry, 2012. [No Significant Difference in Service Learning Online](#)
- Waldner, McGorry, and Widener, 2012. [E-Service Learning: The Evolution of Service Learning to Engage a Growing Online Student Population](#)

Conceptual Frameworks for Community-Building in Course Design

Readings

Essential

- The “Community of Inquiry” framework is the most well-researched, well-regarded framework for thinking about community and interaction in online and blended courses. This framework is very briefly outlined in these two documents by Purdue University.
 - [“Community of Inquiry Framework”](#)
 - [“Social Presence - Student Engagement”](#)
- Wehler, Melissa. 2018. [“Five Ways to Build Community in Online Classrooms.”](#) *Faculty Focus*. July 11, 2018. This short document outlines a variety of the most commonly discussed community-building strategies.
- ACUE [webinars](#) on online teaching
 - Note: These 3 short segments (all under 5 minutes) assume a mostly asynchronous course design. Most of you will be seeing students in in-person or synchronous online sessions at least some of the time. Still, these three short sessions provide practical advice from very well-regarded pedagogy experts.
 - Wesch, Michael. [“Welcome Students.”](#)
 - Darby, Flower. [“Managing Your Online Presence.”](#)
 - Darby, Flower. [“Plan and Facilitate Effective Discussions.”](#)

Optional additional readings / podcasts

- Cavanaugh, Sarah Rose. [“How to Make Your Teaching More Engaging.”](#) The entire piece is useful and draws on Dr. Cavanaugh’s research about the role of emotion in learning, but if you are strapped for time, focus on Principle 3.
- Chick, Nancy, Kent Anderson, Stephanie Rolph, Betsy Sandlin, and Linda Boland. 2020. [“Distinctive Learning Experiences: Can we identify the signature pedagogies of residential liberal arts institutions?”](#) ROLLINSpire Blog, Rollins College Center for Faculty Development. See the discussion of “student-student” interactions as one of the “signature pedagogies” of liberal arts campuses.
- Darby, [“How to Be a Better Online Teacher”](#); Items 1-3 + 9 from her list of “10 Essential Principles and Practices.” All address elements of cultivating a sense of community and collaboration.
- Moore, Christina. [“Tips for Synchronous Online Sessions.”](#) Oakland University Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. This 4-page tip sheet outlines some of the most common recommendations about synchronous session management.

Planning

How can you take these principles and put them into practice?

Welcomes & Introductions

All of these resources ask you to pay particular attention to community-building at the beginning of your course, especially through welcome plans and introductory activities. How might you develop a welcome plan for your course?

- We've addressed this in the "[First Day Interactions](#)" section.
- What else might you plan as part of a welcome / introductions strategy?

Social Presence

How might you develop a social presence plan for your course? (Especially if you have significant out-of-class elements (in either a blended or a fully remote course))

- For this goal, you might do any of the steps recommended by Flower Darby, including developing a plan for how you will give regular feedback, how and when you will respond to queries, or establishing a regular schedule for posting in your online space.

Peer Interactions

How might you develop a plan for student-student interactions in your course?

- Even for classes with in-person class meetings, student-student interactions will be different this fall. Identify at least one way that you will enable students to have peer interactions in your course.
 - This could entail strategies for whole-group or small-group discussions in an on-campus class under social distancing and masking protocols.
 - It could entail incorporating some digitally mediated group work -- which could be done in class or out of class.
 - It could entail out-of-class discussion fora, social annotation for assigned readings, social film watching (Netflix watch parties) or other socially-based activities.

ACS Inter-Campus Collaborative Working Group Members:

Erika Berroth, Associate Professor of German and Faculty Fellow, Center for Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship, Southwestern University

John Krebs, Willis H. Holmes Distinguished Professor of Music, Hendrix College

Maureen McClung, Associate Professor of Biology, Hendrix College

Sasha Pfau, Professor of History and Coordinator of the Engaged Citizen Working Group, Hendrix College

Julie Sievers, Director of Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship, Southwestern University