

Flexibility Guidelines

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Prepared in Collaboration between the Committee on Academic Policy (CAP) AY 2023-24 and Paula Fitzpatrick, Ph.D., Director of the Center for Well-Being, Faculty Affiliate, Psychological Sciences

Overview: CAP and the Center for Well-Being collaborated to create a set of flexibility guidelines to support faculty and students. These flexibility guidelines provide some support for faculty and students in aligning expectations regarding how to best implement flexibility practices while minimizing additional workload for the faculty. Faculty are encouraged to choose a mix of the evidence-based flexibility guidelines (clear communication and transparency, flexible deadlines, flexible attendance practices, and flexible grading practices) that best support their learning goals and objectives.

Objective: The goal of these flexible teaching guidelines is to provide a proactive framework to promote effective teaching and learning that supports both faculty and students. These guidelines are intended to help faculty address and ideally reduce requests for flexibility in a systematic way, while providing students with a mix of compassionate challenges and flexibility to foster academic and personal success.

Rationale: Student requests for flexibility are high both at WPI and across higher education. For example, in the March 2024 CAP Faculty Survey, 70% of faculty agreed or strongly agreed that they feel overwhelmed by student requests for flexibility. These trends for increased student demand for flexibility mimic the trends seen nationally, where students are looking for flexibility in deadlines, attendance policies, and class participation (Flaherty, 2023; Supiano, 2023). In the March 2024 CAP survey, 70% of faculty agreed or strongly agreed that flexible classroom policies will improve student well-being; however, 72% are also concerned that implementing flexible practices will increase their workload.

The responsibility WPI faculty feel for supporting students is reflected in the 2024 CAP survey results which indicate that 72% of faculty agree or strongly agree that they worry if they do not respond to student requests for flexibility positively, it would impact the students' well-being negatively. Conversely, students may not feel that faculty are concerned about student well-being. WISHES (Well-Being Improvement Survey for Higher Education Settings) survey data collected in 2023-2024 found that only 38% of students definitely feel that there is at least one faculty member at WPI who cares about them as a person.

These flexibility guidelines provide some support for faculty and students in aligning expectations regarding how to best implement flexibility practices, while minimizing additional workload for the faculty.

Limitations: Faculty discretion is needed in implementing practices to support the learning goals and objectives of their courses. Not all recommendations are appropriate for every situation. The purpose of these guidelines is to provide options to support faculty in choosing the best way to implement some flexibility into their course design. In addition, these guidelines supplement the accommodations provided by the Office of Accessibility Services for students with documented physical, learning, sensory, psychological, and developmental disabilities. Finally, these guidelines cannot cover all possible extenuating circumstances. Faculty should continue to work with the Undergraduate Studies Office and the Office of Health Services to support students experiencing medical emergencies or other longer-term challenges.

Proposal: When designing courses, it is recommended that faculty incorporate proactive flexibility available to all students. An emerging body of research recommends building flexible teaching practices

into the syllabus when designing a course (Cavanagh, 2023; Flaherty, 2023; Galad, Betts, & Campbell, 2024; Hills & Peacock, 2022; Wagner et al., 2023). These practices benefit both students and faculty by setting course policies upfront, thus reducing student requests for additional flexibility. Faculty discretion is needed to adopt flexible policies that work for their course's unique characteristics and allow students to receive formative feedback in a timely manner. Incorporating multiple modes of flexibility can lead to more inclusive and effective learning environments and humanize teaching (Galad, et al., 2024). Care should be taken in implementing flexibility practices as the practices can offer short-term relief but may have long-term consequences (Galad et al., 2024).

Flexibility Practice Options:

Options to incorporate flexibility include clear communication and transparency; flexible deadlines; flexible attendance practices; and flexible grading practices. Each option is described below. Data on use of these options by WPI faculty is provided in the Appendix.

- **Clear Communication and Transparency:** Considerable research has been conducted in the last decade to understand “best practices” in syllabus design. Bernardi, Brown, Davis et al. (2024) found that 77% of WPI students consider the syllabus important for their learning experience. While there may not yet be enough evidence for definitive “best practices” that generalize to all students and all instructors (Abbot, Luther, & Oliver, 2022) there is growing consensus about several practices that improve the experience of students with regard to syllabi: (a) having a warm and friendly tone and moderate length (Abbot et al., 2022; Wagner et al., 2023); (b) including baseline course information about scheduling and planning, grading and course expectations, and information and policies (Bernardi et al., 2024; Wagner et al., 2023); and (c) inclusivity statements (Bernardi et al., 2024; Wagner et al., 2023). Use of audio and visual media in design and delivery format are inconclusive (Abbot, et al., 2022).

Examples of clear communication practices are:

- Include a clear statement on syllabi regarding course policies such as attendance, late assignments, missed exams, and missed classes.
 - Spend class time explaining the purpose of course policies (deadlines, attendance, grading) so students understand the purpose of course structures and feel they are partners in the course.
 - Remind students about class policies periodically.
 - Adopt a warm and friendly tone in writing your syllabus.
- **Flexible Deadlines:** Accumulating evidence indicates that a balance between structure and flexibility is ideal to support student learning and keep faculty workload manageable (Cavanagh, 2023; Dwyer, & Cardamone, 202; Flaherty, 2023; Marcis & Carr, 2003; Müller, Mildemberger, & Steingruber, 2023). Deadlines help motivate students and help them plan their time (Marcis & Carr, 2003). Flexibility can alleviate stress; however, too much flexibility makes courses feel unstructured (Sathy, & Hogan, 2019) and can negatively impact student mental health (Cavanagh, 2023b).

Examples of evidence-informed flexible deadline practices are as follows:

- Use a "late bank" for assignments (e.g. the students can turn in a specified number of assignments late without justification or "penalty").
- Allow students to choose the date for their class presentation.
- Apply a no deadline policy (i.e., students can turn in their assignments anytime).

- Have a mixture of strict and flexible deadlines for assignments (i.e., some assignments can be submitted anytime during the course, and others have strict deadlines).
- **Flexible Attendance Practices:** Students desire flexible attendance practices. Flaherty (2023) reported that 40% of students believe that they should be allowed to miss 3-4 classes in a full semester and 31% of students believe that attendance should not count for their grade. At the same time, research demonstrates that attendance is critical for learning and academic success (Credé, Roch, & Kieszczynka, 2010; Ha et al., 2024) and well-being (Holstead, 2022). To motivate students to attend class, faculty can incorporate interaction into class time or have attendance count for a small percentage of the course grade (Credé, Roch, & Kieszczynka, 2010; Eddy & Hogan, 2014; Keys, 2021). While attendance is important, rigid attendance policies can be counterproductive and decrease student motivation and self-directed learning (Duncan & Pintrick, 1994; Harbath, 2024; Keys, 2021; St. Clair, 1999), spread illness (Keys, 2021), and prioritize logistics rather than rigor (Ciancanelli & Adamo, 2023).

Examples of flexible attendance practices are:

- Use an "absence" bank for missing in-class quizzes, labs, exams (e.g., the students can miss a specified number of lab sessions without justification).
- Provide students with multiple modes of class participation (e.g., synchronous and asynchronous, in-person and online)
- **Flexible Grading Practices:** The use of flexible grading practices such as ungrading and flexible assessment weighting is an emerging area in higher education. Ungrading fosters a more student-centered evaluation system (Freeman, 2022) and flexible assessment weighting can provide students a more meaningful learning experience without inflating grades (Coyne & Woodruff, 2022). Galad et al. (2024) found that both students and faculty had similar preferences regarding grading and weighting of grades—both preferred numerical grades to pass/fail grades and both preferred more frequent, lower weighted tasks. Both preferred flexible weighting options (i.e., drop lowest), with students having a stronger preference for that practice than faculty.

Examples of flexible grading practices are:

- Drop a certain number of lowest score assignments/exams/quizzes (e.g., a specified number of quizzes with the lowest scores would not count towards the student's grade).
- Use "low-stakes grading" (more frequent assessments/assignments that are worth less).
- Allow students to resubmit their assignments/exams after correcting their mistakes to improve their grade.

Potential benefits of flexibility for students:

- Improves quality of work (Burns et al, 2023; Hills & Peacock, 2022; Sathy, & Hogan, 2019)
- Better management of academic workload (Burns et al, 2023; Hills & Peacock, 2022)
- Promotes self-regulated learning (Burns et al, 2023; Hills & Peacock, 2022)
- Reduces stress (Flaherty, 2023; Hills & Peacock; Ruesch & Sarvary, 2024)
- Reduces barriers to success since students do not need to self-disclose the reason for utilizing a flexibility practice (Hills & Peacock, 2022; Sathy & Hogan, 2019)

Potential benefits of flexibility for faculty:

- Spreads out grading while maintaining predictability (Hills & Peacock, 2022)
- Reduces decision fatigue and emotional labor of responding to student self-disclosure and supports faculty in being educators, not therapists (Cavanagh, 2023; Supiano, 2024c)
- Promotes an equitable and inclusive learning environment and empowers students to be partners in their education (Hills & Peacock, 2022; Ruesch & Sarvary, 2024), which aligns with WPI's strategic initiatives of student well-being, purpose-driven education, and an inclusive community.
- Improves student learning and course engagement (Burns et al, 2023; Cavanagh, 2023; Hills & Peacock, 2022; Sathy & Hogan, 2019)

Faculty concerns about using flexibility guidelines:

- In the 2024 CAP Survey, some faculty at WPI expressed concern that flexibility will reduce class rigor, interfere with meeting course objectives, and negatively impact student learning. Emerging research suggests that flexible classroom practices increase student mastery of course content, reduce fear of failure, improve quality of student work, and allow students to better manage workload (Burns et al, 2023; Cavanagh, 2023; Hills & Peacock, 2022; Marsis & Carr, 2003). Flexibility also improves retention and course completion (Flaherty, 2023). Flexibility allows instructors to be both demanding and warm (Cavanagh, 2023; Hammond & Jackson, 2014). Choosing suitable flexibility practices for a given class and implementing them effectively might require some trial and error but may come with significant benefits for both students and faculty.
- In the 2024 CAP Survey, some faculty at WPI expressed concern that flexible teaching practices will increase workload. While adopting new teaching practices often does require additional time (Brownell & Tanner, 2012; McCorkle, 2021), professional development opportunities can help mitigate negative impact (Brownell & Tanner, 2012). In addition, faculty can incrementally try out new practices (Sathy & Hogan, 2019) and incorporate multiple modes of flexibility to customize the number and types of flexibility offered (Galad, Betts, & Campbell, 2024).

FAQs**What should I do if students ask for MORE flexibility beyond what is in the syllabus?**

- There have always been students who wanted preferential treatment. The difference now is that the percentage of students making requests has increased. If it is normalized that up front policies are built into the syllabus, and faculty don't change those policies, we will start to get to a new norm where students stop asking for so much. The essential point is that if FACULTY state up front what the rules are, STUDENTS should agree up front that those are the rules and stop trying to break them. It is important to communicate to the students that the course structure is required to meet the learning objectives.

What should I do if there is an emergency situation?

- Emergency situations are outside of the scope of this document. There are other policies in place for dealing with emergency situations and those should still be followed. Faculty should continue to work with the Undergraduate Studies Office and the Office of Health Services to support students experiencing medical emergencies or other longer-term challenges.

What should I do if a student says they are sick and need more flexibility?

- If the faculty member is contacted by the Undergraduate Studies Office and/or the Office of Health Services, they should follow the guidance from those offices. Otherwise, explain to the

student that they can invoke whatever flexibility practices are stated in the syllabus (utilize absence bank, utilize late bank, etc.). Flexibility practices are like PTO. It doesn't matter WHY a student uses a flexibility practice – there are a limited number of "freebies" and students take them when they choose regardless of the reason.

What should I do if a student has accommodations from the Office of Accessibility Services?

- These guidelines supplement the accommodations provided by the Office of Accessibility Services (OAS) for students with documented physical, learning, sensory, psychological, and developmental disabilities. Faculty should work with OAS in implementing individual accommodations.

What should I do if I am concerned about a student's mental health?

- If you believe a student is an immediate danger to themselves or someone else, call the WPI Police Department at 508-831-5555 (on campus) or 9-1-1 (off campus). If you believe a student is in crisis, contact the Student Development and Counseling Center (SDCC) at 508-831-5540. If the student has stopped coming to class and is non-responsive or for other concerns, fill out an [I am concerned about a student form](#) and someone from the CARE team will follow-up with the student.

What should I do if a student is struggling with time management or basic study skills?

- Refer the student to the Center for Well-Being by emailing cwb@wpi.edu. Peer well-being ambassadors are trained to provide 1:1 peer education and well-being. They can help peers with a variety of academic topics (e.g., time management, note-taking, reading tips, post-test reflection, etc.), identify well-being priorities, or serve as an accountability buddy. Workshops are offered by the Student Development and Counseling Center (SDCC), Center for Well-Being (CWB), and the Career Development Center (CDC).

What should I do if I have a student who is struggling in my class academically?

- Encourage the student to attend your office hours and/or contact the TA for the course. Refer the student to the appropriate resources:
 - Peer tutoring at the [Academic Resources Center \(ARC\)](#)
 - Help with written, visual, or oral communication at [Writing Center](#)
 - Teamwork support [Sweet Center](#)
 - [Academic Advising Office](#)

What should I do if I have a student who is struggling socially?

- Refer the student to the Center for Well-Being to hang out in the social space, participate in ProjectConnect (to meet people and engage in meaningful conversations), and attend drop-in activities.
- Encourage the student to join a club, fraternity/sorority, or other student organization via the myWPI app.
- Suggest the student sign up for a SDCC group to find support students in finding connection and support.
- Make sure the student is aware of spaces on campus to hang out with others who share their identities (International House, Center for Black Excellence, Lavender or Lotus Lounges).

What should I do if I want to learn more about how to implement flexibility in my own class?

- Explore the articles listed at the end of this document. The Morgan Center has numerous resources to support faculty in syllabus design, including:
 - [Course Syllabus Toolkit](#)
 - [Cultivating inclusivity in introductory undergraduate STEM course syllabi](#)
 - Tools from Morgan Center programs on [Speaking Up to Bias and Interrupting Microaggressions](#).

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Appendix: Data from the March 2024 CAP Survey on Flexibility Practices

Flexibility Practice	Example	% of faculty who used practice	Of faculty who used practice, % who reported:		
			Positive impact on student well-being	Increased workload	Positive impact on student learning
Flexible Deadlines	Late Bank	32	85	35	22
	Students choose date for class presentation	24	48	22	15
	No deadlines	24	52	63	44
	Mixture of strict and flexible deadlines	44	54	42	38
Flexible Attendance Practices	"Absence" bank for in-class activities	28	53	25	17
Flexible Grading Practices	Drop some low scores	47	72	17	17
	Low stakes grading	61	53	49	51
	Allow resubmissions	51	50	64	60