

## Center for the Advancement of Teaching



*Tips from the CAT*

This message to all faculty, deans, directors and department heads has been approved by Dr. Sally McRorie, Provost and Executive Vice President.

# Goals for the First Day of Class

When we're planning for a new semester, it's always important to think about the conditions in which our students will be learning. We're all facing stressful circumstances again, which will shape how we and our students feel and behave during the first week of class. In the midst of another wave of the pandemic, and with health and safety on our minds, it may be especially difficult to know how best to begin such an uncertain semester.

In addition to communicating our expectations for curbing the spread of COVID-19, three worthwhile priorities for the first class session include building a classroom community that emphasizes mutual respect and care for self and others; providing students with a clear picture of how the class is going to be conducted, including if circumstances change; and helping them understand and see value in what they will be learning this semester.

### **Building Classroom Community**

Humanizing yourself and your students, and getting to know one another, seems even more important than usual this semester. More than ever, we are depending on one another for the best possible experience. We can demonstrate respect and care for our students; expect them to have respect and care for one another; and help them understand what that looks like in our courses. We can encourage them, not only to get vaccinated and wear masks ( as described in this memo), but also to share contact information (if they wish) and look out for one another academically as well. We want them to connect rather than compete or feel isolated, and we want to help them understand that they are not just individuals who act in a vacuum, affecting only themselves; they are members of a community, who have obligations to and value for each other.

Helping students connect will be beneficial not only for their learning, but also potentially for their mental health, since many people have been feeling more isolated during the pandemic. It helps if faculty give students opportunities to bond, and to get to know at least some of their peers, before the coursework begins, so introducing themselves should be the first task, whether in person, through Zoom, or online.

## Establishing How the Class Will Work

Determining how best to run our classes has been a real challenge for many of us these last few weeks. We've been trying to think through how to promote safety, how to facilitate active learning, how to handle large-group discussions and small-group activities, how to provide accommodations, how to keep students who are [in quarantine or isolation](#) on track, how to be heard while wearing a mask, and so on. It has been overwhelming for many, and so, first, we welcome you [to meet with us](#) for a one-on-one consultation if you need support as you think through your options and make plans.

Next, we all need to think about how to share our plans with our students on the first day, or even before the first day, by email or on Canvas, so that they know what to expect in our courses. It may be the case that you don't want to make some of those decisions alone, and you need to talk to your chair or director about certain issues, or want to confer with the students themselves about how best to approach certain aspects of the course. Students usually love to be consulted about how their classes will run, and they can offer valuable ideas and perspectives. You can even survey them, and/or put certain elements of the course to a vote.

Guidelines for in-class behavior, [in-class group work](#), and [in-class discussion](#) are excellent topics to put to the students themselves. What makes class discussions go well? What are some problems we'd like to avoid? When the whole class develops the "rules of engagement" (the discussion norms, etc.) they tend to value and abide by them more. They appreciate the opportunity to participate in a more democratic approach to course structure and policies, and they often have higher expectations for themselves than we might anticipate.

## Previewing the Learning

The first day of class is an important opportunity to kindle students' interest in the topic and goals of the course, and in the learning that's in store for them this fall. You can reveal your own passion for your subject matter, and/or help students to envision how taking this course will help them grow: What new knowledge, skills, and perspectives will they gain this fall? You can also introduce them to some of the processes through which they'll do that valuable learning this semester (e.g., through engaging discussions, interesting projects, real-world experiences, etc.).

Of course, if [the first day](#) of class is just an administrative day, dedicated solely to [policies](#), admonitions, standards, etc., we are likely to lose our [best opportunity](#) to shape how students feel about the learning they'll be doing. The course is off to a better start if we can use the first day to stir curiosity, get to know our students, and foster a sense of [belonging](#).

If you'd like support with your plans for the first day, for the whole semester, or with any aspect of your teaching, please contact us at [pro-teaching@fsu.edu](mailto:pro-teaching@fsu.edu).

This email was sent by Florida State University  
222 S Copeland Street Tallahassee, FL, 32304, US