Classroom and Syllabus Guidelines for Instructors Related to COVID-19

July 2, 2020

This guidance is current as of the date listed herein and is subject to change or as additional information becomes available.

Penn State’s Office of Student Conduct (OSC) supports instructors as they seek to provide a positive learning environment for all students. The University Faculty Senate has recommended guidelines for managing classroom disruptions, and these guidelines allow instructors to draw on University support in quickly and effectively addressing disruptions. These guidelines can be applied to a wide range of situations and have been adapted to help instructors maintain a safe classroom environment with COVID-19 requirements. The University recognizes that race, ethnicity, gender expression, disabilities, and other visible social identities play a role in how instructors experience the classroom environment. Thus, all instructors are strongly encouraged to consult Educational Equity’s parallel guidelines which recommend protocols to address classroom behaviors that may disrupt inclusive learning environments and disparately impact members of marginalized populations, in particular.

Related to COVID-19 requirements for Fall 2020, instructors should:

- Include a University statement of classroom behavioral requirements in all course syllabi and posted in all classrooms. COVID-19 related requirements include masking and social distancing. Depending on the classroom and the nature of the course, instructors may add other requirements (e.g., directional guidance in laboratories). Instructors are encouraged to consider including adherence to these requirements as part of the overall participation grade in the course and send an email or post a note on Canvas to remind students about the requirements before the semester begins.
- Orally review classroom requirements at the beginning of the semester and spend a few minutes on these requirements for the first several class periods, before the end of drop/add.

If a student fails to adhere to the requirements during a particular class, instructors should take the following steps, in quick succession:

- Remind the student, in a firm yet kind manner, of the requirement and the reason for it: safety. Ask the student to comply.
- Remind the student that their non-compliance is a violation of class requirements and of the Student Code of Conduct (See notes below regarding “failure to comply” and disruptive behavior) and ask that the student comply.
- Ask the student to either comply or to leave the classroom immediately.
- If the student fails to comply or leave, assess the situation and dismiss class.
- Should an emergency situation develop that you feel cannot be resolved by classroom dismissal, please consider calling 911 for assistance.
After class, instructors should:

- **For students who failed to comply:** Immediately file a report with the OSC. The OSC will alert the student that they will not be allowed to return to class until the matter is addressed through Penn State’s conduct process.\(^5\)
- **For students who initially violated the requirement, but who chose to comply when addressed:** Consider an email or other communication to remind the student of the requirement for future classes, but also to allow the student to explain their action in a way that might help mitigate it in the future.
- **Immediately communicate a class dismissal to your academic unit leader** (i.e., that is, department head, director of academic affairs, or director) and, as soon as possible, produce a written record of the facts.

Instructors should be confident that referrals to the OSC will be addressed and they will have the University’s support as they reinforce Penn State’s classroom requirements.

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\(^1\) Sample COVID-19 Syllabus Statement: “We know from existing data that wearing a mask in public can help prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the community (Lyu & Wehby, 2020; CDC, 2020; Johns Hopkins Medicine, 2020). In accordance with PA Department of Health regulations and guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), The Pennsylvania State University has determined that everyone will be required to wear a face mask in university buildings, including classrooms. You MUST wear a mask appropriately (i.e., covering both your mouth and nose) in the building if you are attending class in person. Masks have been provided for students, instructors, and staff, and everyone is expected to wear one while inside any university building.

Students who choose not to wear a mask may participate in class remotely, but may not attend in person. This is to protect their health and safety as well as the health and safety of their classmates, instructor, and the university community. Anyone attending class in person without a mask will be asked to put one on or leave. Instructors will end class if anyone present refuses to appropriately wear a mask for the duration of class. Students should also be sure they are situated at least six feet away from their fellow students and seated in a seat that is designated to ensure that distance. (Add other appropriate language specific to the class here.) Students who refuse to wear masks appropriately or adhere to other stated requirements may face disciplinary action for Code of Conduct violations. On a case-by-case basis, students may consult with Student Disability Resources for accommodations if they cannot wear a mask. Students requiring such accommodations may be advised to take advantage of and participate in the course through synchronous remote learning.

Finally, students who are experiencing COVID-19 related symptoms should not attend class in person and are encouraged to contact a health care provider.

Instructors may have participation guidelines and requirements related to classroom behavior as it relates to interaction in the classroom and online. These are allowed by University policy and should be stated clearly on the syllabus. Sample statement: “A portion of the grade for this course is directly tied to your participation in this class. Successful participation is defined as consistently adhering to University requirements, as presented in this syllabus. It also includes engaging in group or other activities during class that solicit your feedback on the readings or material in the lecture.”

Sample statement for the start of class related to COVID-19: “As you enter class (or, As we begin class), I expect that each of you is wearing a mask that covers your mouth and nose. Please also be sure you are situated at least 6 feet away from your fellow students and seated in a seat that is designated to ensure that distance. (Add other appropriate language specific to the class here.) It is also important to remember that masks are required to be worn in any University building. These requirements are in place to promote the safety of our entire community.”

Penn State’s Code of Conduct defines failure to comply as “Failing to comply with reasonable directives from University or other officials when directed to do so. This includes, but is not limited to failure to provide identification, to report to an administrative office, to complete sanctions assigned as part of the conduct process or, when reasonable cause exists, failure to leave University-controlled premises (both physical and virtual) or dangerous situations when directed to do so by properly authorized persons, including police and/or University faculty and staff” University Code of Conduct, 2019.

Disruptive behavior is defined as “Obstruction or disruption of classes, research projects, conduct processes and/or investigations (University or police), University governance proceedings, or other activities or programs of the University; or obstructing access to University facilities, property, or programs. An action or combination of actions by one or more individuals that unreasonably interferes with, hinders, obstructs, or prevents the operation of the University or infringes on the rights of others to freely participate in its programs and services. (Also see policy AD-57)” University Code of Conduct, 2019.

Referrals to the OSC for noncompliance will result in the student being immediately informed they may not return to class until the matter is addressed through the University’s conduct process. A student who returns to the class before being expressly given permission will be in violation of the Code of Conduct. An OSC case manager will meet with the student to address the behavior and gather relevant information. The case manager will also connect with the instructor to gather information and communicate next steps in the conduct process. If it is
determined through the conduct process that the student violated the Code of Conduct, sanctions will be assigned designed to hold the student accountable for the violation and to set clear expectations regarding future behavior and adherence to stated requirements. However, if appropriate and warranted (e.g., in cases of significant disruption, repeated non-compliance, or threatening behavior), the student may be prevented from participating in person or removed from the class permanently. In any case, conduct outcomes relevant to the classroom environment will be communicated to the instructor prior to the student being allowed to return to the classroom.