

Planning for Exams, Assessments, and Feedback on Student Work

Unplanned events may disrupt exams and assessment in four main ways. First, class may be canceled or a significant number of students may be ill or may not be able to access campus at the time of a planned assessment. Second, the class time leading up to a planned assessment may have been significantly disrupted. Third, the teaching team may have been impacted by the unplanned event and the instructor may not have the grading support needed to give the assessment as planned. And finally, the course may have been moved to an online format without significant prior notice.

In all situations it is helpful for the instructor to consider the purpose of assessment and the learning goals of the course to know what type of action may be most appropriate. For example, **when exams and other assessments are viewed more as opportunities for students to learn rather than strictly a way for the instructor to determine student grades, it may open up more possibilities** for the types of assessments offered and the type of feedback that is provided to students.

Instructors should consider their learning goals for students, the goal of the assessment in the course (grading, student learning, both), as well as the resources they have to provide feedback on the assessment (see below) as they make decisions about how to best handle disruptions that may impact exams and other assessments.

COVID 19 Considerations

With relation to examinations in particular, it is important to remember that, in the event of a campus closure, we are not necessarily trying to replicate traditional in person finals in an online form.

For Winter 2020, all instructors should prepare for at least some students being unable to attend the final in person. **We do not want to compel a student who is sick to come to campus. To do so poses significant public health risks.** See for instance:

<https://www.washington.edu/teaching/topics/teaching-and-learning-when-classes-cant-meet/>

First principles:

- **Keep the learning going.** think outside the parameters of your original assessments and ask the question, what can we do here that keeps learning happening? What if our first priority in an emergency is not completing testing but giving an opportunity to show learning?
- **Have a plan in place and discuss it with your students** in the days prior to the exam if at all possible. If campus is open, then X. If campus is not open, then Y. If you are sick and unable to attend the exam, then Z.
- Talk to students about how you may have to modify your original grading schema. Be transparent about what that will look like.

Technical considerations in the event of a campus shutdown or for individual students who may not be able to attend an in-person final exam:

Remember that some students may not have access to the internet. For example, UW says, “if previously assigned coursework requires use of UW facilities to be completed, instructors must provide students with an alternative or waive that assignment (or the relevant portion of the assignment).” Presumably, one could have students do some forms of work and take a picture with their phones, sending it in on the cell network.

Consider that some students may not have a computer at home if they are unable to attend the exam in person. Contact the Division of Undergraduate Education or the Division of Student Success with questions regarding whether the university can provide temporary home tablet access.

Specific Information to prepare for Finals in Winter 2020

- Online proctoring is available by request to online@ucsc.edu. The service is currently a student pay model (\$10-\$15 per exam), although this is likely to change in the near future. This bullet will be updated as the situation changes.
- It may not be possible to eliminate all possibility of students cheating on assignments completed at home. See CITL’s suggestions regarding [promoting a culture of academic integrity as one form of response](#).
- In some courses, it may be appropriate to skip the planned assessment and instead offer an alternative assignment that is able to be completed at home (see below). This could include asking students to record a video of themselves responding to a set of questions or creating a video that explains a content item from the class. There are many [creative assignments](#) that can be used to assess student learning even in courses where a traditional exam has been the norm.
- Again, even if you are able to hold a traditional in person examination in Winter 2020, contingency planning for students who are sick on the day of the exam is necessary for all classes.

Some ways to handle missed exams or other assessments:

- Take home exams that focus on critical thinking questions and invite students to use notes, books, and even the internet can transform an exam into a deeper learning opportunity.
- Timed take home exams can be conducted by emailing the exam out at a particular time and then requiring it to be turned in on Canvas or by email by a set time.
- Online exams can be conducted via Canvas, where instructors can set a time window for the exam. Canvas can also allow instructors to require the exam to be taken in a certain place by restricting the IP address of the user and through the use of quiz banks, questions can be shuffled to reduce the likelihood of academic dishonesty.

Planning/Designing for Spring 2020:

- When planning for possible future interruptions, including when planning for Spring 2020, shifting from giving 1 or 2 large exams to doing weekly in class or online quizzes will reduce the impact of one missed exam and make it easier to compensate by either dropping one quiz from the final grade or replacing it with another assignment.

- Planning in advance to offer quizzes online gives instructors flexibility to handle disruptions in real time and on short notice.
- See the separate document on alternative assessments posted [here](#).

Some ideas for offering student feedback when the teaching team is impacted:

- **Peer review of assessments, when supported by a detailed rubric and explanation from the instructor, can be powerful opportunities for students to learn from their peers.** Peer review can be conducted through canvas where a rubric can be built into the assessment and each student can be automatically assigned a particular number of reviews to complete.
- Peer review can also be done informally and anonymously in class by asking students to complete a question on an index card or a worksheet and either leave their name off or provide just a student ID. They then pass the work 3-5 times to maintain anonymity and then work with a partner to see how they could improve on the answer they received. Again, a detailed rubric is important to support students in providing the right level of feedback. This activity works well even in large lecture courses.
- Discussing with students the difference between helpful and unhelpful feedback can deepen the learning experience. For example, “this is great” is not particularly helpful positive feedback but “I liked how you explained X but I was still a little confused by your statement Y” is more useful for the person receiving the feedback.
- In addition to peer feedback, if the teaching team is unable to provide the normal amount of feedback or grading, choosing one or two questions that receive detailed feedback and then giving credit for completion for the rest of the assignment while posting a key, can allow students to check their own work. When paired with a discussion about making students a [partner in their own learning](#), this strategy can relieve the grading burden while also helping students to get the feedback they need to continue learning.

Good communication is key

- Recognizing that many students have significant anxiety around assessment and that all students are likely going to be experiencing higher than normal levels of anxiety during an unplanned event is important. **Clear and positive communication with students about the event and how you will handle assessments can help alleviate anxiety.**
- If you need time to make a decision about how to handle the missed assessment, let them know that and give them a timeline for when you expect to decide.
- **Avoid changing the format of the assessment multiple times** if possible. If you need to change the format or date, be transparent about why and what information you are using to make the decision. Acknowledge that the situation may be less than ideal but that you are focused on providing the best learning experience possible under the circumstances.
- If able, **ask students for their feedback about possible alternatives for assessment.** Giving students the chance to weigh in on these decisions can help them feel more in control of the situation.

Unplanned events can make assessment of student work challenging. **Maintaining a focus on learning outcomes can make decisions about how to handle disruptions clearer.** And finally, good communication with students throughout is essential to helping alleviate stress and helping students maintain focus on their learning in the face of uncertainty.