



## Effective Remote Teaching and Learning: Suggestions from UMass Amherst Undergraduates

On April 9th, 2020, the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment (OAPA) launched a Remote Learning Check-In Survey to gather feedback from undergraduates about their experiences with the abrupt transition to remote instruction necessitated by the COVID-19 crisis. OAPA researchers developed the 28-question survey in-house after soliciting input from Academic Affairs and Student Affairs and Campus Life, and reviewing surveys conducted by other institutions and organizations.

All undergraduate students not poised to graduate in spring 2020 (n=16,548) were invited to complete the online, confidential survey and 5922 (36%) participated. More information about the survey is available at <http://www.umass.edu/oapa/survey-research/other-surveys/covid-disruption/remote-learning-check>.

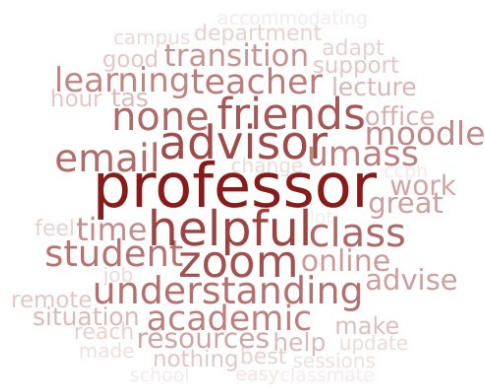
The survey included a series of open-ended questions that asked students to reflect on their experiences with remote learning, both the difficulties they have experienced and their suggestions for how to help them learn remotely. Researchers in OAPA reviewed random samples of these responses and systematically coded them using an inductive analytic approach. In this report, intended to help instructors in developing their online courses, we describe the primary suggestions students make about how to help them learn remotely.

In this report, these suggestions are organized into seven areas for attention:

- Build connections and foster responsiveness
- Incorporate both synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities
- Support students in their efforts to maintain a schedule and keep organized
- Consider workload implications in the online environment
- Use flexible and inclusive grading and assessment strategies
- Pay attention to implications for equity, inclusion, and accessibility
- Practice empathy when interacting with students

### Introduction

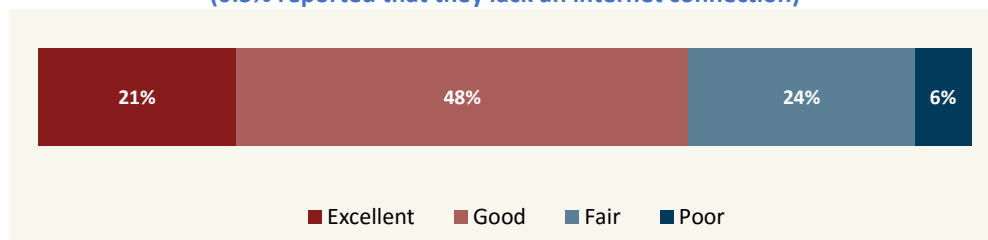
Students' thoughtful open-ended responses about remote learning reflect their engagement with and enthusiasm for their educational experiences at UMass. In fact, in response to the question, "What three aspects of your campus-based UMass Amherst experience are you missing the most?", 50 percent of the students who responded to this question mentioned "in-person classes/learning" – more than the 44 percent who mentioned missing their friends. We know, too, that instructors – professors, lecturers, graduate student instructors – played an enormous role in providing students the support they needed to finish the spring 2020 semester. Nearly half (48%) of students who responded to the question "What UMass Amherst resources, supports, and/or people have been most helpful to you as you have been adapting to remote learning?" named instructors – specifically, instructors' kindness, flexibility, clear and frequent communication, and willingness to adapt coursework and deadlines (see word cloud of their responses below).



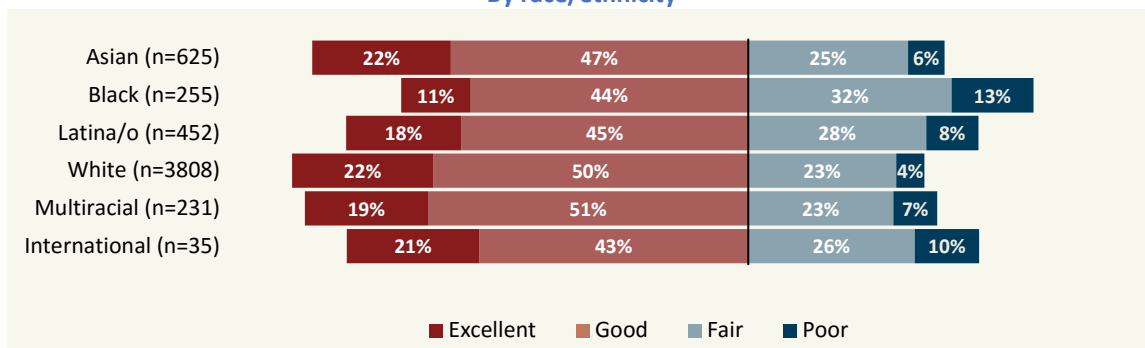
The practice of remote learning posed challenges for students. They describe the difficulties they have in understanding complex content “on my own” and the challenges of trying to concentrate while “staring at a screen for hours.” They also indicate that adjusting to online learning takes time and requires them to adapt to unfamiliar learning strategies. Students describe missing easy interactions with instructors and peers, and the structure of regular in-person instruction that helped them get their questions answered, collaborate with peers, and stay focused, on task, and on top of assignments and due dates.

Students’ responses lay bare the potential inequities of remote learning, many of which are present in face-to-face learning, and amplified in a remote setting. There are differences in students’ capacity to access remote instruction (particularly variability in quality of internet access, see graphs below), and differences in the kind of time, focus, and space available to them (e.g., study spaces, family responsibilities and disruptions, working for pay).

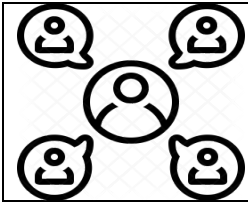
How would you rate the quality of the internet connection where you are living?  
(0.3% reported that they lack an internet connection)



How would you rate the quality of the internet connection where you are living?  
By race/ethnicity



This report presents a synthesis of students’ suggestions for remote instruction, organized into seven areas for attention.



## Build connections and foster responsiveness

Many students described the challenges of connecting with instructors and peers in the context of remote learning. They specifically mentioned difficulties in getting their questions answered, talking through challenges, and getting help in understanding complex concepts and content. Students also identified some ways instructors can be helpful in fostering connections.

**Asking questions:** For students, the opportunity to ask clarifying questions *in real time*, and/or questions involving comprehension of materials, is important. Many students indicated that they aren't able to ask questions in real time, either because Zoom is difficult to manage, or their classes are asynchronous. As a result, they're watching recorded lectures and then, later, emailing the instructor their questions. It is helpful when students have a clear understanding of course communication structures and how and when they can get their questions answered.

**Office hours:** Many students mentioned that regular office hours can be helpful in fostering connections. These office hours provide space and time for students to get their questions answered or work through challenges they are having with course content with the instructor or TA. Also, students noted that holding live office hours gives a chance for instructors to meet with students who can't attend synchronous sessions because of a time difference or other conflict.

**Collaboration/group work:** Some students suggested facilitating "forums" on Moodle to connect with other students and to support collaboration. One student mentioned that Moodle forums can be especially good for complicated and rigorous conversations that this student found difficult to have on Zoom in the period of the spring academic disruption. Several students mentioned the difficulties of doing group work remotely, across time zones and living circumstances. Students expressed that instructors must provide support when assigning group work, and be realistic with expectations.



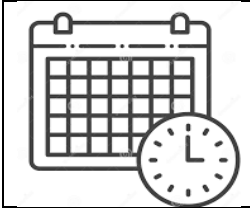
## Incorporate both synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities

Many students shared their thoughts on the benefits and drawbacks of the different aspects of synchronous meetings (e.g., lectures, discussions, office hours, group work) and asynchronous meetings (e.g., recorded lectures, PowerPoints, discussion forums).

**Synchronous classes:** Many students expressed an interest in meeting synchronously, if even for a short period of time, each week. Importantly, students also recognized that it is not possible for all students to meet synchronously, and/or with the video on, particularly those who are living in different time zones, have a distracting home environment, have additional work and/or childcare responsibilities as a result of the COVID-19 disruption, and more. For these reasons, students reacted strongly against courses that had mandatory attendance policies, and some students recommended that these live sessions should take place at the time the course is scheduled to avoid conflicts with other courses. A few students shared they were uncomfortable with instructors requiring their cameras to be on. While students are familiar with the norms for synchronous face-to-face courses, some are unclear about or uncomfortable with those for synchronous online sessions. Overall, it seemed that an interactive live class structure worked better for students than a structure that featured more static instruction (e.g., an instructor reading through a PowerPoint).

**Asynchronous classes/recorded lectures:** The majority of students said it is very helpful when instructors post recordings of their lectures/classes – either a recording of the live class session, or, if totally asynchronous, a recorded lecture. Some students mentioned that one benefit of recorded lectures is that they can revisit the lecture, pause and review material as needed, and work at their own pace.

**Keep lecture sections short:** Students also suggested keeping the lecture components short, or chunking them up into shorter segments. Many students reflected that it is difficult to watch a 1+ hour recorded lecture – these lengthy lectures can be “boring,” and it can be difficult to sit still for this period of time.



## Support students in their efforts to maintain a schedule and keep organized

Many students' responses directly or indirectly addressed their strong desire to keep a schedule or routine, and their struggles with doing so. The task is made more difficult as they juggle learning from home, family demands, job demands, unreliable workspace and technology (particularly unstable internet access), and the anxiety associated with the pandemic. Although students recognize their own responsibility in staying organized and keeping a routine, they also identify a number of ways that instructors can support them through course organization and teaching strategies.

**Emails:** Many students shared that consistent (e.g., once a week and around the same time) email correspondence was extremely helpful to them. Instructors that kept in less frequent touch, or took a long time (e.g., more than 2-3 days) to respond to emails, were a source of anxiety for students. Regular communication through email or use of the assignment functions in Moodle or Blackboard can ease the stress of navigating from in front of a screen what was once in person. An open line of communication is crucial for many students, particularly those who may be hesitant to reach out without the "invitation" that regular contact brings.

Some students did feel they were inundated with emails, though they remained appreciative of instructors who kept in touch. One student suggested that instructors prone to long emails might bullet point the most important "administrative" information (e.g., deadlines, due dates).

**Oral reminders of due dates:** Some students indicated that instructors' reminders at the beginning or end of live class sessions (e.g., "remember that next week we have a deadline") were especially appreciated as they adjusted to the new demands of remote learning and work to keep organized.

**Having a course schedule and communicating it early:** Many students said they would appreciate a weekly schedule or agenda, shared with them via the LMS their instructor is using.

**Sharing/posting materials:** Many students describe challenges associated with materials posted in an erratic or untimely manner. Not being able to consistently anticipate when lectures or readings will be available further hampered students' ability to stay organized. While much of this confusion is attributable to the abrupt move to remote instruction, consistency in providing information remains important. Some students suggested posting lectures within 24 hours of the assigned class time. Generally, it seems that it is most helpful when instructors post all materials at the same time each week. While this might not always be possible, it is helpful when instructors set realistic expectations for when materials will be available, rather than promising a timeline for distribution that will be very difficult for the instructor to meet. Students expressed frustration at needing to guess and constantly check back in to see when they would be able to access course materials

**Using one LMS to organize and present content:** Many students describe difficulties in not being able to find course materials, and/or at instructors posting materials erratically. Students said it is helpful when instructors use one platform and stick to that platform when sharing materials (i.e., it is confusing when some materials are shared via Moodle, some via email, and some via Google docs). They also described how they are putting quite a bit of effort into juggling the expectations across classes and across platforms and tools (e.g., Zoom, Moodle, Google, Slack, Publisher Access Cards, etc.), and expressed appreciation for courses that stick to as few platforms as possible.



## Consider workload implications in the online environment

Many students feel strongly that instructors should not give more work, or make existing work more difficult. They wrote specifically about how adjusting to asynchronous courses was time consuming. And, they described instructors who mistakenly think students have more time to do work, and/or that more work ensures a rigorous learning experience. Note that some of these concerns were exacerbated by the abrupt shift to remote learning and faculty members needing to adapt their course plans under challenging external circumstances. Assigning long papers instead of the exams that were originally on the syllabus was mentioned by some students – these long papers added stress and more hours of work. As the campus moves forward with remote learning in fall 2020, and faculty have more notice to plan their courses, the particularly relevant point here may be to understand remote learning can take more time for students and plan assignments and interactions accordingly.



## Use flexible and inclusive grading and assessment strategies

Many students shared feelings of anxiety and described being overwhelmed at managing school work, the pandemic, family disruption, and, for some, additional work and/or childcare responsibilities as a result of the COVID-19 disruption. Many students asked for flexibility and understanding with deadlines and with their circumstances as it was difficult to focus at home and during the health crisis. Several students said the pass/fail option was a relief, and some asked for instructors to reevaluate standard letter grading and what constitutes “A” work in this context. Students also asked for a flexible exam environment, noting that the demand to take an exam at a particular time may negatively impact students in other time zones. They also noted that strictly timed exams can adversely affect those with unstable internet access. Echoing concerns about workload, some students said that remote learning is not a reason to make exams more difficult.



## Pay attention to implications for equity, inclusion, and accessibility

Throughout this report, we have highlighted students' concerns about structural inequity in remote learning environments. We know from students' feedback that they are navigating the challenges of remote instruction, disparate access to educational resources, and the realities of the COVID-19 crisis, including COVID-19 related illnesses which disproportionately affect Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities. Students expressed concerns about the application of attendance policies that negatively impacted students in some living and work circumstances. They also identified Zoom etiquette requirements (e.g., keeping cameras on) and strict deadlines and exam dates that assume an equal opportunity for engagement across time zone, workspace, technology access, family situation, and financial pressures. Students describe some instructors who demonstrated a lack of empathy and compassion for the mental health impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. Relatedly, many students expressed an appreciation for instructors who practiced communicating and teaching with empathy.

Some students mentioned strengthening ties and communication between instructors and the Office of Disability Services so that instructors better understand accommodations and the experiences of students with disabilities.



## Practice empathy when interacting with students

Many students wrote eloquently about the gravity of the COVID-19 crisis, acknowledging its effects not just on themselves and their families but on instructors. Students expressed appreciation for instructors who made similar acknowledgments – who did not attempt to carry on as usual. Students recognized the actions of instructors who extended themselves to share warmth, show kindness, and check in on students' well-being through email or face-to-face interactions such as live class and office hours. Such actions were integral, students said, to their ability to continue their studies during this disruption.