

# Maintaining Instructional Continuity in the Face of a Significant Disruption

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This document is intended to help Cornell faculty and other members of our community consider contingency plans for maintaining instructional continuity in the event of work disruptions that could include labor actions. The university is engaged in negotiations with CGSU-UE and is committed to reaching a fair and reasonable contract with the union that will form the basis for a relationship of trust and mutual respect in the coming years. This document is informational and preparatory in nature in the event of any work disruption that could include a strike or other labor action.

We encourage Cornell instructors to:

1. **Review the guidance below** and consider steps you may need to take in managing your classes in the event of a work disruption or labor action.
2. Consult additional guidance from the Center for Teaching Innovation on [teaching during periods of disruption](#).
3. Discuss and clearly communicate your plans for any course adjustments with your chair and college associate dean.
4. In the event of an imminent disruption, discuss and clearly communicate your plans for any course adjustments with your students.
5. **Support a productive negotiation process with CGSU-UE** by becoming familiar with the university's [guidance for faculty interactions with graduate workers](#). Faculty who oversee graduate workers should not threaten, interrogate, promise, or surveil members of the bargaining unit.

Please note that guidance may change as circumstances evolve. Additional information and answers to [frequently asked questions](#) will be provided as developments warrant. Please consult the [Graduate Student Unionization Update website](#) for ongoing updates. If you have urgent questions not currently addressed on the website, please email [graduateunionupdate@cornell.edu](mailto:graduateunionupdate@cornell.edu) or contact your chair or college associate dean for assistance.

## Guiding Principles

1. Instructors of record are expected to continue their assigned academic activities and make every effort to support the continued and timely progress of students in their classes. While it is best practice for instructors to provide students with a syllabus and class schedule at the beginning of the semester and stick to it as much as possible, emergencies may arise that require modifications to instructional activities, modality, assignments, and grading. When faced with a significant academic disruption, instructors of record have the authority to decide how best to manage their courses, including through modification of assignments and grading structures.

Changes must be designed in such a way that they:

- a. *Maintain regular and “substantive” academic engagement*, as defined by the Department of Education, through the end of the term (including exam week). If needed, the nature of academic engagement may be modified based on circumstances. To be considered substantive, academic engagement must include some mix of the following five components throughout the term:
  - i. providing direct instruction (e.g., synchronous class, lecture, recitation, field, or laboratory activity, in-person or online);
  - ii. assessing or providing feedback on a student’s coursework (e.g. academic assignments, assessments or exams);
  - iii. providing information or responding to questions about the content of a course or competency (e.g., interactive tutorial, webinar, review session, or office hours);
  - iv. facilitating a group discussion regarding the content of a course or competency (e.g., study group, group project, or an assigned online discussion); and
  - v. other instructional activities that involve interactions with an instructor about academic matters.

This means that the focus of synchronous class meetings and/or assignments may be adapted such that planned discussion sections or labs can be replaced with synchronous or asynchronous instruction (including recorded lectures), in-class work or review sessions, autotutorial modules, online discussion boards, and/or peer assessments and group discussions.

- b. *Prioritize course activities most critical for meeting course learning objectives*. This is especially critical for instructors teaching courses that serve as prerequisites for other courses and/or fulfill core program requirements.
- c. *Maintain standards of evaluation* needed to assess student achievement of course learning goals.
- d. *Minimize reductions in student support* (e.g., access to support materials, ability to ask questions, etc.).

2. It is important for instructors to make every effort to maintain academic engagement through the end of the term. The calculation of credit hour compliance includes a week of final deliverables/exams. The dates of each academic term, inclusive of the week of final deliverables, are reported to federal agencies (U.S. Department of Education and Office of Veterans Affairs). Courses that cease academic engagement before the scheduled end of the course may require credit hour recalculations based on actual weeks of academic engagement, which could trigger changes in VA benefit eligibility and create other regulatory challenges. In order to avoid changes to course end dates, instructors are expected to engage in some form of academic engagement with students on at least one day during the week of final deliverables. The expectation is that during this final (exams) week: (a) at least one day of regularly scheduled instruction, study for an examination, or work on final class assignments or projects occurs; (b) for programs using asynchronous coursework through distance education, instructional materials, resources, and support necessary for academic engagement and completion of course objectives continue to be available, and students participate in educational activities that demonstrate academic engagement during that week. To avoid creating new scheduling conflicts for students, all planned activities should take place during the originally assigned timeframe (e.g., assigned exam slot).
  
3. Submitting grades in a timely manner is a core responsibility of instructors; every effort must be made to submit grades by the designated deadline. Failure to do so can have numerous negative impacts on students and/or the university's ability to fulfill reporting requirements. Missing grades can:
  - a. hurt financial aid eligibility and delay aid disbursement;
  - b. make it impossible to clear graduating seniors for graduation;
  - c. prevent students from successfully declaring (or affiliating with) a major;
  - d. prevent students from being able to enroll in a sequential course for which the current course serves as a prerequisite;
  - e. hurt students who intend to apply to other programs (e.g., graduate programs, transfer, etc.);
  - f. impact graduating seniors who are international students applying for Optional Practical Training (OPT);
  - g. negatively impact the ability of ROTC students to be commissioned;
  - h. prevent the Office of the University Registrar from being able to report grades within 30 calendar days from the end of the term and graduation status within 60 days from the conferral date, as required by the Department of Veterans Affairs ;

- i. prevent the university from determining continued NCAA eligibility for student athletes; and
  - j. make it impossible to identify students who fail (or fail to complete) all of their classes; the university is required to report these “unofficial withdrawals” to the Department of Education within 30 calendar days from the end of each academic term.
4. When the instructor of record for a course is unavailable to manage the course to completion, department chairs (or other academic unit heads as designated by college leadership) are expected to coordinate the implementation of academic continuity plans with instructors in their unit and designate an emergency instructor of record to assume responsibility for the course (“designated instructor of record”). Changes or additions to the instructor(s) of record must be promptly communicated to the unit administrator responsible for managing course updates in CCI so that newly added instructors are able to access the course via Faculty Center and Canvas. The relevant dean’s office as well as the vice provost for undergraduate education should also be notified of changes in instructors.
5. Due to the negative impact of missing grades on students (see principle #3 above), course instructors and/or designated instructors of record must request permission from their college dean to submit grades after the deadline. Deans, in consultation with the vice provost for undergraduate education, will evaluate and approve exceptions on a case by case basis where other, better alternatives do not exist.
6. Do no harm: If class meeting times or locations are adjusted, students shall not be penalized for being unable to participate in academic activities that are scheduled for a time or location that deviates from the course’s original meeting pattern if their inability is a direct result of significant academic disruptions beyond their control. This means instructors are expected to provide access to materials covered in their absence (or reasonable alternatives) and provide reasonable extensions so that students are able to complete required coursework. In the event changes are made to graded assignments and/or to the way final grades will be calculated, instructors should design changes in a way that does not disadvantage students or treat them unfairly.
7. Any changes to course activities and/or requirements necessitated by a significant academic disruption must be communicated to students in a clear and timely manner. Recall that students are enrolled in, and will likely need to manage changes in, many courses. Instructors should be mindful about clearly communicating changes to any of the following, with any and all updates documented in a single consistent location (for example, an updated course syllabus) and announced on the course Canvas site to make it easy for students to track:

- a. Course assignments, including impact on deadlines, grading, and rules about collaboration, etc.
- b. Instructional staff, including contact information
- c. Availability and location of office hours, course materials, and other support resources
- d. Class meeting times
- e. Instructional modality

Adjustments to these academic continuity guidelines and academic policies may be issued as necessary, depending on the timing, magnitude and duration of the academic disruption.

## Potential Disruptions to Class Meeting Patterns and Office Hours

Course learning goals and total contact hours should be preserved to every extent possible. If needed, in-person classroom contact hours can be replaced with synchronous online instruction, online instruction using recorded lectures, in-class work or review sessions, autotutorial modules, and/or online discussion boards. However, any deviation from scheduled modes and times of instruction, as laid out in the course syllabus and course roster, should be approved by the department chair. Department chairs may approve use of online instructional methods in a class for up to two class sessions. Any requests to use remote instruction for more than two class sessions must be reviewed and approved by the relevant dean's office.

Any faculty, regardless of rank or title, who fails to meet their core duties (as described in the [Faculty Handbook](#)), including failing to show up to teach their course without express prior permission, will be subject to appropriate discipline by the relevant dean's office. Colleges should consult with the Deputy Provost if such cases arise.

## Disruptions to Discussion/Recitation Sections

These sessions count towards credit hours and therefore cannot just be canceled. However, there are various options for maintaining academic engagement even when there are not enough instructional staff to continue offering all scheduled sections:

1. Reduce the number of meeting patterns offered based on the number of available instructors and ask students to switch to an available meeting pattern. If the assigned classroom cannot accommodate more students, the section can be moved to zoom with approval from the department chair. Be sure to provide a mechanism for students who are unable to attend one of the available meeting patterns to keep up with content. For example:
  - Record the zoom sessions

- Invite students to engage with the instructional team during office hours instead
  - Online discussion board (e.g., on Canvas)
2. Consider alternatives to in-person discussion sessions that will support students' learning outcomes, such as:
    - Online discussion boards (with active monitoring and clearly stated expectations about participation)
    - Recorded videos, ungraded online quizzes, worksheets, and other asynchronous material for students to work on independently outside of class or in groups
  3. Develop learning activities that students can complete together during the designated discussion meeting time but without a faculty member or TA present. Examples include:
    - A video for students to watch and reflect upon together, with or without requiring short written responses to be handed in
    - Create a video to introduce content, followed by a problem for students to work on. Alternatively, have students first work on a problem and offer a solution video for students to watch after trying to solve the problem.
  4. [Flip](#) the way you utilize lectures and discussion sections. Rather than use lecture time to deliver content and discussion sections to answer student questions, have students watch a recorded lecture prior to the lecture and use lecture sessions to answer student questions.

## Disruptions to Labs/Studios

These sessions count towards credit hours and therefore cannot just be canceled. First consider whether there are lab staff, advanced undergraduate students, or other academic staff who can help run your lab or studio sessions.

If this is not possible, consider alternative methods for meeting learning for the course. If you have a no-lab week later in the semester, consider pushing the lab schedule back by a week to buy time to get organized and adapt your plans.

Depending on the learning outcomes associated with lab, studio and other hands-on course types, instructors can adapt to meet learning outcomes using online and other alternatives. Examples to consider include:

1. Develop a video demonstration of the lab that students can watch prior to answering questions or performing calculations, and share data so that students can still complete a lab report. If using

videos, opt to create several short videos focused on key elements of the lab rather than a multi-hour recording.

2. If available, leverage virtual labs, recordings, or other hybrid teaching methods you or your colleagues created during the pandemic.
3. Provide artificial data for students to analyze instead of performing the actual experiments.
4. Convert in-person labs to online labs using virtual lab programs (e.g., AWS Apps on Demand), or other available materials (e.g., those developed for use during the pandemic when labs needed to be de-densified).
5. Assuming students have already had opportunities to learn how to use discipline-specific physical hardware, shift focus to other learning outcomes related to the discipline that do not require physical access to the lab (e.g., data analysis, presentation and/or communication skills, teamwork, etc.).
6. Offer a limited subset of lab sections and provide mechanisms for students whose section has been canceled to [collaborate](#) with students in other sections to achieve learning outcomes.
7. Shift the emphasis of labs to focus on other learning outcomes related to the discipline that don't require physical access to the lab

## Disruptions to Office Hours

If faculty or TA office hours become limited for reasons beyond the instructor's control, consider offering the following alternatives:

1. Utilize online discussions to answer questions in a way that allows the entire class to see the answer. The platform Ed Discussion allows students to ask and answer questions, with faculty endorsing correct answers.
2. Extend your own office hours as much as possible and/or shift to a time that is likely to work for as many students as possible (e.g., late afternoon or evening).
3. Consider posting tips for completing assignments that will help students without giving away the answers.
4. Ask students to submit questions via Canvas and dedicate time during lecture to answer the most common questions. You may need to cut some lecture material, but students will likely find the tradeoff to be valuable.
5. In the event of a short disruption, consider extending a deadline to allow students to benefit from office hours in a subsequent week.
6. Consider allowing students to drop an assignment from their grade (or an extra assignment if you have already offered one drop) so that they won't be penalized for not being able to benefit from office hours to optimize their grade on the assignment.

## Grading

### Deadline for Submitting Grades

The university deadline for submitting grades is posted on the [University Registrar's website](#); for Spring '25 grades it is June 3, 2025, and the degree posting deadline for colleges is June 9, 2025. However, please note that colleges may have different deadlines that precede the university deadline. Depending on the timing, magnitude, and length of an academic disruption, it may be possible to extend the deadline for submitting grades for some courses. However, due to the negative impact of missing grades on students (see principle #3 above), course instructors and/or replacement instructors of record (for courses being taught by instructors who are unavailable to manage the course to completion) must request permission from their college dean and vice provost for undergraduate education to submit grades after the grading deadline. Exceptions will be approved on a case by case basis where other, better alternatives do not exist.

### Making Grading Manageable

The strategies that are deemed appropriate may vary across classes depending on the manner and magnitude of academic disruption, course learning goals, and link to program requirements or subsequent courses in a sequence. To make grading more manageable while still achieving course goals, instructors might consider any of the [following strategies](#) (or some combination of them):

1. Shorten assessments so that they do not require as much grading. Remember, more is not necessarily better as long as you focus on core learning objectives. Consider replacing comprehensive, cumulative assessments with assessments of a representative sample of content.
2. Transform individual assignments into group assignments. For example, let students work in groups and submit one assignment per group. Collaboration can facilitate learning.
3. Simplify the grading rubric to minimize feedback to students and focus on the most important learning.
4. In courses with scaffolded assignments where later assignments build on earlier ones and sufficient pre-work has been graded, the final deliverable can be graded more efficiently by treating it as a validation of grades earned so far.
5. Redesign assessments so you can leverage online tools such as Canvas Quizzes (automated grading), Gradescope (grading at scale), and [Feedback Fruits](#) (peer assessment), which are designed to automate or facilitate faster grading (e.g., batch grade problems). [Gradescope Bubblesheets](#) can be used for paper exams with multiple choice questions (replacing Scantron exams). Take-home homework assignments can also be converted to Canvas quizzes for auto-grading. More information can be found on CTI's website.



6. Have students turn in their assignments and then self-grade using a solution sheet and have students submit their score via a Canvas quiz.
7. Utilize peer assessments (guided by clear rubrics). Consider having students evaluate de-identified assignments for more objective feedback. For take-home assignments, peer assessments can be facilitated through Canvas using various tools.
8. If sufficient assessments have been completed to assess student learning and inform grades, offer grade options for the final assessment to make grading more manageable while preserving fairness to students. Examples include:
  - a. Allow students to choose whether they want to complete the graded final assignment to try to improve their grade or skip the final assignment and receive their current grade in the course.
  - b. Complete the final assignment for a grade or submit an ungraded written reflection of what they learned in the course (to preserve course credit hours).
9. If you deem that working on the final deliverable is essential for achieving learning goals, grading options might include:
  - a. Complete the final assignment for a letter grade or for S/U grade; students who choose the latter would receive their current grade in the course.
10. If you have already embedded an opportunity for students to drop an assessment of their choice, allow students to apply this option for the final.

## Support for Grading

*Can I ask individuals currently not associated with my course (e.g., students, faculty colleagues, staff, select emeriti faculty, etc.) to help grade and/or manage other course activities?*

Yes, the primary instructor of record may decide to recruit extra instructional support. We recommend that instructors consult with departmental colleagues and the department chair and/or dean's office to identify creative solutions. It is permissible to have undergraduate students help with grading as long as instructors [de-identify exams](#) and put quality assurance mechanisms in place (e.g., grade a random selection of the assignments to compare against UG graders, use relevant tools within Gradescope, etc.).

## Final Deliverables

### Canceling or Extending Final Deliverables

*Can faculty cancel final deliverables if academic disruptions result in the loss of expected grading or other instructional support?*

There are several reasons why this is not a good idea:

1. Canceling a final deliverable may cause a class to fall out of compliance with the [credit hour policy](#) which follows NYSED guidelines and is consistent with the U.S. Department of Education's definition of credit hours. Total credit hours for courses are calculated inclusive of both instructional time in the classroom and work that is scheduled to occur during the exam period at the end of the semester. In addition, if there is no planned academic activity during exam week (i.e., after the last day of classes), the university is required to report an earlier end date for these courses to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), which could impact students' eligibility for VA housing benefits.
2. While some students may be happy about this, others might feel this is unfair (e.g., because they were counting on being able to improve their grade based on their performance on the final deliverable).

Instead, instructors should consider modifying assignment or deliverable structures and approaches to making grading more manageable (see grading section).

*Can the deadline for final deliverables be extended past the last day of exams?*

No. We are not permitted to extend academic activity beyond the last day of the term without officially marking students as having an INC. In addition, pushing student work beyond the term may impact break, holiday, or other post-semester activities (e.g., internships, employment) that are important for student well-being.

### Administration of Exams

Faculty who are concerned about having enough proctors for in-person exams should consider teaming up with colleagues to help proctor each other's exams. Alternatively, instructors should consider switching from an in-person to take-home or online exam.

*Does the university offer support for proctoring exams?*

Courses participating in the [Alternative Testing Program](#) can expect to receive proctoring support as originally scheduled. If the circumstances surrounding a significant academic disruption make this

impossible, course instructors will be notified by the ATP team as soon as possible. If additional proctor resources are available, the ATP team will coordinate with college leadership to prioritize requests from large courses.