# **Fall 2021 Student-Focused & WebCam Use**

# Flexibility & Empathy as a Pandemic Response

"Building the plane as we fly it" is a metaphor we have used before here at SUNY Nassau Community College that emphasizes the need to learn, adapt, revise, and implement simultaneously. In the midst of the pandemic, so many of us here at SUNY Nassau Community College and across the nation have realized we must find ways to lessen the psychological burden imposed by this virus and its variants.

We all have our own anxieties and concern for our students. Faculty have discovered new ways to engage students even while keeping their distance. Many of us have learned how to use new technologies, and all of us have had to rethink our classes, syllabi, learning objectives, and instructional methods. We worry anxiously about the future for our students, ourselves, and our colleagues, but within these moments we also have the opportunity to share and be supportive. We have found new ways to communicate, teach and care.

As we all prepare for the new normal that the fall 2021 semester brings, we encourage faculty and staff to be mindful of the anxiety that COVID-19 has produced. We would like to promote a College wide culture of empathy and flexibility as a part of our pandemic response.

It takes tremendous work to move from sympathy to empathy. As humans we are often empathetic with those like us and those we love. But in our new normal, empathy is needed for everyone we encounter, students and colleagues alike. Perhaps it is just a matter of reaching out more often to check in on students and colleagues via telephone or text or staying connected with students in more time-consuming ways than we might have done before.

Academic environments are inherently competitive. Academia is traditionally rigidly hierarchical and the pressures to succeed can increase stresses between students, faculty, and staff. Now is not the time to compete, however, but rather to care. We advocate for an empathetic and flexible response to the return to the fall 2021 semester for all.

Please be empathetic and flexible with our students as they adapt, as we are, to the new semester. Be empathetic and flexible with students who come to class late or who sign into a Zoom session late or lose their connection and need to reconnect. This empathy and flexibility will benefit everyone in the SUNY Nassau Community College community.

# WebCam Use in an Online/Remote Setting

Remote learning technologies pose new challenges with respect to student privacy and equity. With the surge in remote teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Office of Academic Affairs is offering the following guidance to support inclusive teaching environments and to raise awareness of the different challenges students face as they pursue their education.

While it may be pedagogically beneficial to encourage students to turn on their cameras when using video conference software, there are important factors that faculty should consider before instituting this as a mandatory course requirement that could negatively impact a student’s grade.

* Students may wish to maintain privacy and not share a view of their living quarters or home identity with their classmates and instructors.
* Students may be sharing physical space with other family members or house mates and having a camera turned on can prove unsettling to other individuals sharing the living space with the students.
* Students may be on low-bandwidth or mobile connections that will not provide stable or affordable video connections.

The SUNY FACT2 group endorse the City University of New York's Guidelines on [Requiring the Use of Cameras during Live Classes](https://www.cuny.edu/coronavirus/academic-continuity/guidance-on-academic-continuity-to-campuses/#Requiring-Use-Cameras-Live-Classes):

*As is the case with many colleges and universities that have chosen online and distance learning modalities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, faculty utilizing Zoom, Blackboard Collaborate and other digital technology to deliver course curriculum/material must be sensitive to issues of privacy. To that end, faculty offering classes through web conferencing digital technology like Zoom cannot require that students turn on their cameras during live classes, unless there is a pedagogical need to do so.*

If faculty feel that requiring students to have their cameras turned on for the duration of the class is crucial to promote the most effective educational environment, the Office of Academic Affairs also recommends adopting flexible engagement opportunities instead of strict approaches given varying levels of access students may have to resources such as software, hardware, and the web:

* Students may be attending class in their cars using the institution’s parking lot Wi-Fi to gain bandwidth.
* Although some students may be able to use virtual backgrounds, this will not work for others who use phones, tablets, and laptops that do not support virtual backgrounds.
* Class attendance and participation can be monitored using active learning techniques without requiring students to turn on their cameras.
* Noisy environments can also interfere with student use of their microphones. Alternative student interaction can take place using chat, polls, and other software features as needed.

Further, we recommend that any requirement of student live webcam use be disclosed to students prior to course registration and included in the syllabus. These recommendations for allowing students flexibility with respect to the camera requirement are intended to raise awareness of privacy, equity, and inclusion issues among our students, and a recognition of distinctions between attending on-campus vs. participating using remote learning technologies.

While the ultimate decision regarding student camera use rests with individual faculty members, we thank you in advance for taking into considerations some of the issues raised above in setting camera requirements for your students.

**DISCLAIMER**

The recommendations and instructions herein, no way suggest that students cannot request special accommodation because of a disability or specific religious belief. Students who seek adaptive assistance related to a disability must be referred to the Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD). Religious accommodations must be referred to the Office of Equity Inclusion & Affirmative Action.