

## Teaching During COVID-19: Closing the Semester with Compassion and Flexibility

The pandemic has highlighted the critical role of flexibility and compassion in higher education, creating considerable personal and professional demands and intersections of work lives and home lives. Our students confront similar and, sometimes, still more difficult challenges. Flexibility and empathy are ever important in our work to continue education during this time. In particular, generating adaptable, workable solutions in the design and delivery of final examinations can enable students to successfully demonstrate their learning amidst the unique circumstances of this health crisis.

The following offer suggestions for frequently asked questions regarding final examinations:  
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**Q: What if I want to change the format of my final exam?**

**A:** Review and possibly reconsider plans for the final examination period. With our primary focus on using authentic measures for how students have performed in this extraordinarily disrupted time, this semester's final examination format may not be as traditionally administered in the past, such as requiring students to adhere to strict times for completion.

You could consider some of the following options:

- Shorter, un-proctored exams that allow for citations and creative responses
- Journaling or reflection papers
- Essay sprints – One-minute Essay tasks
  - <https://provost.tufts.edu/celt/files/MinutePaper.pdf>
- Portfolios of work completed, creative responses to targeted questions uploaded to Blackboard as jpegs or pdfs
- Brief presentations either for instructor-only or to a small group of peers via one of the online platforms you are currently using
- Video Project/ Digital storytelling
- Oral exams
- Small group problem solving tasks or case studies simulations that can be completed via one of the online platforms you are currently using
- Peer feedback/evaluation
- Other alternative assessments - see this great tool for more ideas:
  - <https://resourcecenter.odee.osu.edu/course-design-and-pedagogy/keep-teaching-alternatives-traditional-finals>



**Q: How can I grade all those types of exams?**

**A:** Another strategy for compassionate adaptation to the end of the semester is to decrease the weight of your final exam in your grading scheme.

Below are a few ideas of how to make that a possibility:

- Identify places where grading can be added to work that has already been completed.
  - Grade discussion board responses.
  - Grade journal entries.
  - Identify objective measures of participation.
    - Differentiate between the traditional portion of the semester and the online portion.
    - Consider if students had ample opportunity to ask and answer questions during face-to-face learning.
    - Online engagement could be gleaned from students' consistent logging on to course materials on the Blackboard platform.
- Identify graded work that has already been completed that could be substituted or weighted more heavily than you had originally planned.
  - Weight the best test grade heavier than any other test.
  - Instead of dropping the lowest test grade, replace it with the best grade.



**Q: What if I just want to make my final exam lower stakes?**

**A:** Managing the grading of alternative exam formats is always a challenge and during this chaotic period that will be even more so.

Explore available tools in Blackboard that can make grading easier -

- Use objective grading tools in Blackboard.
  - Preload feedback for each question.
- For short answer or essay assessments, try the following:
  - Use rubrics.
  - Grade one question at a time rather than one student at a time.
  - Copy and paste common feedback comments for quick positive or negative feedback.
  - Identify common errors and address those errors to all test takers rather than individually.
- Consider that group projects result in fewer artifacts to grade.
  - Students can self-assign to groups, or you can assign groups in Blackboard.
  - When students are assigned to complete a task as a group, one document is turned in and all group members receive the same grade.
  - Rubrics can be added to group projects as well.



**Q: Won't the students cheat on exams like that?**

**A:** Students are much more likely to turn to cheating when the stakes of a particular assignment, test or project are particularly high. Minimizing the stakes of any final exam/alternative assessment can be a proactive way to respond to the disruption with compassion and flexibility.

The need to maintain the rigor and integrity of our academic work is key, so consider the following in the adaptations you are planning:

- Making the final exam optional if the student is content with their grade before the final
- Allowing for multiple attempts on tests
- Allowing students to choose the best way they can show their knowledge

Try to adapt your assessment tools rather than compound pressures on students by requiring real-time monitoring. Though real-time monitoring is an available tool for administering final exams at a distance, it tends to create complexities in the areas of hardware accessibility and student privacy and safety. Because of this, faculty are encouraged to consider using alternative assessments as a viable means to mitigating such concerns, as well as reduce unauthorized student collaborations on capstone work.

Below are some additional suggestions that may be used in conjunction with the suggested alternative assessments to assure that students are doing their own work.

- Use unique short answer questions.
- Add variety and/or randomization with
  - different versions of the exam,
  - different versions of the questions,
  - randomized ordering of the questions, or
  - randomized ordering of the answer options.
- Require some personal detail in responses.
- **\*If\*** it is essential to time the exam,
  - consider decreasing the weight of the exam (lower the stakes) or
  - add weight to other portions of the course – specifically to those that were completed before conversion to online learning.
- Do not release the answers to the exam until all students have completed the exam.



**Q: What if I already told students that we're having a final exam?**

**A:** Clear communication with your students about the parameters for completing the final exam/alternative assessment is paramount to preventing collaboration or resource searching during the exam. Below are some recommendations for communicating with your students regarding upcoming final examinations.

If you use an alternative assessment, provide the following info to students:

1. The format for your alternative assessment with a title that clearly states that this assessment is in place of a traditional final examination
2. The date and time the assessment materials will be released to the class
3. The resources and collaborations that are allowed in the process of completion of the assessment
4. The resources and collaborations that are expressly disallowed in the process of completion of the assessment
5. Procedures for students to follow if they encounter connectivity or other resource obstacles at any time during the assessment period (Note: Keep in mind that if a student does not have internet access, it is likely that they may not be able to email you to tell you so.)
6. The date and time the assessment will be due
7. The acceptable submission formats
8. Where to submit
9. The expected turnaround grading timing

If you use a traditional examination, provide the following info to students:

1. A general description of the number and type of questions that will be on the exam
2. A specific description of the portion of the semester's material that will be covered by the exam
3. The date and time the exam will be released to the class (Note: It is highly encouraged that you send a reminder email to the class no less than 2 hours before the start time.)
4. The resources and collaborations that are allowed in the process of completion of the exam
5. The resources and collaborations that are expressly disallowed in the process of completion of the exam
6. Procedures for students to follow if they encounter connectivity or other resource obstacles during the exam period (Note: Keep in mind that if a student does not have internet access, it is likely that they may not be able to email you to tell you so.)
7. The date and time the exam will close
8. The expected turnaround grading timing



**Q: What could be an option for students who are not able to finish course activities by the end of the term?**

**A:** A grade of *Incomplete* could bridge the gap for students managing competing school-related and non-academic demands that the pandemic has raised. While traditionally *Incomplete* grades have been a provision intended for students who have completed most of the requirements for a course, you may consider assigning this grade to a student in Spring 2020 that is not able to complete course activities by the end of the term.

When assigning an *Incomplete*, faculty are recommended to communicate with the student a written agreement that includes:

1. A negotiated new deadline, perhaps one month in the future
2. A negotiated description of the work that needs to be completed in order for a permanent grade to be assigned.

To satisfy the *Incomplete*, you could specify that the student either

1. Complete all or a negotiated portion of the course material that is still outstanding,  
or
2. Demonstrate mastery through some other alternative assessment at a later date, which could include any of the suggested alternative assessment modalities.