

Instructors Guide To Supporting the Incoming Class

What to Expect

In the pandemic context, the effects of systemic educational barriers had an outsized impact on student learning prior to attending Cornell. Many students experienced COVID-related academic disruptions, but not every student was affected in the same way. The result was an exacerbation of gaps in student learning. Instructors should be aware that some students may need extra support.

Here are some things you can do to prevent students from falling through the cracks in your course.

Before the Semester Starts

- **Send a start-of-semester survey:** Find out about your students early on to identify gaps and barriers to learning before the experience even begins. This will show them that you care about their well-being and learning, and can serve to guide your semester planning. Follow up with at-risk students. (see this sample [survey](#), which you can adapt to your own teaching needs)

First Week

- [Build community and belonging](#) early in your course and develop your [instructor presence](#). A sense of connection as a student can help prevent feelings of isolation. Learn how to make yourself and TAs available and approachable to students while [teaching while wearing a mask](#).
- **Provide opportunities for students to interact and form study groups.** Collaborative activities and icebreakers allow students to get to know each other and build connections. Encourage students to form study groups, and explain why this is important. Help match them with a study buddy by using questions from this sample [questionnaire](#).
- **Acknowledge challenging situations and normalize getting help.** Share experiences where you, TAs, or students felt challenged and how you overcame them. Discuss that it is ok to make mistakes and that is how we learn and grow. Provide several places to go for regular help including TA check-ins, office hours, study

buddies, and the [Learning Strategies Center](#); encourage students to talk about their worries and struggles. Emphasize that the earlier Instructors and TA's are aware of your situation, the better able they are to support you.

Week 2 and Beyond

- **Alert students early about their progress in the course.** Students might not even know they are behind, and it could be too late in the semester to remedy the situation depending upon when they receive feedback. Help prevent such situations with early feedback, by displaying grades visibly in Canvas, and incorporating opportunities for intervention with those who are struggling.
- **Provide several low stakes assessments** and distribute them evenly throughout the semester so students still have a chance to recover after prelims. This will give students plenty of opportunities to demonstrate their learning, practice skills, and adapt to academic life at Cornell.
- **Check-in with students often** to see what is working or not, and make modifications to the course based on their feedback. Ideas include checking in during class verbally or with a [classroom poll](#), surveying students with the [Mid-Semester Feedback Program](#), opening up a [discussion board](#), and having TAs meet regularly with designated groups.

To discuss ideas and strategies for supporting students, stop by our [online drop-in sessions](#) or contact the [Center for Teaching Innovation](#) to set up a consultation.