May 15, 2020

Dear SEAS Faculty and Staff,

Thanks to your hard work – as well as the patience and understanding of our students – we made it to the end of the semester! I couldn’t be prouder of our SEAS Community and the way we all rallied to handle the challenges posed by the pandemic.

It is not easy to transition directly from ending a difficult semester to actively planning for an uncertain future. My discussions with faculty, staff, and students (including prospective students) over the past couple of weeks have highlighted that the lingering uncertainty about Fall 2020 campus operations is a major source of anxiety for everyone. Safety is paramount. As President LeBlanc said to the Faculty Senate last Friday, “We cannot invite our employees back to campus, our students back in residence, our faculty back in their offices, unless we have testing, tracing and a quarantine capability.”

I have reflected deeply on how this lingering uncertainty affects our planning for Fall 2020 instruction, leveraging two key principles:

1. **Uncompromised Quality**: We must commit ourselves to providing the highest quality education to all of our students, regardless of the situation in which we find ourselves. This is core to our mission, is expected (and deserved!) by our students and their tuition-paying families, and is critical to the long-term reputation of our university and our disciplines. My litmus test is being able to look our students in the eye – in-person or online – and honestly tell them that we are giving them the highest quality education.

2. **Resilient Inclusion**: Our mode of instruction must be flexible and agile in order to resiliently support all of our students and faculty in the face of significant uncertainties and dynamics. For Fall 2020 instruction, we do not know at this time (and likely will not know until mid-summer – the university is hoping to decide by June 15) if we will be entirely online, mostly in-person (some students and even some faculty will likely be online regardless – including many students who are overseas), or somewhere in between. Additionally, it is important that we pro-actively establish inclusive modes that can easily accommodate a possible ‘second wave’ of the pandemic and/or individuals who may need to be quarantined. These uncertainties and dynamics may extend into Spring 2021 and beyond.

These principles and my consultations with the Associate Deans, the Department Chairs, and the SEAS Ad-Hoc Committee on Online Education have led me to the decision that we as a school must prepare for a mode of instruction for Fall 2020 (and possibly beyond) that provides high-quality education simultaneously to both in-person and online students and that seamlessly supports students/faculty transitioning between the two. There are a number of course models that would achieve this mode, with one exemplar being “HyFlex” (a brief introduction is appended to this memo).

I have charged the SEAS Ad-Hoc Committee on Online Education (membership below) to be the thought leaders on this. (Recall, this committee was appointed earlier in the semester based on Department Chair recommendations, and the membership will be voted on at the next SEAS Faculty Meeting.) Over the next two weeks, the Ad-Hoc Committee will be answering the following questions:

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Office of the Dean
• What are the models, methods, and best practices (and the associated evidence) that support this mode, including instructional labs and projects?
• What training (workshops, materials) and staff support (IT, instructional designers) should be provided to faculty (full-time and part-time/adjunct), staff, TAs, and students?
• What technology, tools, software, etc. do we need in our classrooms or in the hands of our faculty and students?
• What support and oversight should be available during the semester to ensure high performance and to identify needed adjustments?

It will then be my responsibility to act on the committee’s recommendations and ensure faculty and staff have what they need to provide our students with the education they deserve. In fact, I am actively working with the other GW Deans to determine how we can best provide the additional instructional design support we know will be needed in the months ahead. As your Dean, I am fully committed to doing everything in my power to advocate on your behalf to ensure our school has the necessary resources and tools to be successful during this transition.

I now ask all of you – the SEAS faculty and staff – to thoughtfully consider how you will contribute to the success of the two guiding principles of uncompromised quality and resilient inclusion outlined above. I acknowledge that many faculty have other obligations at this time of year and that it will be a burden to fit in yet more teaching preparation. But in the coming weeks, I ask you to engage with the ideas and resources the Ad-Hoc Committee provides, to be open-minded as you consider necessary changes to your courses and mode of instruction, to collaborate with your colleagues as you consider how to best handle individual courses and broader programmatic issues, and to work with your Department Chair to identify what is needed to successfully execute your plan. There will be flexibility and reasonable autonomy in the details and methods of instruction (the Ad-Hoc Committee will provide a variety of options), but we cannot compromise on the two principles above.

Like every crisis, this pandemic poses challenges, threats, and opportunities. Within the context of instruction, it will clearly be a challenge and require significant effort to be true to uncompromised quality and resilient inclusion in light of the uncertainties and dynamics we face. I fully recognize this, and I thank you all in advance for the hard work that will be required to do this successfully. And we must be successful, because the threats to our students’ education and career prospects, our institution’s reputation, and our very sense of selves are tremendous and could have long-lasting impacts. Given the challenges to achieving success, we also have the opportunity to shine, taking our school and the SEAS Community to new heights! After keeping our community safe, this will be my #1 priority in the months ahead, and I ask you to approach this with the same urgency and importance. I will devote as much time and as many resources as possible to support your efforts, but – as always – SEAS is counting on all of you to plan and execute with excellence.

Please be assured, we are actively working to address many other critical issues – safe campus and workplace return, finances, operations, student services, etc. – and will be in touch on all of these issues in the weeks ahead, but I wanted to address the instructional issue now to give everyone as much time as possible to prepare. If you have any questions, you may want to start with your Department Chair and/or your department’s Ad-Hoc Committee representative, but feel free to contact me directly on school-level issues related to this communication or any other critical issue.
Thank you again for all of your efforts to see us through Spring 2020, and thanks in advance for everything you will do to ensure educational excellence going forward regardless of what the pandemic throws our way.

Warm regards,

John Lach
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SEAS Ad-Hoc Committee on Online Education Membership (pending SEAS Faculty approval)
Jason Zara, BME  Pedro Silva, CEE
Shelly Heller, CS  Shahrokh Ahmadi, ECE
Joost Santos, EMSE  Lorena Barba, MAE
Bhagi Narahari, Undergrad programs  Can Korman, Graduate programs
Shahram Sarkani, Online programs  Raoul Gabiam, IT
Scenario

For the fall term, David and Bryce both sign up for a course on Shakespeare. The class is taught as a HyFlex course, in which all of the learning activities are offered both in-class and online and students have the option of attending face-to-face or online (or both) on any class day. The syllabus offers a menu of assignment choices, some of which are tailored for remote students and others for those in the classroom.

Bryce works part-time at a bicycle shop. Because he enjoys the social interaction on campus, he makes time to attend classes in person, and he often reads while riding the bus to campus. He's done well in his classes for years by attending lectures, doing the assigned reading, and taking the quizzes, and he feels confident following that pattern now. David commutes 30 miles from his home to a construction job and 35 minutes in the other direction to campus. All this car time gives him plenty of opportunity to listen to audio versions of the Shakespeare plays, but by the time he leaves work, his enthusiasm for driving to class is low. Instead, he prefers to participate in the online discussion session.

Sometimes students who attend in person join the online discussion, and a couple of students have mentioned that "double attendance" has helped them learn the material faster and more thoroughly. As a result, when he finds himself confused by King Lear, David decides to attend a couple of classes in person as well as online.

The final exam requires all students to attend class. The professor asks each learning team to draw out of a hat the name of one play studied during the term. Bryce and David are on the same team, which draws King Lear. Each team has 30 minutes to write a five-minute "playlet" that sums up all that happens in the chosen play. The team members take roles and read lines or deliver in an improvisational mode. Overacting is encouraged, and a box of costumes is provided. During the next hour and a half, each team delivers their production to the class and then addresses questions about the play. David and Bryce are proud of their understanding of Shakespeare and their ability to discuss King Lear with the class—and of the rousing ovation they got for their performance.

1 What is it?

HyFlex is a course design model that presents the components of hybrid learning (which combines face-to-face with online learning) in a flexible course structure that gives students the option of attending sessions in the classroom, participating online, or doing both. Students can change their mode of attendance weekly or by topic, according to need or preference. In this "flexible hybrid" design, instructors provide course content for both participation modes and can tailor activities for each format. This is not a self-paced model, even though online sessions can be either synchronous or asynchronous. Students frequently take the same final assessment, regardless of the chosen path through the material. The menu of options offered by HyFlex can ease the scheduling burden for students who commute long distances or who must be away from campus for athletics or other competitive activities. It is useful, too, for students who must coordinate work and family responsibilities with a challenging course schedule. In providing an online option, the model provides the flexibility to keep a class from falling behind if, for example, the instructor has to travel unexpectedly or the campus is closed due to weather or other circumstances.

2 How does it work?

Because the HyFlex model is a conceptual framework—not software—it can be implemented using an institution’s existing course management system or other online course infrastructure. The course is generally listed in the catalogue as a face-to-face course because the assignment of a room is necessary. Class sessions are offered both online and in the physical classroom so that students can attend either or both—those who attend face-to-face sessions can join the online class discussion if they like, and those who attend online can later review in-class sessions that are posted in audio or audio/video format. Students choose assignments from a menu of learning options that might include readings, exercises, and research projects. Some of these might be tailored to either face-to-face or online attendance, but all selections should equally support the learning goals of the course. A frequent feature of the HyFlex model is small-group engagement and collaborative work, which might call for team meetings, conducted virtually or in person.

3 Who’s doing it?

At San Francisco State University, several classes in the Instructional Technologies (ITEC) master’s program are taught using the HyFlex model, which was developed there to accommodate a student population with significant commuting and work-related demands on their time. The array of courses that follow this...
The HyFlex model has been growing since its introduction so that now most seminars in the ITEC program are offered as HyFlex courses, and the faculty are working to present more courses that use the HyFlex model each semester. Herkimer County Community College uses a slightly different approach to HyFlex design in which two sections of an introductory psychology course are scheduled in one classroom and two instructors lead the class as a team-teaching project. At Buffalo State University, a HyFlex course has been offered in Advanced Library Research, which focuses on research skills, evaluation skills, and critical thinking.

Why is it significant?
Models like HyFlex, which present multiple paths through course content, may work well for courses where students arrive with varying levels of expertise or background in the subject matter. The flexible approach to attendance allows those needing additional review of the course material to acquire it by attending both face-to-face and online sessions when they need extra review. The menu of assignments can invite a student to select the attendance option that best matches his or her background and skills. In these ways, students will find that HyFlex courses offer them a high degree of customization and more control over the learning process. At the same time, HyFlex encourages students to be more engaged and to take greater initiative in their learning, possibly helping cultivate metacognitive skills. Institutions may see in HyFlex course design a solution for meeting the needs of a student body scattered over a large geographic area.

What are the downsides?
The successful deployment of the HyFlex model is highly dependent on institutional context. It is easiest to implement where institutions already have an established path for the faculty to offer their courses online. Similarly, the ready availability of technologies to capture lectures digitally will smooth adoption of HyFlex design. But even where technology supports the HyFlex design, there may be a gap of several days between the capture of the in-class session and its availability to students who attend online. Though some instructors contend that offering a menu of options to students is less work than might be expected, there can be little doubt that developing for multiple platforms and providing a high level of customization requires more effort on the part of an instructor, at least initially. The open, flexible model might only be appropriate for those who are highly motivated to engage in the coursework. Accordingly, some faculty find it useful to ask students to complete a “readiness test” that will help them determine for themselves if they are a good fit for this type of course.

Where is it going?
Introduced in 2006, the HyFlex model has not yet been widely adopted. Additional implementations might clarify which students are most likely to succeed with this open framework and the types of courses for which it will be most effective. The current financial pressures in education might pave the way for more hybrid courses in the HyFlex model, as a way to address space constraints and accommodate the ever-growing population of students who work full time. In addition, the adaptable approach suggested by HyFlex allows students to customize their education, a trend that might continue in coming years as new technologies that support individual learning emerge.

What are the implications for teaching and learning?
Courses built on the HyFlex model help to break down the boundary between the virtual classroom and the physical one. That is, by allowing students access to both platforms, the design encourages discussion threads to move from one platform to the other. But such courses require more from both instructors and students than do traditional offerings. To make these courses successful, instructors must coordinate with students, IT support, learning technologies support, and others within their departments. Students must make choices and thereby accept greater responsibility for their own learning processes. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students faced with extended periods of absence or who work farther from campus are able to complete HyFlex courses more easily, potentially boosting student success and retention. In short, HyFlex might help institutions move toward a more customized teaching and learning approach, one that is more likely to meet individual student needs—and one that may eventually alter their expectations of course offerings.