Dear President Rao,

The Faculty Technology Advisory Committee (FTAC) met on Feb. 7, 2022 and discussed issues related to the expectation that faculty will let students come to an in-person face-to-face (F2F) class via Zoom if they cannot come to the class in person. We also want to clarify what the term hybrid means. When a course has a hybrid modality, the expectation is that the instructor and students share a physical space for a percentage of the class time and the other percentage is completed online, either asynchronously or synchronously. When a student comes to class via Zoom while the other students are in person, this is hybrid simulcast; it’s also been referred to as hyflex.

While in the best of all possible worlds, VCU faculty would be willing and able to respond to students’ requests that when they are teaching F2F, they would be able to hybrid simulcast their class sessions for students who are unable to attend in person; however, there are three areas of considerations.

The first has to do with availability of the technology in classrooms. There are only 42% of centrally supported classrooms that have the ceiling microphones and cameras currently available and the percentage for those non-centrally supported classrooms is unknown. This will cause challenges for faculty when they are asked to let students join a F2F classroom virtually via Zoom or other simulcasting applications (like Google Meet) because the virtual students may have difficulty hearing all that is happening in the classroom and will not be able to see the instructor as they move around the classroom. If faculty need to record the class session, there are issues of getting a medium to high quality recording of class sessions. These ways of including students in class virtually cannot be imposed on faculty when the classrooms are not equipped to support this.

The second has to do with instructors and instructions. If faculty are expected to let students Zoom into a F2F class, there will be instructional time lost should the faculty be expected to set up and run simulcast or hyflex sessions. Even in classes with teaching and instructional assistants, it cannot be assumed that the assistants have the requisite skills. Importantly, instruction is highly variable in its deployment. A more lecture oriented class session may lend itself to simulcasting and recording. Courses that engage in flipped classrooms, small group work, active learning and discussions, for example, will not ‘translate’ as a simple broadcast or recording. Delivering authentic, well-designed learning, then, would require the faculty member to create resources, materials, and activities for both F2F and distance learners. Moreover, synchronous distance learners will often need resources, materials, and activities different from those of asynchronous viewers of recorded class sessions. In discussion based and small group activities, it would be possible to set up breakout rooms, but attending to the F2F and breakout rooms cannot be handled by a single instructor most of the time.

Faculty have already suffered two very hard years pivoting during the COVID crisis. Many have learned online teaching techniques and many are adept. It would be important to have fully delineated training programs AND compensation for all faculty who would agree to teaching in a simulcasting/hyflex mode. Consideration would need to be given to hiring TAs and IAs proficient in the technologies for any and all faculty needing assistance. Distance learning is not the same
as F2F instruction: time, attention and resources need to be in place.

The third consideration is administrative: definitions need to be clear about what different modes mean to both faculty and students. Faculty will need templates for syllabus descriptions and other information needed in Banner and on Canvas. Importantly the upper administration will need to understand the highly divergent teaching and learning needs across the two campus and between undergraduate and graduate education. Each unit should designate its capacities and needs as befits its disciplinary specific instructional modes so that delivery can be flexible, agile, yet appropriate given discipline-specific needs and discourses.

Thank you for reading these concerns. Faculty want nothing more than to support our students, but there are many considerations that need to be taken into account. We would be happy to discuss these further.

Respectfully,

FTAC

Valerie Robnolt, Chair

Kristy Artello, Vice Chair