

THE OMBUDS OFFICE 25 COURSE MANAGEMENT SUGGESTIONS

With an eye to preventing the most common problems that students bring to the Ombuds Office, here are 25 Course Management Suggestions for Faculty, Instructors and TAs. Should you wish to discuss any of these, please contact the Ombuds Office. Our contact information is provided at the end of this document.

BEING FAMILIAR WITH ACADEMIC REGULATIONS

1. Students are expected to know and respect the academic regulations that appear in the Undergraduate Calendar <http://registrar.concordia.ca/calendar> and in the Graduate Calendar (<http://graduatestudies.concordia.ca/publications/graduatecalendar/current/>). But, the Calendars are not just for students. Rules and procedures described in those pages include information on course management, grading, re-evaluation and academic integrity and offenses. It's therefore important for faculty to be familiar with their content. A yearly review is also a good idea as regulations can change.

SETTING CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

2. When you present your course outline, it is important to discuss academic integrity. Highlight that you, other students and the University expect them to be honest in their academic work. Discuss what this means using examples of required course work. Concordia has information available to students to better understand and uphold academic integrity. The Academic Integrity website can be found at (<http://www.concordia.ca/students/academic-integrity.html>). When you suspect academic misconduct, it is your responsibility to report it. The Academic Code of Conduct clearly outlines the process to follow. It is located at <http://www.concordia.ca/students/academic-integrity/code.html>.
3. Make sure that every student is given a copy of your course outline. The Course Outline Guide found at <http://www.concordia.ca/content/dam/concordia/offices/ctls/docs/Course-Outline-Guide.pdf> clearly describes the information that students should have in writing at the beginning of the term.
4. Explain your expectations for papers and projects. Review these when students are working on assignments. Indicate the due dates and your policy on extensions and on late work. If work is to be left in your department, make sure that someone will be there to receive it or that there is a locked box in which to leave papers. For graded work you wish to return to students outside of class time, make arrangements for you or someone else to return it. For reasons of privacy, leaving graded work in a box outside your office or in an envelope on your door is not appropriate.
5. If you have an attendance requirement, state this clearly, discuss your reasons, and keep attendance records. Usually attendance should only be mandatory when it is essential to the design of the course and factored into the evaluation scheme.
6. If you plan to have field trips, special meetings or tutorials, announce them early especially if they will involve time outside class hours. Normally, you should not expect students to attend meetings outside the times scheduled for your course.

GROUP PROJECTS

7. If group projects are part of your course requirements, have a plan to deal with conflict between group members. Inform students that conflict does sometimes arise and the best way to resolve it is to address it

promptly and fairly. Advise them as to what they should do if problems arise. Ideally, your instructions should be in writing.

PAPERS IN FRENCH

8. Students at Concordia may write assignments and examinations in French; Section 16.3.2 of the Undergraduate Calendar (<http://www.concordia.ca/academics/undergraduate/calendar/current/sec16/16.html#b16.3.2>) and the Academic Regulations Section of the Graduate Calendar (<http://www.concordia.ca/academics/graduate/calendar/current/academic-regulations.html>) provide more specific information. At the beginning of your course, announce how you will deal with papers in French. If you are unable to evaluate them yourself and will ask a colleague to read them, discuss any possible disadvantages or delays for students.

EVALUATION

9. Be as clear as you can about grading criteria and invite students to discuss questions with you early in the term. If you mark using percentages, indicate how these will relate to a final letter grade. Include this information on your course outline. As some departments have a standard for percentage to letter grade equivalencies, consulting your Chair before finalizing your course outline is a good idea. If you plan to adjust or curve grades, it is important to let the class know and to explain why and how the adjustments will be made.
10. If class participation figures in your grading scheme, explain clearly how you will evaluate it. Because participation marks are hard to re-evaluate, it is important to let students know how they're doing and, if they're not doing well, how they can improve. Ten percent for participation can make a big difference in a grade—a participation mark shouldn't be an end of term surprise.
11. Conducting peer evaluations can provide a useful learning opportunity for students. Generally, each student working on a common team project is asked to write a short description about each team member's activities and performance in the group and to assign a grade.

If you ask your students to peer evaluate, they should be given specific written guidelines before the team projects begin. Explain how to conduct a peer evaluation, what you expect them to evaluate and how the evaluations will be used in terms of assigning an individual and final grade. Have a plan to deal with any interpersonal or participatory problems at any point in the semester.

Some professors adopt a useful strategy of collecting periodic synopses of a group process to ensure they are aware of each group's activities, progress and potential problems. As peer evaluations are hard to re-evaluate, these synopses will prove helpful. The Centre for Teaching and Learning (<http://teaching.concordia.ca/>) is a good resource for more information on the subject.

CHANGES TO EXPECTATIONS

12. If you have to change course requirements, test dates or deadlines you've announced in your outline, explain why. Most students understand when changes have to be made for pedagogical reasons or because of circumstances beyond your control. But they feel unfairly treated when they perceive changes are arbitrary. According to the Common Course Outline, unanimous consent of students or consent of the Chair is required to proceed with any changes. Reasonable efforts should be made to convey these to all registered students. Depending on students to get the information from others in the course isn't the best strategy. The information they get this way isn't always reliable. As well, a student may not know anyone else. Providing written amendments to course outlines is ideal and worth the effort.

GRADE SUBMISSIONS

13. It is important to be familiar with the administrative notations used by the University when you submit your grades; this information is provided in Sections 16.3.3 to 16.3.8 of the Undergraduate Calendar <http://www.concordia.ca/academics/undergraduate/calendar/current/sec16/16.html#b16.3.3> and in the Academic Regulations Section of the Graduate Calendar <http://www.concordia.ca/academics/graduate/calendar/current/academic-regulations.html> If you have questions about these notations, consult your Chair.
14. It is important to get your grades in on time (for undergraduate courses, see 16.3.1 in the Undergraduate Calendar, and for graduate courses, please contact your Department Chair). Late grades can sometimes result in a big inconvenience or a very serious problem for a student. If your grades must be late, let the department secretary know when you will submit them. Students can then be informed.

GRADE APPROVAL

15. There is a process for the approval of grades. They are first submitted to the Chair for approval and are then submitted to the Dean for final approval. Approved grades are then sent to the Office of the Registrar to be entered on the student record. It is important that students be informed that initial grades posted on your website are not final and could change.

KEEPING IN TOUCH

16. Your course outline should provide your e-mail address, your phone number, or a number where students can leave messages, and your office address. Tell students when you are available to meet with them and whether they need an appointment or can just drop in. Encourage students to call or meet with you—getting together can answer a lot of questions and avoid problems. If students call you or send an e-mail, returning the message within a day or two is good practice.
17. If something prevents you from keeping office hours, arrange to have a note put on your door.

FEEDBACK

18. Students appreciate feedback or mid-term results before the deadline for academic withdrawal (DISC). Important dates for the 2015-2016 academic year are:

Undergraduate courses November 8, 2015 for Fall term courses (/2)
March 15, 2016 for two term (/3) and Winter term courses (/4)

Graduate courses November 8, 2015 for Fall term courses (/2)
April 2, 2016 for two term (/3) and Winter term courses (/4)

Every year a great number of students submit student requests for 'late withdrawal' when they find out after the deadline they're not doing well. These requests are generally denied.

RE-EVALUATION

19. It's important to remember that all students have the right to see their course work and to ask for any component of the course to be re-evaluated (Academic Re-evaluation Procedures, Art. 1 http://www.concordia.ca/vpirsg/documents/policies/Academic_Re-eval_Procedures.pdf). For this to occur, Art. 3 states: "Instructors are responsible for the preservation of course work that has not been returned to students as follows: until December 31 of the next calendar year for Fall-term courses; until

April 30 of the next calendar year for Fall/Winter and Winter-term courses; and until August 31 of the next calendar year for Summer-term courses.” If a dispute arises, your evaluation should be clear and defensible to both the student and a third party. Likewise, a re-evaluation decision must be supported by a reasoned report.

ACCOMMODATION

20. Your policies should reasonably anticipate unforeseeable circumstances (e.g. the broken alarm clock at exam time, bus strike, snow storm) and life events (e.g. illness, death in the family). Invite students to inform you if they need special consideration. For example, it's useful for you to know that a student's been in hospital for a month and hasn't just disappeared. Talk about student responsibility in the course.
21. Explain your policy when students miss a test or a deadline for compassionate, medical reasons or for a reason of disability. For religious reasons, apply the Policy for Students on the Accommodation of Religious Observances found <http://www.concordia.ca/news/stories/topics/cunews/main/stories/2011/09/13/new-and-revised-policies.html>. A student should not be penalized for a compelling reason and their request for an accommodation should be duly considered. At the same time, you have the right to know that such excuses are valid.

CONFIDENTIALITY

22. Students' grades and personal information are confidential and should not be shared with others without permission. The University is subject to Québec's Act Respecting Privacy and Access to Information and Protection of Personal Information. The Policy Concerning the Protection of Personal Information <http://www.concordia.ca/content/dam/common/docs/policies/official-policies/SG-9.pdf> outlines how the law applies to the Concordia context. The Guidelines on the Application of the Act Respecting Access <http://www.concordia.ca/content/dam/common/docs/policies/official-policies/New-Access-Guidelines.pdf> provide useful Q and A sections.
23. Medical information is also confidential. If you require a physician's certificate to consider granting an accommodation to a student, ask to be told what the effects of a student's medical condition might have on his or her academic work in your course, rather than asking for diagnoses or personal and potentially sensitive information. If you're unsure about a particular situation, the University's Health Services (<http://www-health.concordia.ca/>) is a good resource.
24. Don't leave marked papers for pick up in a place where they can be read or taken by someone other than their authors.

DIFFICULT BEHAVIOR

25. Most students are reasonable. If a student's behavior in your course is unreasonable, talk to him or her about it. Often, a quick discussion will solve the problem. If you feel you need assistance or you want to discuss the situation, talk to your Chair or contact the Office of Rights and Responsibilities at rights@concordia.ca or the Ombuds Office at ombuds@concordia.ca.

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