

Preparing for the First Week of Class

Classroom climate has a significant impact on students' overall performance and well-being. Here are some recommendations to build a sense of belonging among your students, beginning with your syllabus and the initial class meeting.

Guidelines for a community of learners

Community guidelines for classroom interaction, introduced on the first day of class, are an effective practice for fostering belonging among your students. Community guidelines emphasize the value of the classroom as a **learning community** with shared goals and aspirations. The guidelines serve both the practical purpose of outlining expectations for constructive engagement, as well as establishing a common agreement to which students can hold themselves and one another accountable.

Questions to ask yourself when composing your guidelines

- What are my goals for this course?
- What kind of interactions occur in my course?
- Do I provide concrete examples for respectful interaction?
- Do I frame my expectations in positive language?
- Will students have input into developing the guidelines? If so, how will I solicit their input?
- What is non-negotiable for me?
- What is most important to me in building a community of learners?

Community guidelines that make a difference

How do you meaningfully communicate these guidelines so that students will take note?

FIRST DAY OF CLASS

Introduce guidelines and statements aloud at your **first class** meeting. Distribute a hard copy, or include it as a page on your Canvas site. Revisit in class after several sessions to elicit revisions or additional suggestions.

MIDTERM

Use at **midterm** for students to provide feedback about their experience of the class interactions and learning environment.

STRATEGIC MOMENTS

Use in **strategic moments** where interactions might feel tense. Remind student of your agreement if you're moving into a *potentially high-stakes conversation*.

SEMESTER'S END

Use at **semester's end** for students to self-assess their participation.

For more ideas about writing classroom guidelines and building a community of learners where all students belong, enroll in the PDN course: *Building Community in the Classroom*.

Communicating welcome, safety, and inclusion

Community guidelines are complemented by statements of welcome, safety, and inclusion. A practical way to do this is to include information that demonstrates your concern for the whole student and encourages help-seeking behavior.

Here are some sample statements that help set the tone of your class and demonstrate your willingness to engage with students:

- If you face difficulty in meeting the requirements of this course, please let me know as soon as possible. Together we'll develop strategies to meet both your needs and the expectations of the course.
- Virginia Tech provides a variety of services to support student success. [List relevant services and their locations] All of these services are provided at no additional cost to you.
- I will reach out if I suspect you need additional (non-academic) support. My intention is not to be intrusive, but simply to let you know I am concerned and that help, if needed, is available.
- If you are facing challenges securing food, housing, or childcare, you are urged to contact the Dean of Students for support. Likewise, you may notify me if you are comfortable doing so. I can help to connect you to resources on campus.
- I want you to feel able to share your life experiences in classroom discussions and written reflections as relevant. I want you to trust that I will keep any information you share private. Please be aware that I do have mandatory reporting responsibilities related to my role as a faculty member. This means I am required to share information regarding sexual misconduct or information about a crime that may have occurred on campus with the university Title IX Coordinator.

Religious and Cultural Diversity

9/22-24* Rosh Hashanah
10/1-2* Yom Kippur
2/17 Lunar New Year
2/17 Ramadan Begins
3/1-20 Nineteen Day Fast (Baha'i)
3/19-20 Eid al-Fitr*
4/1-9 Passover*
4/3 Good Friday
4/5 Easter
4/10 Orthodox Good Friday
4/12 Pascha
*sundown to sundown

The academic calendar does not accommodate religious observances. However, certain religious and cultural holidays that require rest, fasting, and contemplation coincide with the work week. You can respect religious and cultural diversity among your students by not scheduling assignments, tests, or exams on core holidays, granting absences without penalty for students who request them, and learning more about the various belief systems of our diverse populations of students.

See the full Interfaith calendar at:
<https://dos.vt.edu/interfaith/calendar.html>

For more insight into communicating welcome, safety, and inclusion, enroll in the PDN course: Building Community in the Classroom. This course provides information about campus resources available to support students' health and well-being.