

Fall 2020 Guidelines for Office Hours

Faculty Office Hour policy (6.2 of the faculty handbook) requires that “every class shall normally require two office hours, although the actual number of office hours will vary depending on the nature of the faculty member’s assignment.” Further, “up to two-thirds of the total hours per week should reflect the faculty member’s teaching assignment.”

For Fall 2020, the decision has been made to adjust the office hours policy. Faculty must still maintain two office hours per class taught, but the mix of office hours and modality must take into consideration the complexity associated with the pandemic. Faculty will need to provide some portion of office hours virtually to each course. Further, faculty can provide all office hours for each course virtually, should they so choose.

This fall, for every course, at least half of all office hours must accommodate students who are not able to come to campus. This means that at least one hour per course is to be offered via virtual office hours (Ex: BlackBoard Collaborate, Zoom, Teams, telephone, etc.) for each of your classes and available to all of your students. It is also acceptable for all office hours to be done virtually. It is critical that your office hour modality, schedule, structure, and your availability be clearly indicated on your syllabi for the fall and in your Blackboard course shell.

Again, it is perfectly acceptable for all office hours to be done virtually. Faculty can use BB Collaborate, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Email, Telephone, etc. to be available for two hours each week per course. An important note that for the official office hours for any course, if faculty plan to use a discussion board or email, the expectation is that this time will be synchronous and that students can expect a near immediate response via these formats during the specified hours (for those who choose to use these specific and typically asynchronous mediums for their office hours). Faculty are not required to have face-to-face office hours, but are supported in doing so, should they so choose for any one or multiple courses.

Additional Considerations and Information for Faculty regarding Office Hours

The purpose of this document is to offer guidance on effective, risk-reduced practices for student meetings during the pandemic. The health risks associated with COVID-19 necessitate a set of risk-reducing best practices (e.g. “social distancing”) which inherently complicate traditional approaches to faculty and student meetings. When choosing your medium for meeting with students, please understand that both the reason you are meeting and the best social-distancing practices are equally important. Unfortunately, there is no simple “one best way” to approach these meetings. Ultimately faculty will be tasked with balancing the needs of the meeting with the needs of best health practices.

Below you’ll find information to consider as you make your decision about how to structure your office hours for the fall.

Risk Factors and Social Distancing

The most recognized method of transmittal of COVID-19 involves the aerosolization of particulates. As infected people breathe, they spread these particulates into the air. Several factors are directly associated with increasing risk of infection.

1. The type of activity in which the infected person is engaged. Simply stated, the heavier the breathing action, the more aerosolization occurs. In rough order of magnitude, coughing and sneezing exceed singing, which exceeds talking, which exceeds silent breathing. Projected speaking (e.g., our lecturing voices) is probably somewhere above talking and below singing.
2. The distance separating the infected and non-infected person. The closer you are to an infected person, the greater the risk of exposure.
3. The duration of interaction. The more time you spend in presence of an infected person, the greater the risk of exposure.
4. The enclosure of the space. Enclosed spaces increase risk of exposure, more so than outdoor, or open spaces.

Personal protection equipment (PPE) is NOT an all-encompassing protection. The guidance for masks and other forms of PPE typically presumes a short duration encounter (e.g., less than 10-minutes) with reasonable distancing (6ft or more of separation) and a lower intensity of breathing (talking or silence). As the exposure from each of the factors identified above is increased, the protective power of PPE is decreased.

The very nature of our office meetings with students compromise the efficacy of PPE. In general, a typical office meeting with students occurs in a closed space (violates #4), for prolonged periods of time (violates #3) and the spacing is usually fairly close (narrowly violating #2).

Meeting and Mentoring: Office Hour Complications due to COVID-19

From a health-related perspective alone, it would seem that lower-risk meetings in open spaces would be preferable and that virtual meetings using Zoom, Skype, or Collaborate would be safest. However, the health benefit improvements may conflict with the types of meetings your students may need. We play an important, formative role in the lives of our students. While the reasons we meet are myriad, some of the issue present when we meet with students includes:

1. The need to build trust and rapport.
2. The need to honor privacy and confidentiality.
3. The need to address difficult, sensitive issues.

The proxemics of our meetings, are the space and the spatial effects present when we meet. These proxemics are often as impactful on meeting effectiveness as the actual topics discussed during the meeting. Trust and connection do not develop well over physical distance, nor do they develop easily virtually. Privacy, confidentiality and sensitivity are not at all protected in open environments. However, these concerns may be mitigated with intentional and thoughtful approach to our office hours and meetings with students. Being aware of some of the complicating factors as well as our overarching conceptual goals (in addition to the practical goal of office hours) can help to overcome some of these challenges.

Virtual meetings can add complications. Video camera usage is, in some ways, an intrusion into a student's home and it also metaphorically opens the door to material comparisons which can complicate establishing rapport.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Meeting Options

<i>Meeting Modality</i>	<i>Advantages</i>	<i>Disadvantages</i>
<i>Virtual Meetings</i> Meetings held using video conference tools such as Zoom	Safest and easy to schedule.	No proxemics Students may have concerns regarding allowing cameras into private residence
<i>Open Air Meetings</i> Meetings outdoors or in large atrium areas	Lower health risks.	Problems with confidentiality, privacy, and sensitivity. Some faculty and students may not be able to travel to campus
<i>Conference Room Meetings</i> Meetings in a conference room or similar meeting area.	Slightly lower health risks, protects confidentiality, privacy and sensitivity.	Poor proxemics, hard to build rapport/trust across a conference table with likely plexiglass partitions. Some faculty and students may not be able to travel to campus. Limited conference room availability: scheduling issues with other faculty members.
<i>Office Meetings</i> Meetings in faculty office space	Best proxemics for building trust, best for confidentiality, sensitivity and privacy.	Highest level of health risks, particularly due to closed air, distance between participants, and duration of meeting. Some faculty and students may not be able to travel to campus

Potential Ideas & Suggestions for Virtual Student Meetings & Office Hours

In addition to all that is outlined above for consideration, the following tips might be helpful as faculty craft their plans and policies for Virtual Office Hours. Remember – all faculty must have a portion of their Office Hours offered virtually in the fall 2020 semester; faculty can choose to offer all office hours virtually, if they wish. Faculty using virtual office hours should consider some of the guidance below when planning virtual meetings, students may not be comfortable dropping into a virtual office hour chat potentially open to all other students.

- Consider timing a portion of online office hours immediately before or after synchronous class sessions; this might increase likelihood of attendance.
- Consider which method will work best for you and your students: BB Collaborate, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, google hangout, a special discussion board thread, email, phone, etc. Be sure to announce the method as well as timing and process for your office hours on your syllabi.
- Consider creating and offering guidance to students about online meetings with individuals vs. groups (class); it could be helpful for them to know what to expect about the structure and timing of your online office hours. Include in this resource the instructions for use of virtual backgrounds which are allowed in Zoom and Teams and help to address privacy issues of all involved, if you plan to use one of these platforms.

- If you plan to use Zoom or BB Collaborate, be sure to set up your meetings/rooms so that you capitalize on the 'waiting room' features as this allows you to admit students into the room one at a time, if this is your preferred way to meet with them. This will help to ensure privacy and individualized conversations, if needed. You can also establish small group meetings in this way.
- It is acceptable to ask students to 'sign up' or indicate to you in some way that they plan to attend office hours. Many faculty used online schedulers/software for this in the pre-Covid-19 semesters, and this can be helpful now, too. You can ask for them to let you know in advance if they will be attending the office hour session, if possible. This might allow you to group students with similar questions, prepare for difficult conversations, and/or be ready with resources and information, if needed.
- When establishing online office hours, you are encouraged to set up a time and methodology convenient for your various work responsibilities. It is critically important that you establish your availability, the mechanism by which you can be reached and that you are then available in that time frame. Help students understand when, where, and how to interact with you. This helps prevent an assumption that you are available 24/7.
- Be sure that you are present in the ways and times that you indicate you will be. It is impossible to know if students will 'show up' or utilize this resource and there are moments when 'life happens' and you simply cannot log on. It is critically important that you establish your availability, the mechanism by which you can be reached and that you are then available in that time frame.
- If you plan to make yourself available online (e.g., email, discussion boards, etc.) as a portion of your office hours, it is important to articulate when you will be online and a policy for when students should expect a response when using these asynchronous tools. For example, you can inform students they can expect a response within 24 hours (or whatever your response timeframe/policy is for the course).