Spring 2021 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 Spring 2021, 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 or portion or all of their office hours virtually to each course.

**In Spring, 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, email, 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.

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 part of this time will be synchronous and that students can expect a near immediate response via these formats during the specified 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. “physical distancing”) which inherently complicate traditional approaches to faculty and student meetings.

Below faculty can find information to consider as they make decisions about how to structure office hours for the fall.

# Risk Factors and Social Distancing

The most recognized method of transmittal of COVID-19 involves the aerosolization of particulates. 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.

Video 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.

# Virtual Office Hours and Identity Verification

If information protected by FERPA is discussed in office hours, faculty should verify student’s identity or restrict virtual office hours to authenticated users.

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.

* Faculty can consider timing a portion of online office hours immediately before or after synchronous class sessions; this might increase likelihood of attendance.
* Faculty can 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.
* Faculty can 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 faculty plan to use Zoom or BB Collaborate, they can consider setting up meetings/rooms so that they capitalize on the ‘waiting room’ features as this allows to admit students into the room one at a time, if this is the preferred way to meet with them. This will help to ensure privacy and individualized conversations, if needed. Small group meetings can also be established in this way.
* It is acceptable to ask students to ‘sign up’ or indicate to the professor in some way that they plan to attend office hours. Many faculty are using online schedulers/software (such as Calendly). Faculty can ask students to notify them in advance if the students will be attending the office hour session, if possible. This might allow faculty to group students with similar questions, prepare for difficult conversations, and/or be ready with resources and information, if needed.
* If faculty plan to make themselves available online (e.g., email, discussion boards, etc.) as a portion of the office hours, it is important to articulate when the professor will be online and a policy for when students should expect a response when using these asynchronous tools. For example, the professor can inform students they can expect a response within 24 hours (or whatever your response timeframe/policy is for the course).