

MEMORANDUM

To: Faculty, University of Toronto Scarborough
From: Katherine R. Larson, Vice-Dean Teaching, Learning & Undergraduate Programs
Date: 10 December 2020
Re: **Student Feedback and Pedagogy of Kindness**

Dear colleagues,

As we wrap up the fall term, I wanted to share with you some of the feedback that we have received from students about their course experiences in the context of COVID.

There is tremendous recognition from students of the dedication and creativity that faculty have been bringing to their online teaching. Thank you all so very much for your work and for your commitment to our students. It is deeply appreciated.

Students have also provided valuable input that we hope will help to inform your planning for the winter term. A summary of this feedback has been prepared by the Provost's Office and can be found on the [Centre for Teaching and Learning's Academic Continuity site](#) as a PowerPoint slide deck. We would like to draw your attention in particular to the following:

- **Care, compassion, and flexibility:** Students are struggling with many competing pressures during this time, including familial responsibilities, financial stresses, and feelings of isolation. As you plan for the winter, we encourage you to be as flexible as possible with course assessments, deadlines, and policies; to communicate with your students with care; and to consider how pedagogies of kindness and compassion might be centred within your teaching. The benefits of these elements for our students have been underscored in new ways by COVID, but they also extend beyond the pandemic context. The pedagogy of kindness was recently explored on Professor Maydianne Andrade's podcast "[The New Normal](#)," featuring Professor Fiona Rawle from the University of Toronto Mississauga.
- **Assessment design and workload:** As we pivoted online, many faculty responded to this new teaching environment by developing multiple low-stakes or "micro" assignments. The goal in many cases was to ease pressures on students, but one of the surprising pieces of feedback that we have received is that this shift has paradoxically resulted in higher workload across courses. As you are planning for your winter classes, we would ask you to pay close attention to the number of assignments overall and the weekly workload that is being required for each course. Consider how assessments might be designed to maximize flexibility as well as to foster academic integrity. Please note as well that students are finding that timed online assessments are particularly stressful.
- **Accessibility and universal course design:** As you are planning for the winter term, courses and assessments should be developed with an eye to inclusion. We encourage you to consider developing your classes using the principles of universal course design. Continue to keep in mind the challenges faced by students who are navigating different time zones and the importance of making synchronous content available. You might also consider the possibility of incorporating accessible elements like captioning into your course materials. Planning proactively with inclusion and accessibility in mind helps to support all of our students. A reminder as well that no changes should be made to marking rubrics, assessment requirements, or related course elements partway through the term without a student vote.

- **Support for student mental health:** Closely related to the above is the importance of supporting student well-being and mental health. Let students know that you are committed to supporting their mental health, and make this clear throughout your courses. Take advantage of educational opportunities to enhance your own awareness of mental health. Please draw the newly launched tri-campus [mental health support site](#) to the attention of your students and ensure that they are aware of the resources and supports that are available to them both at UTSC and across the university, including in online settings.
- **Communications and class community:** While some students have been enjoying aspects of the online teaching environment and finding new ways to engage in their classes, other students – particularly first-years who do not yet have a connection with the campus – have been feeling isolated and alone. Clear, caring, and consistent communications with your class, as well as opportunities for feedback, can make a big difference. Whenever possible, we encourage you to find ways of creating community in your classes and to foster opportunities for students to connect with each other, particularly at the outset of the term.

The full set of slides summarizing student feedback can be found on the [Centre for Teaching and Learning's Academic Continuity site](#), which continues to serve as a hub for online teaching resources.

Looking ahead to January, the Centre for Teaching and Learning will be offering two webinars in the new year, the first on January 12 from 11am-12pm focusing on [Microaggressions in the Classroom](#) and the second on Pedagogy of Care, Compassion, and Kindness (date and time TBA). We would like to draw your attention as well to the [Equity Matters Seminar](#) on January 21, on the topic of inclusive curriculum development and featuring guest speaker **Amy Sueyoshi**, Dean at San Francisco State University.

Finally, and no less important than our students' well-being, is the well-being of faculty. Kindness and compassion need to extend to ourselves and to each other as well as we continue to pace ourselves through this exceptional year. We hope that the information included in this memo proves helpful for your winter term planning, but we also recognize the importance of filing it away for a few weeks so that you are able to benefit from a restful holiday break.

Thank you again for your support of our students and for the creativity and new learnings that you have undertaken in your own teaching as a result of the pandemic.

Warm wishes,



Katherine R. Larson

Vice-Dean Teaching, Learning & Undergraduate Programs