

# Memo to Provost Woodruff

## Subject: Course Modality

April 18, 2022



## Background

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In November 2021, Dr. Mark Largent, Associate Provost of Undergraduate Education, requested that the UCUE help the Provost craft guidelines for online vs in-person instruction at MSU. UCUE voted to create a subcommittee to work on this important topic. The subcommittee discussed and deliberated for several months resulting in the information shared below.

Higher education is at a crossroads with respect to the modality of education. This modality juncture makes the spring of 2022 a time for intentional decisions on how to move forward as a University. MSU has an opportunity to evaluate course modalities to (1) effectively achieve learning outcomes, (2) best support student success, and (3) remain relevant to key stakeholders. **At this point, the subcommittee is not recommending specific parameters or guidelines to determine teaching modality for undergraduate courses.** Our careful deliberation considered the massive changes MSU — and higher education as a whole — are experiencing due to cultural and demographic shifts exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Our initial charge was to craft guidelines to determine how and when to offer in-person and online instruction. **However, we offer the thoughts below as a framework to begin discussions with Deans, Chairs, program stakeholders, and especially faculty who are best suited to make the crucial decision for course modality.**

The subcommittee was comprised of faculty from across campus and Associated Students of Michigan State University (ASMSU) representation, including:

- Dr. Rachel Barnard, Academic Specialist - Teaching, Lyman Briggs College
- Dr. Richard Enbody, Associate Professor, College of Engineering
- Aaron Iturralde, Vice President For Academic Affairs, ASMSU
- Dr. Gina Leininger, Associate Professor, College of Natural Science
- Dr. Antoinette Tessmer, Associate Professor Fixed Term, Broad College of Business
- Dr. Thomas Summerhill, Associate Professor, College of Social Science
- Alexandria Thrubis Stanley, Instructor and Director, College of Communication Arts & Sciences

The subcommittee consulted with several campus leaders connected to course modalities, including:

- Dr. Cara Cilano, Chair, Council of Undergraduate Deans
- David Goodrich, Instructional Designer/Learning Experience Designer, Hub for Innovation in Learning and Technology - Spartan QM certification specialist
- Dr. Stephen Thomas, Digital Curriculum Coordinator, College of Natural Science; the Assistant Dean for STEM Education, Teaching and Learning; and the Associate Director for the Center for Integrative Studies in General Science;
- Dr. Jeremy VanHof, Director of Learning Technology and Development, Broad College of Business



## Key Takeaways From Our Discussions

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1. **MSU should offer a variety of modalities in undergraduate courses in response to a quickly evolving educational landscape and in an attempt to create educational opportunities that serve more diverse student populations.** MSU has been a “bricks and mortar” University and our credit-bearing instruction is largely a residential experience in East Lansing. Our faculty have also been leaders in developing high quality online courses, and we have learned that in some cases it is the superior modality to support student learning. This means there is no "one size fits all" approach for quality instruction. Moreover, as a land grant institution our mission is to provide quality education that is widely accessible to advance knowledge and transform lives. Offering online instruction increases our ability to reach, teach and fulfill our core mission. It is therefore incumbent upon us to provide access to educational opportunities that aid student success for a wide range of students, which can best be achieved with a mix of in-person and online modality courses.
2. **The decision about course modality should be made at the faculty level in consultation with unit administrators / leaders.** As we move forward, modality for all courses needs to be deliberative and determined by the faculty working with their unit leaders. Faculty know best what modality will optimally support learning objectives for a given course. Unit administrators play a key role in determining how specific delivery modalities integrate programmatically.

We are evolving from the crisis mode of the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated an all-online modality, to a pilot phase in which **we can choose course modalities that best facilitate student success**. It is a critical time for colleges, department and unit leaders to work with faculty and implement new student-centered course modality choices based on learning objectives, and evidence-based assessments of learning.

**We recommend using the suggested framework below for three to five years, at which time the university needs to evaluate successes and challenges among key stakeholders.** Given that we are in the midst of great changes, we advise a period of evaluation to gauge what works and does not work to achieve learning objectives and support student success.

## Considerations for Administration to Develop Campus-Wide Practices and Policies

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1. **Students expect and deserve a high-quality Spartan education in whatever modality a course is offered.** Existing policies such as the Teaching Code of Responsibility, along with resources and frameworks like Spartan Quality Matters, create a foundational expectation for MSU courses. This committee feels that although the Quality Matters standards are designed for online courses, the standards are relevant for the online component (e.g., D2L) for a course of any modality.



2. **The [Code of Teaching Responsibility](#) should be revised** to reflect the implications of a wider variety of course modalities.
3. **MSU needs to develop a shared, consistent, and universal understanding of what to expect in different course modalities.** No one modality is always better than another. There are access and equity considerations for all course modalities.
4. **Course modality and the reasons for choosing it should be clearly articulated to students.** Including course modality in SIS course descriptions is vital to ensure transparent communication of course modality early in students' enrollment decision process. Additionally, syllabi should articulate how the choice of instruction modality was made to support the course learning objectives, which can help students understand how to succeed in that format. This transparency is important for student success and "buy-in" from students and other stakeholders (e.g., parents/guardians/caregivers).
5. **Student advising should include a conversation on course modality and how it fits the student's learning preferences and situation.** Selection of a course based on modality should be carefully considered by the student and advisor to ensure that it best fits individual learning preferences and academic objectives as well as other practical considerations (e.g., access to internet, geographical location, etc.) supported by the student's past success or failure with that course modality.
6. **Develop communication strategies to educate stakeholders to ensure understanding of the varying course modalities.** Each stakeholder has different levels of preconceived notions about all potential modalities. It is important that each stakeholder group is provided with evidence that one modality is not superior to another modality and how both serve student success. Key stakeholders to target for communication strategies include students, faculty, advisors, parents, guardians and/or caregivers.
7. **Faculty pedagogical professional development and technical support need to be promoted, supported and valued by the university.** Teaching excellence is a hallmark of an MSU education. Teaching-related professional development opportunities should continue to be offered and valued by the University. These opportunities need to address all course modalities.
8. **Accessibility and inclusive teaching practices should be key considerations in both technologies and course design.** Encourage faculty to use MSU IT vetted education technologies and platforms (see: <https://tech.msu.edu/service-catalog/teaching/> and <https://tech.msu.edu/service-catalog/teaching/tools/>). Use of consistent platforms contributes to greater student success, leaving more time to learn course content rather than learning how to use a new-to-the-student platform. Additionally, instructors should guide students in how to appropriately use the learning platform for their course (a recommendation in the Spartan Quality Matters guidelines for online courses that should apply to all courses).



## Considerations for College, Department, Program, and Unit Leaders to Develop Practices and Policies

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The items below are intended to be considered in consultation with local administrators, leaders, and faculty to make strategic decisions for any course modalities. Below are aspects we suggest that the Provost and administration share with Deans and Chairs to discuss with faculty in their programs and units, and to value their considerations.

**In coordination with their unit leader and in agreement with the unit programmatic strategy, faculty shall:**

1. Contribute to equitable offering of diverse course modalities to accommodate diverse student learning styles.
2. Propose a course modality in which the faculty are proficient, and which will allow them to contribute to student success.
3. Commit to and announce the course modality prior to enrollment dates.
4. Clearly state how the course modality contributes to student learning objectives for the course.
5. Clearly state the level of engagement expected from the students, how student engagement is assessed, and how feedback will be provided to maintain student engagement.

## Conclusion

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**This is the time to make intentional decisions about course modalities that support student success and support our land grant educational mission. Our hope is that the considerations outlined above can begin practical conversations with administration, faculty, students and other stakeholders on how to best choose and leverage modalities to support knowledge and success for a wide and diverse student population.**

Please share any questions you may have. The committee is happy to further discuss this framework with you.

