

From: SAS Undergrad Chairs <notifications@sakai.rutgers.edu>

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To: SAS Undergrad Chairs <no-reply@sakai.rutgers.edu>

Subject: [SAS Undergrad Chairs - Announcement] Our students are feeling overwhelmed...

Dear All,

These are trying and difficult times for all of us. I am enormously appreciative of all the time and work our instructors and staff have put into allowing our students to continue their progress toward their degree despite the limitations imposed by the measures the University is taking to protect our community's health.

I am writing now because we are hearing from multiple sources that a broad range of our students are feeling overwhelmed. I know many of us are too. We discussed some of this at the last undergraduate chairs meeting. At the risk of further overwhelming you, I invite you to reflect on the below and invite discussion among your colleagues. I share this in the same spirit of my earlier [musing about asynchronous versus synchronous formats](#) and the [Resources for Inclusive, Equitable, and Effective Teaching](#). It is food for thought rather than "policy." You may share as you think best.

Students are feeling overwhelmed.

In part, they are feeling overwhelmed because they have a perception that instructors are requiring a lot more work in the remote environment. These perceptions are fueled by (1) our advice to faculty that they replace high stakes assessments with multiple smaller stakes assessments — to decrease violations of AI, to promote improved learning (compared to cramming for a high stakes mid-term and final), to ensure regular and substantive interaction (the gold standard for remote learning); (2) the stress of doing virtually all work [on screen](#); and (3) students not internalizing the official credit-hour-to-time ratio... 1 credit equals 3 hours work per week — or 15 credits equals 45 hours per week.

And, there is, of course, the temptation among first year students to see the always-challenging adjustment to college (where all of your peers are now also students that were in the top of their high school class) through the lens of remote learning. Some of these feeling of being overwhelmed are particularly coming from our high achieving students — the SAS Honors Program student blog had a great student-written piece about this recently: [On Breakdowns and Burnout: Tackling Perfectionism During a Pandemic](#). It is especially powerful advice to students because it comes from another student. We've shared it with our Advising Staff, EOF, Honors College, and Dean of Students as well.

Students are also feeling overwhelmed by multiple online platforms they are expected to use; finding syllabi, assignments, etc. in different places in each course; and the flood of email they receive. Many of us are feeling the same way. Our Rutgers [Learning Centers](#) can provide students with strategies for dealing with some of these challenges and we urge you to refer your students to these resources. Again, the SAS HP student blog has helpful advice: [How to Keep Track of Your Asynchronous Online Classes](#). It applies equally well to synchronous classes.

All of that said, there is a reality here that I hope that we can address.

Fifteen credits of remote learning is hard; students are also doing the difficult work of living through a pandemic and its economic dislocation, protests, and heightened political conflict; and students are cut off from the usual rhythm and stress-busters of campus life. Many of us are (surprisingly) missing travel time across and between campuses as we move from one back-to-back Zoom meeting, Microsoft Teams check-in, and WebEx session.

As we continue to learn through this experience, it is especially important that we clearly explain to students *why* we are asking them to do the assignments we are requiring, *how* those assignments promote their learning, and the *ways* that they can most efficiently and effectively study and complete assignments. For example, one small thing that helps is providing students estimates of how much time each assignment should generally take.

Most of us didn't have much experience in teaching (or learning) remotely prior to Covid, hence we didn't have the intuitive sense of appropriate workloads in the remote environment that we have for our customary in-person courses.* As we continue to gain more experience, **instructors might consider** reducing the planned amount of work each week while focusing on key learning goals – reducing both the work required of students and their own grading work. Some have called for “blackout days” when students would have no assignments due. Some instructors many want to make some planned assignments optional or increase options for dropping the lowest grades. Some reading assignments might be reduced, depending on the discipline. Many are concerned about the impact of the first week of November on our students, staff, and instructors. This is not a call for a decrease in rigor, standards, expectations, or learning. Rather, **this is to spur thinking about mid-course “corrections” and to focus us not so much on how much we cover in our course, but how much students take away from the course at the end of the semester.**

Most students are taking 5 courses this semester. **It is helpful if instructors take a look at the required work for their course, multiply by 5, and use that to consider the total workload of their students.**

One tool that might provide some insight is this [Workload Estimator 2.0](#). Some caveats go along with using this tool: the output depends on the assumptions you put in (e.g. how much study time you assume for exams); the use of this tool can create the illusion of greater precision than we can really have; equality of outcomes is more important than getting precise equality of hours of effort; this should be used as a *ballpark estimator* and to check your intuitions about how much work you're assigning, **not** to fine-tune until you have exactly 41.25 hours per credit. Remember that the official rule on the credit-hour-to-time ratio is based on the time the *average* student would need to invest. The estimator itself also has some caveats/explanations of the research that goes into its built-in assumptions. <https://cte.rice.edu/workload#howcalculated> Remember that this tool is an estimate of something that's highly variable.

Most important at this moment, assumptions about how much time various assignments should take should be generous given the increased cognitive load are students are living with this year. There is a helpful literature on “teaching through trauma,” which 2020 (and likely at least the first half of 2021) certainly qualifies as. Below is an excerpt from a recent [Inside Higher Ed article by Mays Imad](#), the current leading expert on this. The article also includes “seven principles and suggestions to help guide our teaching practices.”

As educators, we need to consider the questions: What does this pandemic reality mean for students' ability to learn? How can we teach to the lonely, the anxious and the fearful?

When the brain is under traumatic stress, it goes into survival mode by prioritizing what matters -- conserving energy to stay alive. The work of [Bessel Van der Kolk](#), [Antonio Damasio](#) and others helps us understand that when we experience trauma, whether consciously or subconsciously, the limbic system (emotions) hijacks the cerebral cortex (reason). Learning, which requires the expenditure of energy, becomes physiologically less of a priority to our brain -- making it difficult to learn about, for example, linear regressions or the cell cycle.

In this midst of a pandemic, is it feasible to expect that our students can learn?

They can continue to learn -- brilliantly so -- but only if we change the ways we understand learning and radically reconceive how we teach. As educators, we must have at least some rudimentary understanding of how to recognize and mitigate stress, anxiety and trauma. More specifically, moving forward, we must adopt [a trauma-informed approach to teaching and students' learning](#).

And it concludes with this uplifting reminder:

Our roles as teachers and leaders are more important than ever. In his book [Radical Hope](#), Kevin Gannon reminds us, "Teaching is a radical act of hope. It is an assertion of faith in a better future in an increasingly uncertain and fraught present. It is a commitment to that future even if we can't clearly discern its shape."

Hope can be a passive gesture: "let's hope it all turns out OK." But hope can also be active, as a resistive act of defiance, self-empowerment and enduring resilience even in the face of uncertainty. [We impart hope](#) -- cultivating our students' and our ability to continue learning, to connect, to love and to dream -- of a better future for us and our fellow human beings.

Further resources can be found [here](#).

Thank you for your patience with this long message and for your support of our students.

All the best,
Susan

*I have vivid memories of my first semester teaching at Rutgers and how it rapidly became apparent that I had vastly overestimated how much I could teach in a single semester-long course. I had to cut quite a deal and learned a lot about how to prepare for the next semester. And, those were the days of in-person courses using chalkboards. Also, it seems I can't give up writing with footnotes.