

Revised Course Instructional Modes

Implementation Guidance and FAQs

This document is intended to provide guidance to faculty members and academic administrators about course instructional modes.

Instructional modes are intended to improve transparency and accuracy in how instructional delivery is communicated to students, promote consistency across Penn State's campuses, and ensure institutional compliance with external requirements. Faculty retain full authority over course content, learning objectives, instructional methods, and assessment strategies, consistent with approved curricula and policies on academic freedom.

1. Who is responsible for determining the course instruction mode of every course each semester? When and how does this happen? How does the University account for changes in course instructors?

Instructional mode designation is a programmatic and scheduling decision, not an individualized personnel action. Consistent with long-standing practice, these decisions are expected to be made by academic unit heads (i.e., chief academic officers, department and division heads, directors of academic affairs, school directors), deans, and chancellors at the college, campus, or unit level, in consultation with faculty and informed by program learning objectives, accreditation requirements, needs of student populations served, and resource considerations. Decisions about instructional modes should be driven primarily by our commitment to student success and with specific consideration to the listed learning outcomes of the course, both within a specific course and across a course of study.

Neither the Office for Undergraduate Education nor the Fox Graduate School assigns instructional modes to individual course sections (called "classes" in LionPATH). Their role is to provide the definitions and expectations that help ensure transparency and consistency across the institution in support of student success.

In practice, instructional mode decisions should be made through the normal schedule-building process and early enough for published course information to be accurate and useful to students. It is recognized that changes to course instructional mode may occur when unforeseen circumstances arise, including a late change in assigned instructor.

If an instructor is newly assigned to a class shortly before the semester starts, the unit should ensure that the new instructor is aware of the assigned instructional mode for that class and provide support for the instructor's efforts to deliver the course in the mode specified. The instructional mode should only be changed when all other options have been exhausted.

If students are registered in the class when a change is made to the instructional mode prior to the start of the class, units should contact students directly to make them aware of the change in case this affects their selection of course and/or section, given their personal circumstances and preferences as well as any limitations imposed by student aid, scholarships, visa requirements, etc.

2. What recourse do faculty have if their course is scheduled in a course instructional mode that is inconsistent with how they, in their professional judgment, believe the course should be taught?

Faculty should raise concerns through normal academic leadership channels at the unit, campus, or college level well in advance of publication of the semester schedule of classes to preclude any disruption of student schedules. Because instructional mode decisions are made programmatically by academic unit heads, deans, and chancellors, those conversations should focus on alignment with course objectives, accreditation or licensure requirements, student needs and expectations, best practices in teaching, and available resources.

If faculty believe they have not been treated fairly in course planning, faculty are encouraged to first pursue informal resolution in their college via college policies and procedures. They may also avail themselves of the process outlined in Policy AC76, Faculty Rights and Responsibilities.

3. How are these processes to be monitored? Who has oversight and how will they exercise that?

Monitoring and oversight of how these definitions are applied rests primarily through the existing academic and administrative structure at the college, campus, and unit levels.

The main purpose of oversight and monitoring is to support clarity, consistency, and accurate communication to students—not to constrain pedagogy or redefine academic freedom.

Oversight should focus on whether the class as advertised reasonably matches the instructional experience students can expect and whether any needed adjustments are handled transparently and appropriately.

Where recurring concerns emerge, units should address them through regular academic leadership channels, starting with the department/division/campus/school, then through the college and university offices, if necessary.

4. How does the University account for the unexpected – such as, but not limited to, illness, injury, mid-semester changes of instructors, campus-wide closures, and periods of mandatory remote instruction such as were necessary during the global COVID-19 pandemic?

Instructors are expected to deliver their courses as set out in published course schedules and course syllabi.

University-directed remote instruction—for example, weather-related closures, election-day accommodations, or public health mandates—does not count against allowable thresholds.

Instructors are not permitted to change the instructional mode without first consulting with the appropriate academic leader. Temporary deviations resulting from illness, injury, family emergency, or other unforeseen circumstances will be managed through existing academic and administrative processes governing faculty absences and continuity of instruction.

If a new instructor is assigned mid-semester, the goal should generally be to preserve the advertised instructional mode to the extent reasonably possible while allowing limited, good-faith adjustments needed to complete the class responsibly.

5. How will the University address the inequities in resources allocated for instructor substitutions across units and campuses?

Instructional mode decisions are expected to be informed in part by resource considerations and made at the college, campus, or unit level. That framework allows local circumstances to be considered when instructional mode decisions are made and when disruptions occur.

We recognize that not all units and campuses have the same access to substitute instructors, graduate assistants, or other support. We therefore understand that short-term disruptions cannot be handled in the same way across colleges and campuses. The aim is reasonable consistency in standards and student communication, while allowing units to respond in ways that reflect local capacity, disciplinary needs, and practical constraints.