

Course Delivery Modes Task Force Report

Abstract

The Course Delivery Modes Task Force was composed of stakeholders from the Ramapo College community including faculty representing the six units, deans, staff representing various offices on campus, and student representation. The charge of the Course Delivery Modes Task Force was “to undertake a data-informed, disciplined, inclusive, and deliberative process to establish which course delivery modes are most pedagogically effective, best fit our curricula, meet the needs and align with the learning styles of our current and prospective undergraduate and graduate students, and are compatible with the course scheduling and financial needs of the College, as well as our practices related to the assignment of instructors.” Reflective of suggested data recommended for consideration, four subcommittees were formed:

1. Literature Review Subcommittee: focused on collecting and analyzing published scholarly reports and conceptual frameworks
2. Other Institutions Subcommittee: focused on reaching out to and learning from other institutions about their course delivery modes, policies, and procedures
3. Ramapo College Past Data/Reports Subcommittee: Focused on Task Force reports, assessment data, and other relevant information from within the College
4. Ramapo Needs Assessment Subcommittee: focused on reaching out to stakeholders at the College (students, faculty, graduate programs, deans, staff, etc.) to understand and contextualize the issues/concerns around course delivery modes

The Task Force puts forward **two** recommendations for piloting alternative course delivery modes. These recommendations are qualified by the following: 1) All course delivery modes should remain at the discretion of deans and conveners in concert with faculty and the Provost according to programmatic

needs. 2) The appropriate training and resources should be available before faculty can teach these alternative course delivery modes to successfully deliver the course.

- **Recommendation 1:** The College should pilot the **virtual synchronous** course delivery mode.
- **Recommendation 2:** The College should pilot the **virtual hybrid** (aka “blended” combination of virtual synchronous and asynchronous) course delivery mode.

Recommendations with Rationales

The two recommendations to pilot new course delivery modes are highlighted below along with definitions, rationales, and contextualization drawn from the four sub-groups. It is important to note that the data collected by the Task Force are highly influenced by our collective experiences through the COVID-19 pandemic over the past two years. In contrast to the emergency situation where all faculty and students were forced into a virtual classroom environment without training or preparation, these recommendations are focused on the future with a targeted and intentional approach to course delivery modes. Going forward, deans and conveners, alongside faculty and the provost, should be able to make informed decisions about different course delivery mode options. Similarly, when given the choice, students should be able to select the course delivery mode that best suits their learning style and life situation.

Recommendation 1: The College should pilot the *virtual synchronous* course delivery mode.

Definition: Virtual Synchronous courses have regularly scheduled class sessions that meet via video conferencing in a synchronous setting. There are no class meetings on campus.

Rationale:

The Task Force collected data from peer-reviewed literature, on-campus interviews of program directors and staff of supporting programs such as the Office of Specialized Services, and offerings from other academic institutions. In totality, the evidence suggests that piloting virtual synchronous instruction is a worthwhile endeavor under specific conditions. Those conditions include limiting piloting to ensuring appropriate training and resources for faculty teaching virtual synchronous courses and only

offering courses in the virtual synchronous modality that have been selected by the faculty, conveners, and deans with the goal of that mode being chosen for pedagogical reasons.

The literature reviewing the virtual synchronous course delivery mode is supportive of the whole student experience and satisfaction. Still, it rests upon students keeping their video cameras on during the class session. Research showed that synchronous online classes offer a higher level of personal participation ([Hrastinski, 2008](#)), increased social presence ([Daigle & Stuvland, 2021](#)), a higher degree of cognitive presence and interaction ([Molnar & Kearney, 2017](#)), and encourage active learning ([Lockman & Schirmer, 2020](#)). The synergistic relationship between social and cognitive presence is emphasized in synchronous videoconferencing environments ([Blayone et al., 2017](#)). The use of visual cues such as facial expressions and body language, audio cues from direct speech, and the incorporation of text chat foster community and collaborative learning ([Hrastinski, 2008](#); [Rockinson-Szapkiw & Wendt, 2015](#)). Student satisfaction was found to be higher ([He et al., 2021](#)), preferred by students ([Fabrizz 2021](#)), and provided higher satisfaction ratings than face-to-face ([He et al., 2021](#)).

Results regarding how performance and grades were affected were mixed. [Molnar and Kearney \(2017\)](#) found that synchronous classes positively impacted final grades, and [Daigel and Stuvland \(2021\)](#) noted that increased social presence through synchronous online meetings enabled student performance to match that of students in face-to-face classes. [Martin et al. \(2021\)](#) found that synchronous learning improved cognitive outcomes.

However, [Fabrizz et al. \(2021\)](#) found no difference between learning gains when comparing synchronous and asynchronous modes. Synchronous distance education was not significantly different from traditional education ineffectiveness ([He et al., 2021](#)). Another study found no significant difference between synchronous and asynchronous in terms of academic achievement, student satisfaction, or classroom community ([McCracken & Olson, 2013](#)).

Synchronous teaching is less demanding of faculty members than asynchronous ([Molnar & Kearney, 2017](#)). [Martin et al. \(2021\)](#) found synchronous learning more effective for graduate and professional students than for younger students.

The Course Delivery Modes Task Force found that most other academic institutions, including potential competitors such as Montclair State University, offer virtual synchronous courses. When considering Ramapo College-specific data, the Task Force found numerous deans and program directors who expressed advantages and concerns regarding using virtual synchronous courses during the pandemic. Advantages included the flexibility and convenience of the mode and its ability to still give students a “live” experience. Concerns included that some students did not keep their cameras on, certain class structures such as labs can not be offered virtually due to equipment access, and a perception that students were less engaged. However, these concerns may be pandemic specific and will be adequately addressed by the conditions outlined in the recommendations. For example, during the pandemic faculty and students of all courses were required on an emergency basis to switch to virtual synchronous courses regardless of the faculty member’s training or the fit for the particular course for that modality. Students were often resistant to turning on their cameras for a host of reasons during this emergency switch; however, if virtual synchronous is the selected mode the expectation will be clear that students’ cameras must be on for the full class session. Also, this modality will be restricted to specific courses at the selection/approval of faculty, conveners, and deans for pedagogical reasons. Although it may only be a small number of programs/courses that select to utilize the virtual synchronous course delivery mode, it is essential that programs that would benefit from its availability not be denied because it is not the right choice for most courses. Its utilization would remain in the hands of faculty, conveners, directors, and deans with the best interests of each program in mind.

Recommendation 2: The College should pilot the *virtual hybrid* (aka “blended” combination of virtual synchronous and asynchronous) course delivery mode.

Definition: Virtual Hybrid courses have regularly scheduled class sessions that meet via video conferencing in a synchronous setting, along with asynchronous class sessions akin to a traditional hybrid course. There are no class meetings on campus.

Rationale:

By utilizing both synchronous and asynchronous approaches the virtual hybrid course delivery mode can offer the benefits of flexibility while also engaging students. [Heilporn \(2021\)](#) notes the importance of utilizing both synchronous and asynchronous modes in order to optimize student engagement. In fact, students preferred the blended approach, and found social and emotional connections, relationships, and group interactions to be lacking in asynchronous settings ([Moallem, 2015](#)). Blended virtual classes that mix synchronous and asynchronous teaching were found to result in a positive effect on final grades as well as student satisfaction ([Daigel & Stuvland, 2021](#)). When synchronous components are integrated with asynchronous features, online courses are more engaging, increasing learning outcomes, positive attitudes, and retention ([Martin et al., 2020](#)). [Nieuwoudt \(2020\)](#) found that it is important for students to attend class, but it does not necessarily make a difference whether students attend synchronous virtual classes or watch the recordings of the virtual classes. A significant relationship was found between academic success and the number of hours students participated in and interacted with the online learning system. Academic success may be increased by providing various options for students to participate and interact online, and to attend classes synchronously or asynchronously.

The virtual hybrid course delivery mode offers faculty, program directors, and deans considerable flexibility on how each course will design the balance of synchronous and asynchronous activities to meet the required course hours. Some Ramapo College stakeholders expressed concerns regarding student engagement as an issue with online courses and the research suggests this mode might be an optimal offering to address those concerns. It may also be a more engaging choice of courses offered in the winter and summer sessions to increase student engagement as compared to a completely asynchronous course delivery mode.

Hyflex Considerations

A “hyflex” course gives students the option to attend scheduled synchronous classes in-person or online, potentially under specific conditions set by the instructor. A hyflex course could also give students the opportunity to “attend” class sessions asynchronously by watching a recorded video of the class or completing equivalent asynchronous work. While not considered a course delivery mode per se, instructors could have the option of making their course hyflex, enabling students some flexibility in how they attend synchronous classes.

The hyflex course delivery is one of the most recent developments in higher education. Designed to maximize flexibility for students, hyflex courses enable students to choose how they want to experience the course: in-person, online, or even asynchronously. Certain conditions can be set by the instructor (eg, students attending remotely must keep their cameras turned on for the entire class). The hyflex option allows learning in a flexible way so that students can either attend face-to-face class sessions, participate online (synchronously or asynchronously), or do both according to their learning needs and availability ([Lakhal et al., 2017](#)). Learning environments which combine synchronous and asynchronous activities and are situated on a continuum between face-to-face and online teaching and learning have the potential to optimize student engagement ([Graham, 2019](#); [Halverson & Graham, 2019](#); [Manwaring et al., 2017](#)), in ([Heilporn et al., 2021](#)).

Possible concerns or challenges of hyflex courses include a lack of institutional recognition for the amount of effort and investment required for a successful hyflex experience; management of online students and face-to-face students at the same time; and students’ level of technological skills. A hyflex course design also demands much more physical and social preparation than courses in a single modality ([Lakhal et al., 2017](#)). Faculty self-efficacy must be one of the first barriers to address, since faculty with previous negative experiences with technology might face increased obstacles, and support staff must recognize the level of comfort needed for faculty to be open to adoption and revision of technical tools

([Buchanan et al., 2013](#); [Reid, 2017](#)).

Through outreach to other institutions, it is clear that hyflex course design requires a significant investment of money, time, and space. For example, Eastern Michigan University is creating state-of-the-art classrooms (each costing approximately \$15,000-20,000) with smart monitors and multiple nimble cameras and microphones that follow the speaker. UNCC has a media production team and several instructional designers on staff who assist faculty in designing and delivering high quality, multimedia experiences in a hyflex setting.

It seems clear that the hyflex option is a highly specialized experience that requires a creative and tech-savvy instructor combined with advanced technology to ensure each class runs smoothly for students in class and those online.

Qualifications

1) All course delivery modes should remain at the discretion of deans and conveners in concert with faculty and the Provost according to programmatic needs.

Rationale:

This qualification simply reiterates the current state of affairs at the College when it comes to determining which delivery mode is best suited for a specific course. The alternative course delivery modes suggested for piloting by the Task Force would add additional options for programs, but the designation of any course delivery mode should be based on programmatic needs in consultation with the faculty and with approval by the Dean and with accreditation standards in mind. At the same time, a faculty member should never be forced to teach in a delivery mode with which they are unfamiliar, uncomfortable, or untrained. Particularly in a graduate or advanced undergraduate course with multiple

sections, the opportunity is there for deans, conveners, and faculty to provide students with different options based on their learning styles and life situations.

Regarding the recommended course levels for piloting alternative course delivery modes, there was not a consensus among the Task Force members. Some members expressed concern about the culture of the College; in order to preserve a sense of on-campus community they advocated for piloting new course delivery modes with graduate and advanced undergraduate courses (300 and 400 level). Other members advocated for piloting new course delivery modes across all course levels, including introductory undergraduate courses (100 and 200 level). Since we already offer introductory courses online (ONL), then it is reasonable to explore alternative course delivery modes that offer increased opportunities for synchronous learning and contact with the instructor.

2) The appropriate training and resources should be available before faculty can teach these alternative course delivery modes to successfully deliver the course.

Rationale:

The undertaking of these alternative course delivery modes requires extensive faculty training and investment in resources and new technologies. As we learned from the virtual learning “experiment” forced by the pandemic, some instructors have more skills and experience with virtual instruction than others. Even these tech-savvy instructors need support and training regarding instructional design, collaboration and community in a virtual learning environment, and effective ways to manage the course. The Instructional Design Center and Faculty Resource Center will need to establish workshops, conferences, and other opportunities for instructors to be trained in these new modalities.