

SMC ETHICS

Continuing a Dialogue on What We Do and How We Do It

Free to Explore:

Academic freedom gives us the amazing chance to explore new communication tools better suited to our students. For example, Pronto is a program that allows faculty to contact students via a phone application, almost as if you're texting the student. Pronto promotes equity as it helps reach minoritized students who may not have as much familiarity with using email, but are very familiar with texting. Google's Jamboard is a feature that functions like a virtual poster board. It appeals to visual learners while facilitating closing equity gaps by providing asynchronous accessibility for all voices in the class to be heard via adding virtual post-it notes. Flipgrid is a program that allows students to create mini-video recordings of their responses to a prompt, which not only humanizes the online experience but also promotes equity through both its asynchronous learning capabilities and low stakes engagement of casual conversation.

Besides trying out new technology, you could also try out new ways of grading. One popular alternative to the traditional way of grading is [contract grading](#). Rather than basing a final grade on a possibly mystifying system

Equity, Online Education, and Academic Freedom: Supporting Innovation

Academic freedom, though often threatened and in need of strong defense, remains an essential right we have as college instructors that is protected by SMC Board policy. This freedom includes not only the selection of course content based on our expertise but also the methods of instruction and pedagogy we adopt, as long as they remain within the limitations of the Course Outline of Record (COR). Different departments of course encourage different levels of variation on that content and pedagogy, but this freedom remains one of the greatest aspects of being an instructor at the college level.

In this newsletter over the last few years, we have regularly promoted deep reflection on how we approach and carry out our teaching duties. Aiming at a more equitable college environment and struggling through the pandemic-induced shift to online education, we have argued that there can be no "return to normal" if we wish to best serve all our students and improve student success.

In practice, that means SMC must continue to develop a radically innovative and fluid educational environment that continuously promotes, accepts, and reflects on experimentation in both the what and the how of teaching. Rather than resisting or being scared of this change, we should learn to be excited about the fresh ideas and techniques our colleagues are bringing not only to their students but also to their teaching peers. No doubt some of these new proposals will easily fit into our pre-established framework and be easily accepted, but others will at first seem a

of points and percentages, contract grading transparently spells out in a “contract” what students need to do over the course of the semester to earn a specific letter grade. For example, successfully completing a certain number of tasks will result in a C, completing a larger number of tasks will result in a B, etc. Proponents of contract grading argue that this kind of transparency increases equity by giving students a greater sense of control over their grades, rather than feeling their grade is based on the whims of their professor or the vagaries of a complex grading formula. Some instructors have even questioned their role as assessor, exploring new ideas around [ungrading](#), which in essence hands students the role of grading themselves in order to help them to engage authentically with their own learning, rather than fixating on a grade.

Making these kinds of changes means venturing into the unknown a bit, which can be scary, frustrating, and time-consuming. Integrating new technology or innovative grading practices also means that students have to learn something else besides your course content, adding to their cognitive load. Therefore, it’s probably best to make adjustments incrementally, but ultimately improving our teaching with equity in mind is worth it.

challenge to things we deeply hold on to as teachers who have been shaped by decades of our own educational experiences.

Nonetheless, if we can operate with good faith about our peers’ intentions and professionalism, this is a chance to see academic freedom at its best, furthering not just the production of scholarly knowledge but its effective transmission to our students. But for this process to best succeed, we should go beyond just respecting the academic freedom of our colleagues in how they approach their classes. We should learn to appreciate what might initially feel unfamiliar or disruptive on the assumption that improvement may mean taking the risk of failure, but that as long as we all engage in this enterprise together in a serious and thoughtful manner, we can make progress that will produce real advancement for our students. We also must make sure that all faculty, whether tenured or part-time, feel secure and supported when introducing bold new ideas into their approach to the classroom.

Faced with startling data about our equity gaps or striving to connect with our students in an online environment, it can often feel like we are catching up or reactively adapting to circumstances forced upon us. But if we look at and recognize the energy and creativity our peers are putting into these challenges, and if we can put aside any of our reservations about educational change, we can see this is an exciting time to be teachers and the perfect illustration of the need for academic freedom. Without any sacrifice of our critical integrity, we can learn to learn from each other without feeling threatened by the new. Whether it is rethinking attendance policies when giving on-ground classes in a pandemic, exploring contract grading that is so counterintuitive to those used to a grading scale, attending a seminar on Decolonizing the Academy, or testing out the newest technologies like Pronto, there are colleagues out there exploring these notions and willing to help out, if we only let them.

Related Links:

[SMC Board Policy on Academic Freedom](#)

[ASCCC Position Paper on Academic Freedom Co-authored by Former Academic Senate President Nate Donahue and the 2019-20 ASCCC Educational Policies Committee](#)

[Equity Speaks/Research Roundtable: Academic Freedom with an Equity Lens](#)