Report: Spring 2021 Faculty Discussion Sessions on Academic Engagement

Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship
June 11, 2021

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Introduction

This report outlines major themes in adjustments to teaching practices emerging from the Spring 2021 Faculty Discussion Sessions (FDS). These discussion sessions centered on eliciting practices that faculty intend to retain when students return to campus for in-person learning. The FDS are a feedback mechanism for CNDLS to record teaching practices and what impact these practices have on students, the classroom environment, learning, and the instructors themselves. The FDS also serve as informal, conversational spaces for faculty to meet colleagues, and to share strategies and advice across departments and schools.

Table 1: Faculty Discussion Sessions participants in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021

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The past semester was the second semester of the FDS dual support/assessment programming offered jointly by CNDLS and OADS. Overall, we offered 7 discussion groups in late March and early April 2021 with 28 faculty from 7 schools ultimately participating. 7 faculty were repeat participants from Fall 2020 (25%). Faculty represented 83 courses taught at Georgetown in Spring 2021. Table 1 shows a breakdown of faculty participants in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 by affiliation type and school. For the full methodology, see Appendix A.

The Faculty Discussion Sessions began in Fall 2020 as a way to hear faculty perspectives on the Academic Engagement Student Survey data, when we recognized the potential for new information from the rich narratives of teaching and comparative discussions of practices only possible through bringing faculty together for a conversation on teaching and learning during this time. For the full text of the Fall 2020 Faculty Discussion Sessions report, see Appendix B.

In the Spring 2021 semester, each session was facilitated by 1-2 CNDLS staff members, averaged 4 participants per session, and lasted approximately 90 minutes. During each session,
participants engaged in discussion around four key questions designed to elicit valuable feedback and on what adjustments they made during this year and which of these may represent long-term changes to their teaching practices. Two additional questions were also asked concerning what faculty will remember most and where they found support during this time. The key questions appear in the order in which they were asked below:

1. What were some of the adjustments you made this semester to your course schedule, assignments, or class sessions?
2. Which, if any, new practices do you think you will carry forward into your teaching in future semesters, even as we return to in-person learning?
3. In five years time looking back on this year, what will you most remember about your experience teaching during a pandemic?
4. Where have you found or received support for yourself during this time?

Three themes in adjustment of teaching practices

This report defines prominent themes and outlines key practices commonly cited by faculty. Across all four key questions (and especially focusing on key questions #1 and #2), these three overarching themes emerged when discussing effective course adaptations this semester; faculty viewed these themes as principles worthwhile to carry forward into future semesters:

- Theme A: Flexibility and student feedback
- Theme B: Social learning, community building, and connection
- Theme C: Intentional uses of time

It is clear from our analysis that practices instantiating one or more of these themes contributed to faculty’s successful adaptation to virtual teaching during the 2020-2021 year. Moreover, the practices faculty reported they will retain in future semesters may be especially likely to be those that incorporate multiple themes simultaneously. After an overview of the themes and subthemes we identified, we outline five key practices that span multiple themes.

Theme A: Flexibility and student feedback

Flexibility for students was a clear theme among faculty responses. Flexibility was mentioned as a consideration in teaching, design, and classroom environment practices such as assessment, grading and deadlines, office hours, participation in synchronous sessions, alternatives to synchronous participation, and independent work. Many of the practices around flexibility that faculty introduced were reported to have emerged from the process of gathering student feedback and learning more about students’ support needs, leading faculty to report a greater level of student influence on course planning, pacing, and content selection than in pre-pandemic semesters.
Designing in flexibilities for students

A key component of this flexibility for students was the role of student choice and student voice in course pacing and flow, assignment options, and format of synchronous sessions. A few faculty mentioned giving students the options of whether to attend class synchronously and/or to alternatively complete work asynchronously. Some faculty reported they found themselves paying more attention to student engagement, including monitoring student energy levels or soliciting feedback on their students’ motivation and support needs. In our Fall 2020 discussion groups, faculty reported challenges in both gauging and generating student engagement in Zoom. In Spring discussions, we noted a slight shift from this challenge framing to a more optimistic framing highlighting the incorporation of flexibility as a means to engage and to care for students. While comments along the lines of challenges persisted in Spring 2021, many faculty participants implemented new accountability and feedback structures that encouraged student engagement and allowed faculty new metrics with which to monitor engagement. Simply put, this semester faculty have adapted and incorporated new tools for a more structured approach to collecting student feedback on their engagement.

Rethinking presentation of materials and class flow

Faculty reported finding that paying attention to student engagement suggested making adjustments to course pacing throughout the semester, including, for a few faculty, pauses in coursework or synchronous sessions during the semester when they thought their students were feeling fatigued, overwhelmed, or demoralized. A couple of faculty participants reported canceling a synchronous class session spontaneously when they sensed a low student energy level or a high amount of student stress. These light work days were reported by many faculty participants, though most undertook them in a more scheduled way at the encouragement of the administration. A couple faculty members reported they were happier to “go with the flow” during synchronous lectures than in pre-pandemic semantics, pacing the synchronous time in a way that was informed by perceptions of student engagement and allowing for more discussion.

Scaffolding and adaptation of assessments and projects

Some faculty also described how they scaffolded student work. For example, long paper assignments became shorter and more structured assignments throughout the semester coupled with ample feedback. Group work and team activities done in synchronous breakout rooms were given new structures and accountability mechanisms, such as question prompts, collaborative Google Docs, and assigned outputs such as reflection posts or presentations -- one faculty member noted that this was a change from his less structured breakout room use in Fall 2020 that he deemed less successful. Choice among formats for assignments and assessments, as well as assignment deadlines, were noted as other areas where some faculty made adjustments from previous semesters, noting that this adjustment was at the encouragement of messaging from GU administration or was in response to perceptions of student stress, fatigue, and/or external commitments. One faculty member reported converting a previous assessment into a “team test” so that students could collaborate in small groups of peers to complete it, while other faculty reported that take-home open-book exams worked well.
Virtual office hours (expanded availability)

The incorporation of virtual office hours was so successful that many faculty participants reported being interested in continuing it in future semesters. Faculty participants reported that virtual office hours, whether over zoom or by phone, allowed them an expanded availability to meet with students, given that they did not need to be present on campus for meetings. They were also able to be more accommodating of students’ availability to meet, for much the same reason. A few faculty members imagined the flexibility introduced by the virtual office hours format would continue to benefit students in future semesters who may have other commitments off campus, such as internships in other areas of the city.

Theme B: Social learning, community building, and connection

Community-building was a persistent topic across the discussion sessions. Faculty across groups reported finding that the best use of synchronous class time harnessed the social nature of time spent together as a group. Faculty developed activities and structures for synchronous class sessions and asynchronous interactions with and between students that supported belonging and social well-being, developed community, and connected students to faculty, each other, and connected course content to students’ lived experiences and the outside world. Within each subtheme below, faculty reported intending to retain adjusted practices into future in-person semesters.

Focus on student motivation and well-being

Faculty seemed to recognize their role in supporting student motivation and well-being through connection. Like in the two previous pandemic semesters, some faculty reported adopting the practice of reaching out to individual students in classes or by email on a regular basis to check-in and to provide support and encouragement where needed. The use of extensive pre-surveys to gauge student motivation and support needs continued to be a common practice among the faculty in these sessions. One faculty member also reported assigning email check-ins to her students to reach out to and connect with one another over the course of the semester.

Connection of course content to students’ lived experiences

A powerful factor in connecting with and motivating students reported by some faculty was the connection of course content to students’ lived experiences. A commonly cited method for doing so was the use of guest speakers, as discussed in greater detail in the next section. A few faculty reported revamping assignments, assessments, and projects for the first time to explicitly address current events including the COVID-19 pandemic, social change, and the political climate. Other faculty reported making more space for students’ interests and identities outside of class to inform their work on assignments and projects. Reflection activities as a companion to assigned readings were also used by some faculty to tie course content to students’ lived experiences as a way to facilitate deeper learning.
Building community during class time

Some of the components faculty reported building into class for the first time this semester or continuing in use from Fall 2020 were warm-up activities and in-class small group assignments. For some faculty, community building activities—sometimes even largely non-academic community building activities—were a completely new use of synchronous class time. Some faculty reported that they found themselves cutting down on the amount of course content they expected to cover with students during class time in order to make more time and space for community building activities, while other faculty reported decreasing the duration of their lectures, or even pre-recording lectures to be watched asynchronously, for the same purposes. Multiple faculty shared that non-academic community-building activities early on in the synchronous class session and/or early on in the semester did not detract from their students’ engagement in academic content but rather facilitated it. Faculty reported more in-depth class discussion, more students contributing to the discussion, more students asking questions during class, more students attending virtual office hours, or more productive group work sessions, and many directly attributed these outcomes to the time they prioritized for community-building during synchronous class sessions.

Small group work

One of the resources faculty drew on for community building was the Zoom breakout room. Faculty reported incorporating more structure for community building and connection into Zoom breakout rooms than they had in previous remote semesters. A few faculty reported maintaining consistent breakout room groups throughout the semester so that students could form small communities within the larger class. Some faculty shared that they structured the use of breakout rooms through crafting question prompts for students to consider together coupled with a shared Google Doc or Jamboard to encourage students to engage with one another and prevent an awkward silence. Other faculty imposed the accountability mechanism of a report-out from breakout rooms, where groups could nominate one member to be the presenter of what they discussed. Small group work that was more structured, considered ways for students to become more comfortable with one another, and included some kind of accountability mechanism were seemingly more successful than previous iterations of small group work faculty attempted that provided less of each of these components. Some faculty imagined translating the structures they’ve created for Zoom breakout rooms into structures for in-person small group work in class in future semesters.

Virtual office hours (building individual relationships)

While virtual office hours instantiates the theme of increased flexibility as described in the section above, faculty also mentioned how virtual office hours afforded an opportunity to talk with students in a more informal manner, which fostered individual relationships. Some faculty hypothesized that the informality of the virtual office hours environment (as compared to traditional in-person office hours) led students to be more willing to attend—either to ask questions about course content and assignments or just to talk with faculty about their experiences in the class and in life outside of class. Faculty used this time to be present for
students for any course-related questions; yet, faculty often also used virtual office hours for checking in with students on how they were doing in their home environments or how they were doing in other classes. In addition to the use of virtual office hours, a few faculty reported organizing social Zoom gatherings outside of class time for students, and multiple faculty reported being pleased at finding that their students had set up a groupme account or other organic web forum to connect with classmates asynchronously (whether that faculty member was included or not).

Theme C: Intentional uses of time

The past year forced faculty to consider the overall question of instructional time and how faculty and students should use their time effectively for learning in the virtual environment. “Flipped learning” or “flipped classroom” models privilege synchronous class time for community-building, collaborative and social learning while asynchronous time focuses on individual preparation, reviewing lecture content, readings, or short, formative exercises. Evidence of the success of this approach was present across discussion groups for both undergraduate and graduate classes and for both small and large enrollments. Of note, faculty who reported the incorporation of “flipped classroom” practices may be instantiating a broader change towards a more thoughtful and intentional consideration of the suitability of in-class (‘synchronous’) and outside-of-class (‘asynchronous’) time for particular learning activities. Faculty reflections on how time would be used in-class and out-of-class reflected a closer alignment with the backward design approach to teaching: attuning activities to course learning goals.

The flipped practices faculty adopted in Spring included: incorporating video lecture content or other interactive content for asynchronous learning; devoting more time for students to work on independent projects; using office hours check-ins in lieu of synchronous class time, and using class time for group activities or guest speakers rather than a traditional one-way instructor-to-student delivery of content such as a lecture. The accumulation of these practices contribute to the well-researched idea of teaching as a form of interactive facilitation rather than transmission of content. Faculty interest in continuing this form of facilitation in future semesters was evident across groups.

Streamlining and intentionality in content and technologies

With learning goals and engagement in mind, faculty reported streamlining and simplifying course content and use of technology altogether this semester—either conducting class in a more streamlined way than they would have in a fully in-person class or even streamlining from a

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1 “Flipped classroom” and “flipping” were the terms used by faculty in these sessions to indicate a move of additional course content to asynchronous time to create space in synchronous time for social learning activities. See, Talbert, R. (2017). Flipped learning: A guide for higher education faculty. Stylus Publishing, LLC; Lo, C. K., Hew, K. F., & Chen, G. (2017). Toward a set of design principles for mathematics flipped classrooms: A synthesis of research in mathematics education. Educational Research Review, 22, 50-73.
more complex use of course technologies in the previous remote semesters of teaching. For various faculty, this streamlining included cutting down on the variety of course activities to focus on key readings, providing fewer course materials and supplements in order to enable students to understand the overall structure of the course and focus on the essentials, or reducing amount of course content they expected to cover and/or assess during the semester. In addition to the perception among some faculty that streamlining of course content allowed students to better understand what was expected of them in the course and to engage more deeply in a more manageable space, other faculty found that streamlining course content and course technology was the only way to counterbalance the time necessary for a more humanized class that made space for social connection and individual and collective well-being among the class as a community.

Some faculty remarked that the streamlining and simplifying process they undertook led them to systematically consider the content they were presenting and how they were presenting it, as well as the relationship between the course content and use of course time with the learning goals they had for students. Some faculty reported more intentionality in how content was presented, even in the case of imposing clearer structures and organization on lecture powerpoints carried forward from previous semesters of the course. Though no participant used the word ‘intentionality’ themselves when describing the reconfiguration and streamlining of their course content, a few faculty across groups reported they were reflecting on their content and class materials in this way and redesigning accordingly for the first time this semester.

*Synchronous time: discussion and engagement*

Intentionality also showed up to more of an extent in synchronous class sessions than even in previous semesters during the pandemic period for some faculty. Some faculty reported planning out structures, prompts, and expectations for in-class group work for the first time this semester upon finding unstructured breakout room time to not be as productive.\(^2\) A wide swath of faculty participants cut back on lecture content in synchronous class sessions in order to privilege in-class time for class discussions and activities to engage students. While some faculty reported cutting back on breadth of topics covered during the semester, other faculty reported covering the same number of topics as in previous non-pandemic semesters, but in less depth.

As discussed earlier in this report, faculty reported that they prioritized community building and student engagement in synchronous class sessions through the use of warm-up activities (“ice-breakers”), breakout rooms with consistent membership, class discussions, and student presentations. Social interaction was not restricted to academic discussion, but included non-academic interactions where students and faculty connected with each other as whole selves. Some faculty noted that their ability to effectively manage the synchronous remote classroom improved as they finally mastered the learning curve on new educational technologies they had begun incorporating in the previous two semesters.

\(^2\) We must also say here that other faculty participants reported being more willing to “go with the flow” of discussions in class this semester, in contrast to the faculty who imposed more -- not less -- structure on the synchronous session.
Asynchronous time: pre-recorded lectures and independent work

Many faculty reported pre-recording lectures and requiring viewing prior to the synchronous class session, giving the reason that group work and group discussions were a better use of Zoom time than presenting lecture content. Some faculty wondered whether they would continue to relegate lecture content to asynchronous work outside of class time in future semesters to prioritize collaboration and discussion in class, perceiving in-person lectures to be capable of being more engaging and interactive than Zoom lectures, and consequently anticipating returning to a more traditional class model with in-person lecturing in future semesters. Other faculty observed that offloading lecture content was a great way to make more time for guest speakers during synchronous class time, with inclusion of guest speakers being a popular topic for practices that will continue in future semesters.

Faculty gave shorter lectures in class on zoom, shared short pre-recorded lectures to be viewed asynchronously, or assigned video resources for student viewing prior to class. One faculty member noted that the purpose of the short videos she assigned outside of class was to induce a leveling effect among students to provide a baseline level of knowledge on a given topic to all students in the class with varying academic backgrounds. Many faculty participants noted that synchronous class sessions were recorded not just so that absent students could watch classes they had not attended but so that students could go back and review class sessions prior to assessments.

Moreover, faculty in multiple discussion groups reported giving students in their classes more opportunities to conduct independent research during the semester—sometimes pausing synchronous class sessions altogether and substituting independent or small group office hours to support individual students’ research explorations and progress on independent research projects.

Use of guest speakers

A guest speaker anywhere in the world with a Zoom link was able to easily join for lectures, discussions, and activities. In some cases, faculty were able to assemble panels of guest speakers, while in other cases, faculty called upon former students who are now Georgetown alumni to return to class and share advice from their experiences with current students. For some faculty, this was possible for the first time through the use of Zoom for synchronous class sessions.

Some faculty described helping students prepare to engage with the guest speaker through readings and/or writing assignments, while other faculty assigned pre-recorded lectures or other videos (either produced by themselves or widely available elsewhere such as Youtube) for students to watch prior to engaging with the guest speaker. Rebuilding the flow of the course session around one or multiple guest speakers was a way to structure time, and it prompted faculty to consider the connection between learning goals, content, and applied practice through the guest speaker.
Key Practices

The analysis team discovered that many practices faculty found to be effective addressed multiple themes at once. The practices represent strategies that faculty participants said they would bring forward into future semesters, suggesting that the three themes of flexibility and student feedback, community/connection, and the intentional use of time will continue to be important influences in pedagogical and course design decisions and may lead to lasting changes to practice. The practices also echo the findings of the Fall 2020 faculty discussion sessions, which identified that virtual, flexible office hours, soliciting frequent feedback from students, creating connections, supporting small group work during class, and bringing in guest speakers via Zoom were all techniques that faculty planned to keep once teaching again face to face.

Key Practice 1: Virtual office hours

Virtual office hours was one of the most common practices cited in response to the questions about what worked well this semester and what faculty would keep in future semesters. Faculty found that students were visiting virtual office hours more often than the face-to-face office hours of previous semesters, attributing this to the flexibility and accessibility of the Zoom and/or phone format, letting the student join easily and letting the faculty member expand their office hours time as needed without any need for either to be in a specific location on campus. In addition, some faculty noted that the informality of the format, which could take the form of group office hours, drop-in sessions, or individual check-ins, led to students feeling less intimidated about showing up. The flexibility and openness of virtual office hours, plus in some cases a requirement by faculty that students attend at least once, therefore led to an increased use of office hours by many students, which faculty felt increased the connection between students and faculty and the ability of the course instructor to better support their students.

Key Practice 2: Pre-surveys

Faculty across multiple groups reported administering pre-course surveys. The nature of these efforts to elicit information and feedback from students in advance of class address both the theme of flexibility and the theme of connection. By administering a pre-survey asking questions having to do with students’ interest and experience with the course content, as well as inquiring of any supports or accommodations students will need during the semester to participate fully, faculty reported gaining useful information at the beginning of the semester that went on to guide adjustments they made to their courses. The pre-survey also served as a device to facilitate a one-on-one relationship between the instructor and each of their students—in getting to know their students better, instructors initiated a connection between themselves and their students as whole people and showed each of their students, at the very beginning of the semester, that one-on-one communication was possible and valued and that supporting and attending to each student’s learning needs was something they cared about.
Key Practice 3: In-class polls, pauses, and check-ins

In-class polls, pauses, and check-ins about how students were feeling about the course, and feeling in general, also instantiated both themes of flexibility and connection. Some faculty reported that they would do this at the start of class, while other faculty reported that they would do this to break up longer lectures or in the midst of switching between lectures and other learning activities. Through taking a five or so minute pause in synchronous class time to ask a question or two concerning not just pacing of the course content, but student well-being, motivation, interest, energy level and other factors related to students’ engagement and learning, faculty elicited information from students that was important in guiding the iterative design of flexibilities, pacing, and scaffolding into the course while they also represented to students the social participatory nature of the learning environment, the class as a community, and the consideration of the well-being needs of students being antecedent to learning. These time-tested ‘active learning’ techniques also themselves modulated intervals of more passive learning activities, such as watching a lecture, prompting student engagement and interaction as individuals with the instructor or as a class community.

Key Practice 4: Guest speakers via Zoom

Faculty reported discovering the power of inviting a guest speaker to class as a way to connect course content to the world outside of the classroom. Many faculty said that the practice of inviting guest speakers to attend Zoom synchronous sessions would be something they will continue to incorporate into future semesters of their courses. The ability to use the Zoom platform for a synchronous class session even in a fully in-person class allows a guest speaker to join from anywhere in the world without needing a budget for a formal invite to campus. The practice of including a guest speaker addresses all three overarching themes presented above: it (a) addresses flexibility through its modulation of the flow of the semester by interrupting any monotony in the format or content of synchronous class sessions; (b) addresses connection by allowing students to connect course content to the world outside of the classroom and potentially even their own lived experiences, as well as to build relationships with scholars and practitioners across the globe that they would not otherwise have had a chance to meet; and (c) in some cases, it is a more intentional use of class time and even serves as an example of a ‘flipped classroom’ when faculty also reported assigning readings or asynchronous independent work to be completed prior to a synchronous class session featuring a guest speaker.

Key Practice 5: ‘Flipped classroom’

Faculty reported that they reflected on their learning goals for students and reconsidered their students’ needs for support in meeting those goals. Where flexibility could assist students to better learn content, such as in the form of a short pre-recorded lecture to be watched prior to synchronous class discussion, a class recording able to be rewatched while studying for assessments, the inclusion of a new edtech tool facilitating students’ deeper engagement with course content, or additional scaffolding on assignments and assessments that provided students with clearer expectations and more feedback, which in turn led to final outputs of a
higher caliber, faculty incorporated those flexibilities as part of what many named as a ‘flipped classroom’ model.

Faculty across groups reported offloading content to asynchronous learning, privileging space in synchronous sessions for class discussions, community building, and small group learning activities. When content was moved to asynchronous time, this provided students with the flexibility to engage in coursework independently according to their availability and capacity to do so, which was not always aligned with the timing of a synchronous class session given e.g., difference in time zone or various responsibilities at home. The ‘flipped classroom’ practices that surfaced throughout the sessions are themselves a representation of all three themes. Faculty participants —those teaching large and small classes, lectures and seminars, introductory and advanced classes, undergraduate and graduate classes—reported being interested in retaining ‘flipped’ pedagogies in future semesters.

Additional Findings

In addition to the themes and key practices presented above, faculty responded to a question about where they found sources of support over the last year and voiced concerns about the transition back to on-campus, in-person and/or hybrid teaching in the fall.

Faculty feelings of support

Faculty felt supported over the last year in numerous ways by the university, colleagues, and by their own family and friend support networks. They felt supported pedagogically through numerous CNDLS offerings, mentioning in particular the Course Design Institutes (CDI), CNDLS office hours, workshops and web resources. ITAs were also often mentioned as an invaluable course support for those who had them; many faculty who had ITA support would like this to continue as they anticipate challenges in navigating the classroom technology with some remote students. Comments were voiced about how the GU faculty community came together in a new way and how their department came together during the CDI experience. Many faculty felt supported by colleagues through the MCEF-CNDLS Instructional Continuity Forum and some, though not all, felt supported by departmental conversations, such as those that checked-in with adjuncts and allowed them to meet each other.

“I think, deep down inside, if you really press them, I think most faculty are appreciative of what the University has tried to do well; I am. And I’ve always been impressed with Georgetown’s sense of responsibility for its community, and the fact that very early on Jack came out and said, you know don’t worry nobody’s going to get fired; I mean we’re going to do what we have to do and I think that meant a lot to a lot

3 Importantly, student survey results have shown that the pursuit of this model may lead to an increase in student workload if the synchronous class time is not balanced in order to accommodate the additional asynchronous worktime asked of students. Some faculty reported success with shortening class periods and asking students to watch pre-recorded lectures outside of class, or forgoing one class session each week in lieu of asynchronous coursework.
of people. I think that made a big impression upon people that we are one community where we’re going to sink or swim together and that came from the top, all the way down, you know. So I don’t have any specific things I think you guys should be doing, other than you know, trying to maintain that ethos.”

However, a number of critiques were also voiced where support for faculty was lacking. The top issue was that faculty wanted more support from the administration for themselves. Some faculty felt like the message from the administration was to be there for students, but no one was there for them or paying attention to faculty wellness. Faculty also personally felt the negative effects of Georgetown Redeploy, understaffing, and the hiring freeze because it meant they bore increasing levels of administrative burdens, leading to increased feelings of support systems being taken away during this time.

“I found myself struggling a bit because I felt like we were the lifeline to students and looking out for everyone and making accommodations and bending over backwards and being accommodating and being flexible and being understanding. Yet I didn’t feel like anyone was that way for me and their expectations of me being able to do all of those things so it’s been tough.”

Concerns about transitioning to in-person teaching

Faculty expressed concern about a number of aspects of returning to in-person teaching on campus. Some anticipated technical support challenges when they return to the classrooms and hoped that there will be robust in-the-moment classroom support from CETS. Those who have had ITAs are hopeful this program will continue. Some faculty have concerns about hybrid teaching and what it will mean in the context of the flexibility and accommodation they have afforded students during the pandemic. Faculty voiced a desire to retain many of the benefits of the teaching changes they have made over the last year, many of which we have outlined in this report, but were wondering how to effectively transition use of the technology tools and techniques to in-person teaching.

Conclusion

These Spring Faculty Discussion Sessions afforded an opportunity to capture and document key practices among faculty during this challenging year of virtual teaching and learning. Across the discussion groups, three themes emerged from our analysis: flexibility for students, social and collaborative learning, and a renewed intentionality to how instructional time can be viewed. These practices and themes represent a renewed focus on students and in particular, the faculty-student relationship the virtual learning environment necessitated. One participant noted, “The humanity and the grace and the vulnerability that we’ve all been able to share with one another ... maybe in some ways that’s been better for the professor-student relationship, I mean we’re all kind of in this together. And I think the fact that people show up regularly and do their best under circumstances that are not easy, I think has been a very important humanizing aspect of this whole thing.” This faculty observation summarizes the
academic year that faculty, staff, and students have endured. These practices and mindsets represent pedagogical learnings to take forward into future semesters.

Appendix A: Methodology

The sessions resulted in over 10 hours (630 minutes) of Zoom recordings containing faculty responses to the key questions. The analysis team undertook an informal double-coding process of the transcripts from these recordings, with each of the four analysis team members responsible for a complete coding of the teaching practices mentioned in half of the session transcripts resulting in two sets of codes for each session. All four analysis team members then reviewed individually the two sets of codes for each of the seven session transcripts with a view to commonalities in teaching practices discussed across sessions.

As a team, we identified the five most common practices in response to each of the questions across all sessions. Using a Jamboard, the analysis team then conducted an affinity mapping that combined the five common practices they had each identified into 3-4 larger thematic groupings with those identified by others.

Finally, each thematic grouping was named and labeled. This same Jamboard affinity mapping process was initially conducted for each question separately. One final round of thematic grouping brought together the 3-4 themes in responses to each question into 3 overarching themes throughout the full discussions, each with multiple subthemes.

Faculty participants sometimes named these themes directly in the focus group discussion, while other times faculty talked of a practice that the analytic team was able to link to one or another of these themes using the participant’s explanation of what challenge the practice solved for them or what impact the adjustment had on students, class time, etc.

For example, a faculty participant saying students were not as engaged and productive in Zoom breakout rooms when groups were assigned randomly as in Zoom breakout rooms where students were placed consistently in the same group throughout the semester because they could get comfortable with each other and check-in on one another was analyzed as attributable to the overarching Theme B ‘Social learning, community building, and connection’ even though the faculty member only alluded to this concept and did not directly state it.4

The practices mentioned in the report were raised in response to both questions about adjustments made to teaching practices during the Spring 2021 semester and more permanent adjustments to teaching practices when students return to in-person classrooms. It was not the case that faculty always cited adjustments they made in the Spring 2021 semester as practices they would retain, though it was the case more often than not, justifying the collapse of the first two key questions. Where multiple faculty noted that an adjustment would not be kept upon a return to an in-person semester, we note this explicitly in our report.

4 This example practice of incorporating breakout room solidarity was shared by multiple faculty participants in multiple groups.