

Spring 2020: CC-GS Committee on Instruction
Concerns for faculty who become ill and thoughts for substitutions

The CC-GS COI has devoted much attention to the well-being of our undergraduate students during this Covid-19 outbreak, and the committee is equally concerned for the well-being of our faculty. Committee members have heard colleagues express anxiety about the prospect of becoming ill and being unable to teach, and what that would mean both for themselves and for their students. In an effort to contribute to conversations already happening within departments and programs, the committee offers the following the following ideas and suggestions for consideration and feedback.

Adapting coursework as needed

If an instructor is ill for a relatively short period of time, so that only one week of class meetings is affected, faculty might modify their course materials accordingly. The Provost's Office has confirmed that, in a time of emergency, faculty can make alterations to the structure of a course in its ratio of contact hours to workload hours, as long as students still meet the learning objectives of the course. For example, faculty might choose to ask students to use class time for small group activities whose work is reported out at the end of class, or change the requirement of in-class participation to a requirement of online postings or the assignment of in-class quizzes or exams to untimed writing assignments. If a faculty member is too ill to engage with class at all, however, the best option may be to ask for help in finding a substitute instructor.

Finding an appropriate substitute instructor

Faculty who are ill can contact the chair or director of their program, who will help find another suitable instructor. In some programs, this may be fairly easy to do. In cases where a substitute is not readily identifiable, committee members have offered some alternatives. For example, if it is permissible by GSAS, a graduate student teaching assistant might lead class sessions for a limited period of time (perhaps under the supervision of a faculty colleague), with the benefit that the substitute would be familiar not only with the course material but also with the students. Committee members also agreed that a substitute instructor need not have the identical expertise in, or approach to, the course topic to be an effective intellectual leader for the students in the course. Also, if the search for a substitute needs to extend outside of the department, a committee member noted that she has had particularly good luck in finding substitute instructors who are alumni of their graduate program and who therefore know the coursework and the culture of the program. It may likewise be productive to ask faculty about their networks; they may know of instructors in other departments or programs who have helpful expertise or background.

In thinking about the current semester, committee members also noted for future consideration ways in which emergency planning could be included in our curricular planning each semester. For example, instructors could be asked by their departments at the beginning of each semester to provide the name(s) or one or more instructors who could step in to teach the course in an emergency. Instructors could also be asked at the beginning of each semester to talk with one or more colleague(s) about their course, so that other faculty members in the program could be knowledgeable enough about the course objectives to step in. And departments can maintain historical lists of faculty who have taught a course or a related topic, so that a group of possible substitute instructors would be readily identified.

The committee hopes that these suggestions are helpful. If faculty have additional suggestions to add to this compilation of ideas, we would be glad to update this document accordingly.