



September 14, 2020

Dear UMass Boston Faculty,

As a follow-up to the guidance on webcam usage during synchronous instruction provided to faculty by the Interim Provost on Friday-Saturday, September 4-5, the Undergraduate Student Government (USG) would like to respectfully request that faculty consider additional guidance that students have to offer on the respectful and appropriate use of webcams during remote instruction. We assume that faculty recognize the challenges that students are facing at this time, just as students recognize that you are making efforts to accommodate students' needs. We share this guidance so that you can gain a richer understanding of the UMass Boston student perspective and be more informed about our needs.

Our guidance is timely because the guidance from the Provost recommended that faculty explicitly make students aware before the add-drop deadline of particular syllabus policies regarding webcam usage on proctored exams. Since the USG does not have a mechanism to reach all faculty, we have asked the Chair of Faculty Council to send this communication to you on our behalf.

#### Attending to security while being respectful of students

To keep classrooms secure from external threat, e.g., Zoom bombing, or to take attendance, many faculty rely on the screen names of students shown in their participant windows, e.g., Zoom screen boxes. However, there are valid reasons why a student may use a name other than the student's legal name shown in WISER. For example:

- A student may have a preferred name that is different from their legal name.
- Students could have legal reasons for not wanting other students to know they are present in the same class, e.g., a restraining order.

Class rosters default to a student's legal first name, unless they have entered a preferred or chosen first name on WISER, but not all students may be aware of this option. As faculty, you can display your class rosters with students' preferred names. However, preferred pronouns are not shown in WISER.

Following guidance from UMass Boston's Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, the USG recommends that you ask students what their preferred names are and give students the option to indicate the pronouns that they use for themselves.

In addition, the USG recognizes that many international students, for the ease of communication and avoidance of mispronunciations, may decide to use a name different from their legal name. DACA and undocumented students may hold another name for themselves that they prefer to unofficially use in the United States, separate from the legal name they may use in their home countries, for privacy and protection, especially over a digital platform.

The USG recommends that you provide students the option to use a screen name that is different than the student's legal name in WISER as long as they identify to you what the name is that they will use on their screen so that they can be recognized by you for security and attendance purposes.

#### Webcam usage during proctored exams

Guidance from the Provost specified, "It is recommended that instructors of courses requiring proctored exams with webcam use clearly communicate this stipulation and draw the requirement to the attention of their students prior to the add/drop deadline."

The USG urges faculty to find alternatives to requiring the use of webcams during exams, especially if such usage is recorded. There are many harmful effects to consider:

- Webcams are particularly dangerous for undocumented students. External proctoring companies, such as Honorlock, which is being considered for use by the UMass system, ask students to show their IDs, sometimes to a live proctor who is unaffiliated with the university, at the start of an exam and the event is video-recorded. It is unknown where these videos are stored or by whom they are seen, and a video of an undocumented student showing an ID could be used in very detrimental ways against the student, particularly in the current political climate.
- Starting with an assumption that students will be dishonest presents a stereotype threat that is damaging to students. Studies have amply demonstrated that stereotype threat is especially impactful on students of color, students whose native language is not English, students from the lowest economic groups, and first-generation college students. These students comprise the majority of our student body at UMass Boston.
- Webcams are an invasion of privacy. Many students do not have a private place to take exams. Having webcams on during an exam can expose much more than the student. For example, many students have young children or other family members to care for. In addition to desiring privacy for these members of their households, students may fear being accused of cheating when they talk with a family member in need during a proctored exam. (See below for why a virtual background is not always possible to protect privacy.)
- There are many majors and minors at UMass Boston that require students to take courses in a specific sequential order and others that require two or more courses be taken in conjunction with one another. For those of us in programs of study requiring sequential or corequisite courses, many are unable to drop their courses. Dropping a course could result in the inability to take an upper-level course, making a student unable to complete their degree in a timely manner.

- Access to a webcam and a computer equipped to handle additional software is not a privilege that all students have. Many computers or devices are not equipped with cameras, and requiring students to buy a webcam for their device may not be feasible financially. Additionally, requiring webcams for students who do not already have them or who have a laptop with improper equipment or software creates anxiety for some students. To further complicate matters, access to loaner Chromebooks is not possible for students who do not reside in the Boston area.
- There are substantial numbers of students who do not have internet access at home. These students must either go to a friend's or relative's to use internet, or to a space with public internet access. For a student who is in one of these spaces, monitoring the student would mean that the people around them would be monitored as well; such monitoring of third parties (though not intended) is disrespectful and unreasonable, given that students are unable to control their environments. A proctor may see the actions of the student as cheating, however, even if the student is simply adjusting to the environment around them. While setting a virtual background may resolve some of the privacy issues, not all computers and devices have sufficient memory to support a virtual background.
- Many students struggle with test anxiety, even in a traditional classroom setting. Being monitored may heighten the anxiety of the student, causing them to not be as successful as they would have been in a traditional setting. Students who struggle with test anxiety, or who struggle with other conditions, may have habits like looking around or reading questions quietly to themselves during exams. These behaviors can be seen as red flags by a proctor or monitoring system, which can be unfortunate for the student.
- For students who may be in different time zones, for example a 12-hour difference for some students, requiring an exam that is proctored during the time of class results is an unhealthy schedule for students, as they may be taking an exam at 2 or 3 am. We request that faculty provide extended or flexible periods of time for students to take an exam in these situations. Such flexibility would ensure that all students have equal access to the exam at reasonable times of their day.

#### The shared endeavor of assessment

We understand that faculty are deeply invested in students' success and that part of this success requires that students are assessed fairly and equitably. We appreciate your trust in students, but we recognize that certain types of assessment call for webcam use and other forms of technological monitoring that may not be possible for all students to safely and comfortably accept. We respectfully request that you be open to hearing students' legitimate concerns.

The USG would also like to emphasize the significance of creating an approachable atmosphere for students at this time. This is critical, as it allows students to express any of their concerns without reservations or fear of judgement from faculty. Students may be intimidated to speak up due to the power dynamic between a faculty member and a student, especially during fast-paced lectures. This often causes us to not speak up at all, which leads to the assumption

that all students are content with the conditions of the class. Regularly expressing the different channels of communication students are able to use to reach out to you (direct message, email, etc.) constantly reminds us that a (virtual) door is always open for communication and conversation. Performing check-ins for students has proven to be productive as well. It is also beneficial to establish a welcoming atmosphere to minimize the number of students who escalate their concerns. On behalf of all students, the USG truly appreciates that so many of you are already investing substantial effort in cultivating more genuine relationships with your students.

#### Potential for unique circumstances

There may be situations where students have valid reasons for avoiding webcam use, but students may not have a reasonable option to avoid webcam-proctored exams by dropping a course and taking it in another semester, for example because they would not be able to stay on track toward their degree. While we anticipate that both students and faculty will work out reasonable alternatives, especially with the resources provided on the Teach Fall 2020 website that is linked in the guidance from the Provost office, we also anticipate that there may be rare cases when a student has serious reservations about using a webcam and when the faculty member is unable to accommodate this, and each of these situations will be unique.

We expect that all of these unresolvable situations are likely to occur because of the “power” of technology, and the solutions to them will also likely lie in finding the right technological tools. The UGA is in discussion with the IT Services and Undergraduate Studies offices to develop a mechanism for addressing unique situations in order to support the student and faculty member to arrange alternatives. Our hope is to be able to establish such a mechanism prior to the first round of midterm exams, so that the student and faculty member can rely on support to figure out a workable resolution.

#### In Closing

Transitioning to remote learning has not been easy for students. The same is also relevant for faculty. The USG recognizes the efforts faculty have already made to accommodate students’ needs and we express our deepest gratitude to your commitment to student success, especially during this time. As student representatives, we are committed to addressing serious issues that may hinder student success and offering recommended resolutions while sustaining the overall collaborative relationship between faculty and students. We hope you will reference our additional guidance as we navigate this semester, and we look forward to more collaborative efforts in the future.

Sincerely,

Janrey Javier, USG President

Jaely Pereira, USG Vice President

Joshua “Jake” Bates, USG Representative to the Faculty Council

On behalf of the Undergraduate Student Government