



ACADEMIC SENATE

32/AS/20/ATLC Web Conferencing Camera ‘Techquity’

WHEREAS: The Academic Senate of Stanislaus State [AS] finds that as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic the vast majority of synchronous and hybrid classes include synchronous sessions held via web conferencing; and

WHEREAS: The AS acknowledges the significant impact of the pandemic on our students and the reality that said impact differs across social and economic variants; and

WHEREAS: The AS recognizes and respects the core principle of Academic Freedom with respect to conduct of our instructional work and seeks to balance faculty rights to academic freedom with student rights to a reasonable and supportive learning environment; and be it further

RESOLVED: That until such time as a campus-wide policy is developed and approved, faculty may not require students to have their cameras on during synchronous class sessions until such time as permanent policy is in place and that student choice of having their camera on or off will not directly impact student grades; and it be further

RESOLVED: That the AS assert the need for a campus-wide policy to be applicable beginning Fall 2021_on any requirement that students be “on camera” during synchronous sessions.

RATIONALE:

We can understand why an instructor might need to request a student to have their camera on for a specific activity, for a specific frame of time, during breakout sessions or for scheduled one-on-one meetings; especially if they offer an alternative to which the student cannot adhere. However, tying grades to a student’s ability or choice to appear live, on camera, (through participation credit, exams, etc.) is a problematic practice for the following reasons:

First, the CSU is currently facing legal challenges regarding other pandemic-related issues. We are concerned that issuing grades of any kind based upon the required use of cameras during class is likely illegal and could be a source of future litigation.

Second, our university mission states that we are committed “to creating an inclusive learning environment” and to “encouraging] personalized student learning.” CSU Stanislaus was also recently ranked #5 in the United States for upward mobility and it should be noted that 86% of our students receive some form of financial aid. Penalizing students’ grades for an inability to participate in classes with their cameras on lies in opposition to practices of inclusivity and as such, functions as an abrogation of our specific university mission and further shows an apathetic disregard for the reality of our students’ lives outside of our campus. Furthermore, it ignores substantial gaps in



internet availability and access to technology. One 2015 study found that teens from low-income households were 17% less likely to own a smartphone than those from middle-to high-income households and 14% less likely to own computers.¹ Students must possess a device capable of transmitting a video feed during a videoconference, but they also must have a stable, high-speed internet connection to reliably facilitate such transmission. Requiring camera usage places an additional financial constraint upon students and harms many of our most vulnerable students. Research indicates that Black and Latinx young adults are more than twice as likely to have their mobile service cut off because of the financial burden of monthly phone bills.²

Third, without a well-developed justification for a ‘Camera-On’ policy (e.g., peer-reviewed research that indicates educational benefits for cameras on), we find the decision to tie student grades to having cameras on during synchronous sessions to be an inequitable and oppressive practice. It behooves us all to consider that our students come from varying socioeconomic backgrounds and with that, living situations that might not be optimal for synchronous courses that require cameras to be on. Requiring a student to have their camera on essentially outs students’ socioeconomic situation in a way that can impact their confidence and ability to participate in our courses. In addition, students who have poor internet connections will experience slower speeds and not be able to contribute. Students residing in rural areas, including Tuolumne and Calaveras counties, are especially marginalized by such a requirement. Turning off the camera and relying on audio alone is the easiest solution to this issue.

Fourth, and most importantly, this practice amounts to an unjust wielding of power over students who might be experiencing a myriad of challenges and traumas directly related to the global pandemic: Some of our students have family, neighbors or friends that have gotten sick or passed away. Some of them are worried about their elderly loved ones. Some of them are caring for family members. Some of them haven't seen their family members since March or later. Some of them are working overtime. Some of them are looking for work or are in danger of losing their housing.

As professionals within the field of education, it is the responsibility of instructors to consider the needs and challenges faced by their students above their own necessity to see a face in a box on their screen. Student engagement can be measured via other technologies while allowing students to retain their dignity and experience an ethic of care that is greatly needed in our current situation.

Our position as faculty, staff, and a student representative in the Online and Technology Mediated (OTM) Courses and Programs Workgroup and members of Academic Teaching and Learning Committee (ATLC) is that we should pass a policy forbidding this practice ASAP.

Approved by the Academic Senate on November 3, 2020
Approved by President Ellen Junn on December 2, 2020

¹ Tierney, William G., et al. *Diversifying Digital Learning: Online Literacy and Educational Opportunity*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018. pp. 2-19.

² Ibid.