MERCER UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY POLICIES

Title: Virtual Learning Policy
Effective Date: May 1, 2025
Issuing Authority: Provost
Policy Contact: Vice Provost, Provost@mercer.edu, 478-301-2110

Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to provide direction on virtual learning during times of modified campus operations for emergency conditions including inclement weather.

Scope

This policy applies to all students, faculty, and instructional staff of Mercer University.

Exclusions

None

Definitions

As used in this policy, the following term(s) have the meaning specified below:

Emergency Conditions: potentially urgent, unexpected, and dangerous situations that pose potentially significant effects on the normal operations of the University and the health, safety, and welfare of the University community.

Modified Operations: temporary changes to teaching, learning, research, and business operations in response to emergency conditions that require University action.

Policy Statement

In the event of modified operations for emergency conditions, including inclement weather, Mercer University will prioritize academic continuity by transitioning to a virtual learning environment via University-supported platforms rather than canceling or rescheduling in-person classes. The following guidelines apply across all campuses:

- If the University delays or closes one or more campuses or suspends operations in a more limited capacity (e.g., building closure) due to emergency conditions, only classes affected by the emergency conditions will shift to a virtual format.
- Online classes will operate as scheduled unless otherwise notified by the instructor.
- Clinical placements will continue as scheduled unless changed by clinical providers or program leadership.

Transition to Virtual Learning
In the event of modified operations and a shift to virtual learning:

- Students, faculty, and staff will be notified via official University email.
- If modified operations seem likely to impact University operations, instructors of record may be notified via email by the Office of the Provost to prepare for a virtual learning option.
- If modified operations are declared, instructors will be directed to pivot to a virtual learning environment.
- Instructors must communicate the virtual learning plan with students as soon as possible. Instructors are expected to create and share links and notifications to ensure access to virtual class sessions.
- Virtual classes should meet or provide alternative, equivalent instruction for the regularly scheduled length of time.
- Some course formats, such as labs, practicums, fieldwork, and clinical placement, may not be affected by campus closings or may not be appropriate for virtual learning either in part or whole. Related decisions should be made based on pre-existing contingency plans regarding such classes, including plans for making up class time, and instructors should communicate with students accordingly.
- For classes impacted by modified operations, no assignments or exams should be due during periods of closure, and students should not be penalized for not attending in person.
- Support for virtual learning platforms will be provided by the Mercer IT Help Desk.
- If an instructor cannot provide virtual learning due to power or internet outage, the instructor should communicate with the corresponding program leadership.
- If a student cannot participate in virtual learning due to power or internet outage, the student should communicate with their instructor(s) as soon as possible after service is restored.

Mercer University is committed to digital accessibility. Students, faculty, and staff who experience a barrier to accessing digital content should follow the University Digital Accessibility Policy for guidance.

Students and instructors should engage with the Mercer IT Help Desk for technical assistance. Instructors should contact the Center for Teaching and Learning for support.

Special Circumstances
If modified operations are not declared but an instructor and/or student is impacted by the emergency conditions:

- The student should communicate with their instructor(s) as soon as possible to discuss excused absences and/or alternative, equivalent learning opportunities.
- The instructor should communicate with program leadership and complete the Temporary Course Modality Change Request Form for approval.

Virtual Learning Syllabus Statement
Instructors teaching in-person courses are expected to include the virtual learning syllabus statement as provided by the Office of the Provost.

Virtual Learning Readiness Plans
To ensure academic continuity per the Credit Hour Policy during emergency conditions, each department/program is required to maintain a virtual learning readiness plan. This plan should describe procedures to deliver in-person courses virtually as well as contingency plans for courses that are not well suited to virtual learning, such as laboratories, studios, fieldwork, clinical placement, and other performance-based classes.

Departments/programs should consider the following elements in formulating their virtual learning readiness plans:

1. Course Delivery Strategies

- Lecture/Discussion-Based Courses: In-person courses should be delivered through University-supported virtual platforms.
- Laboratory, Studio Courses, Practicum, Fieldwork Courses, and Clinical Placements: Recognizing the challenges in replicating hands-on experiences in a virtual environment, departments/programs should:
    - Designate plans to provide make-up class time, or
    - Identify virtual simulations or alternative assignments that achieve comparable learning outcomes, and
    - Ensure compliance with professional standards and accreditation requirements, and
    - Describe plans to communicate plans to students.

2. Documentation of Procedures

- Each dean's office is required to house the emergency virtual teaching plans and to update plans by August 1 of odd years. Plans should include:
    - Virtual class sessions or direct instruction arrangements, depending on course type
    - Methods for student engagement and participation tracking
    - Contingency plans for technology failures or access issues
    - Clear communication channels to disseminate information to faculty and students during emergency conditions.
- Program faculty should maintain current contact information for students using University-supported platforms.

Additional Resources

1. Center for Teaching and Learning: https://ctl.mercer.edu/

2. Information Technology: https://it.mercer.edu/

3. Mercer University Credit Hour Policy: https://policies.mercer.edu/credit-hour/

4. Mercer University Credit Hour Policy Explainer: https://ctl.mercer.edu/resources/mercer-credit-hour-policy-explainer/

5. Mercer University Digital Accessibility Policy: https://policies.mercer.edu/digital-accessibility-policy/

6. Mercer University Emergency Conditions Policy: https://policies.wip.mercer.edu/emergency-conditions/

7. Syllabus Statements: https://provost.mercer.edu/curriculum-information/syllabus-statements/