Recommendations for Merging Canvas Shells
Distance Learning Committee (DLC), April 2023

The practice of merging Canvas shells (referred to as "cross-listing" in Canvas) was suspended in Summer 2022 after concerns were raised about meeting Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and accreditation standards. Merging enables section (CRN) enrollments from individual courses to be combined into one Canvas course shell. A workgroup examining the issue requested a legal opinion, which was received in March 2023 from Liebert Cassidy Whitmore. The legal opinion stated that "students communicating amongst each other within a merged canvas shell that is limited *only* to students within each course section group does not raise any FERPA compliance or privacy issues" and that "the District should take additional precautions…to ensure FERPA violations do not arise…Once the additional precautions…are taken, the expansion of interpersonal communication that could lead to FERPA violations would be appropriately limited."

The workgroup referred the issue to the Distance Learning Committee (DLC) for practice recommendations to start the shared governance process. The DLC reviewed the workgroup summary and goals, legal opinion, and guidelines from several other colleges as examples.

The DLC makes the following recommendations:
- That merging be reinstated in Canvas shells of the same course taught by the same professor in the same modality (i.e., asynchronous online, synchronous online, hybrid, on in person), and that merging be continued in stacked, lecture/lab, credit/noncredit mirrored, linked, and cohort classes.
- That faculty be trained in and follow guidelines for maintaining FERPA compliance in merged Canvas shells.
- That faculty be trained in and follow guidelines for maintaining FERPA compliance when using third party tools and publisher sites in merged shells.
- That any institutional compliance monitoring requiring access to faculty courses in Canvas be negotiated by Faculty Association and the district.

Guidelines for Merging Canvas Shells

In merging Canvas shells of the same course and modality, faculty must follow these guidelines to ensure that students of one CRN section cannot interact with or see the enrollment of students of another CRN section.

Under **Settings**, set the following conditions.

- Using the **Navigation** tab, hide the **People** link from students in the course navigation menu.
- Using the **Navigation** tab, hide the **Chat and Conferences/BigBlueButton** links since faculty cannot separate chats by section. See Canvas guide for details on changing Navigation.
- Under the **Course Details** tab, scroll down and click *more options*. Make sure that:
  - "Let students create discussion topics" is *not* checked
  - "Let students organize their own groups" is *not* checked
  - "Disable comments on announcements" *is* checked
  - "Hide grade distribution graphs from students" *is* checked

When creating **Groups**, select the option to **Require group members to be in the same section** when creating a group set. See Canvas guide for details on creating groups.

When creating **Discussions**, choose one of the following conditions.

- Create more than one discussion and assign a separate discussion to each CRN section. For an ungraded discussion, follow the same process but use the "post to" option. **OR**
- Create groups based on CRN sections and assign the discussion to the CRN-based groups.
  - Choose "This is a group discussion" to create groups by CRN. See Canvas guide for details on discussions. If faculty create smaller groups, they can still keep students in the same section and verify that they have set up the groups properly.
  - If a group discussion is copied to a new course shell, such as for a new semester, faculty must edit each group discussion in the new shell to assign students into the correct sections. Faculty need to create groups separated by CRN in the People tab of the new course shell, then each discussion must be edited to be a group discussion using those defined groups. If this is not done in the new course shell, all students will be able to see all other students' responses.
  - When a student joins a class after groups are made, faculty must manually add the new students to a group that is appropriate for the CRN in which they are enrolled.

When creating **Peer Review** assignments, faculty must manually assign students from the same CRN to review each other.

When creating **Canvas Collaborations**, faculty must *manually* create the Collaboration groups to ensure that students are from the same section. The Collaboration screen does not display section information, so faculty will need to use the People tab or the Gradebook for that information. (For collaborative tasks/activities using third party tools, please refer to the **Consideration for Third Party Apps** section below.)

When sending an **Inbox message** to multiple students, select the option to **Send an individual message to each recipient**. This will send a separate copy to each recipient and hide the names of the recipients in the message header.

When using **Canvas Studio**, disable comments, or post a separate video for each section if using the comments feature for the video.

Considerations for Synchronous Online Classes

Synchronous Zoom class sessions must be held separately by section/CRN. Students from one section should not be in the same Zoom Room as students from another section. That means that faculty cannot set up Zoom sessions via TechConnect Zoom, which is open to all students in the same shell, nor can they post one link in a merged shell for all students to use.

Posted recordings of synchronous sessions, whether in an online or hybrid class, must not include any student data including name, image or voice, phone number, or Chat comments which allow students to be identified or contacted unless faculty obtain a waiver from the students who were recorded. For other guidelines for camera use in synchronous online classes, including using the setting of Speaker View, see the *DLC Recommendations for Camera Use in Online Synchronous Classes*.

Considerations for Third Party Apps and Publisher Sites

Like ADA compliance, it is the faculty's responsibility to set up their courses to meet FERPA compliance in both Canvas course shells and third-party sites or tools that they might use as part of their classroom pedagogy. There are dozens of third-party apps and LTIs integrated into Canvas. Interactive apps, including but not limited to Flip, Padlet, Perusall, and Voice Thread, allow students to see or hear each other or read each other's posts or comments. Faculty must not publish one link in a merged course shell if the app enables students to see, hear, read comments, or recognize names of students enrolled in another course section. Faculty should not assume that Canvas or Mt. SAC has vetted any app integrated into Canvas

for FERPA compliance in merged shells. Faculty must do their own research and test apps before deploying them.

Publisher sites should be vetted for privacy concerns. Students from multiple sections should not be able to see or contact each other in the sites faculty direct them to. Publisher site access that includes any kind of comment, collaboration or discussion should be separated by section. Ideally, discussions and collaborations should take place within the Canvas shell to ensure FERPA compliance, student privacy, and demonstrate regular substantive interaction. Faculty using publisher sites for textbook access and individual assessments only are not violating student privacy guidelines.

Faculty should remember that student access to third party apps and publisher sites should originate from the Canvas shell to ensure authentication. Links should be deployed in the Canvas shell; if the app is interactive, different links should be deployed through separate sections based on CRNs within the merged Canvas shell.

Recommendations for Training

The DLC recommends that training for FERPA compliance in merged Canvas shells, third party tools, and publisher sites be presented both synchronously and asynchronously before faculty merge shells.

The training should encompass a definition and brief overview of FERPA, focusing on faculty responsibilities for ensuring student privacy in online courses; recommended Canvas settings in both synchronous and asynchronous online classes; and discussion of what to watch for when integrating third party tools and publisher sites. If they have additional questions beyond the training, or want to discuss certain tools, faculty may contact the Instructional Designers in FCLT during FCLT office hours or make individual appointments.

At the end of the training, a "compliance checklist" will be sent to faculty completers that they can use to ensure their merged course shells are FERPA compliant. The completed compliance checklist may be uploaded, used, stored, or reviewed to whatever administrative site the district and Faculty Association agree to.

In addition, the DLC recommends that a pop-up or autogenerated message be sent to faculty who request merged shells as a reminder. See example from Diablo Valley College, below.

Ongoing, SPOT and Regulations Update for SPOT Recertification will be updated to include pertinent issues about student privacy and FERPA compliance in merged Canvas shells.

The DLC feels that the question of faculty or administrators entering another faculty's course shell to have their compliance evaluated is an item that is outside the purview of the DLC and should be negotiated by Faculty Association and the District.

References

Cornell Center for Teaching Innovation. (2022, February 24). *Student Privacy in Canvas Courses with Cross-Listed Sections*.   https://learn.canvas.cornell.edu/student-privacy-in-canvas-courses-with-cross-listed-sections/

Julius, J. (2021, June 9). *FERPA compliance and student interaction in merged Canvas course sections*. MiraCosta College C^3 Teaching and Learning Center. https://tic.miracosta.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/MiraCosta-FERPA-and-Merged-Canvas-Courses.pdf

LeForestier, M. (2020, October 19). Legal Opinion 2020-12: Online class cameras-on requirements. California Community Colleges. https://www.cccco.edu/-/media/CCCCO-Website/Files/General-Counsel/2020-12-Opinion-Online-Class-Cameras-On-Requirements-a11y.pdf?la=en&hash=CFD930C17E57FC8DAFAE7C6C303A1596C5B662C3

Liebert Cassidy Whitmore. *Opinion Letter re impact of merging canvas shells on FERPA compliance*. March 10, 2023.

Mt. San Antonio College. (2022, December 8). *Canvas Shell and Related Matters Workgroup*.

Example from Diablo Valley College – directed at faculty who have requested merged shells.

> Agree to the pop-up for keeping interactions between students in differing sections separate (FERPA) before completing your request.

<div style="border:1px solid green; padding:8px">

NOTICE:
As faculty teaching in the CCCCD, I understand that combining two or more sections of the same course into one Canvas course shell is a privilege that I am allowed so long as I take every precaution described below to ensure that student privacy is protected under the requirements of the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act.
In my combined Canvas course shell that contains two or more separate course sections, I will:
- Not use Peer Reviews, since they could be assigned to students across sections, UNLESS assigning them manually with students from their own sections.
- Assign all assignments and discussions to specified groups set up by sections.
- Not enable responses on Announcements, as these shared announcements and responses can be seen by all.
- Not enable Chat, as Chat cannot be restricted to sections.
- Check with vendors on LTIs prior to enabling them.

I understand that if I fail to exercise care in applying these restrictions to protect student privacy and adhere to the requirements of FERPA, my privilege of combining sections into a single course shell will be removed.

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