UCUE Subcommittee on Webcam Use in Online Instruction

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Policy: https://remote.msu.edu/teaching/video-conference-policies.html

Question/Charge: What are the issues and/or drawbacks for people with disabilities with the current Webcam Policy as it states students can not be required to have webcams on without sufficient notice (ie. For exams etc).

Summary:

"It's a fine line between what benefits some students and what benefits others."

This observation by Virginia Martz, the Blindness/Visual Impairments, Deaf/Hard of Hearing, Mobility, and Speech/Language Specialist for the Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities (RCPD), captures the central challenge of class webcam usage.

Our committee finds that the existing university webcam policy effectively balances student needs and interests. The real issue, we find, is the implementation and communication of the policy. Instructors need resources to implement the policy in flexible ways to address the requirements of their particular courses and the needs of the students in them. It was also found that it is vital that the policy acknowledges that implementing this policy is not a substitute for RCPD visas and that the previous process for student visas should continue to be upheld. The committee also acknowledges that it could be beneficial to include a hyperlinked separate document included in this policy mentioning the benefits and drawbacks of this policy. This supporting document could provide individuals with things to self educate about and give faculty an opportunity to create a more inclusive classroom, the committee recommends that the MSU Accommodating Technology committee is consulted when creating this documentation. (Grey Pierce can be contacted to consult with this committee).

This report is based on discussions with RCPD specialists and with MSU's Americans with Disabilities Act Coordinator, and participation in an MSU Accommodating Technology Committee (ATC) meeting.

There are several reasons to allow students the option of turning off their webcams except in tightly defined circumstances. Students have an expectation of privacy. In large classes, webcam use places severe strains on limited bandwidth. Webcam use can spark anxiety. Optional use can allow students to feel a sense of commonality and normality, especially those with disabilities. Students with hearing or auditory processing disorders can find webcams challenging.

The use of webcams does have many benefits, even if those benefits are not sufficient to allow instructors to mandate their routine use. Auto captioning is both imperfect and not widely used and students with hearing impairments can benefit from seeing faces and having the opportunity to lipread. The ability to see facial expressions and other visual cues can enhance communication and help foster engaged discussions.

When webcams use is required, test design can alleviate some of the challenges with the technology. There are also specific accommodations available. Instructors should be aware that online proctoring software which can interfere with assistive technology.

The experts we consulted with stressed repeatedly that instructors need to be flexible in adapting the MSU webcam policy. It is not just an issue for students with disabilities—all students face challenges adapting to an online learning environment. Transcript tools can be useful to a range of students, for example, and should be widely available. The university could help instructors and students navigate the challenges associated with webcam use with more outreach.

Notes from Richard Bellon's Meeting with Leslie Johnson and Ashley Maloff of the Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities

Leslie Johnson (Assistant Director, Assistive Technology) and Ashley Maloff (Ability Access Specialist: Chronic Health) of the Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities (RCPD) note that their center has dealt with a wide variety of cases involving webcam use on a case-by-case basis. Webcam use has been associated with anxiety issues, challenges for students with hearing or auditory processing disorders, concerns about promoting and assessing course participation, privacy issues, bandwidth limitations, and testing design.

The RCPD recognizes both the importance of privacy and the technical problems that bandwidth-hungry webcams can create. The MSU requirements for student laptops have not specifically required webcams so not all students may have access to the technology. The center also acknowledges that the absence of video makes it difficult for students with hearing disability who rely upon lip reading. Students with auditory processing disorders can also find it challenging to process conversation without facial cues.

Instructors have been using creative solutions to address challenges with the use of cameras during tests. Challenges still exist, especially around the use of online proctoring software which can interfere with assistive technology.

Leslie Johnson and Ashley Maloff stress the need for instructors to balance flexibly the competing needs and interests around webcam use. They note that while instructors cannot require webcam use, they can encourage their students to turn on video whenever practicable by explaining the benefits to their fellow students by doing so.

All colleges and universities have been struggling with this issue, of course. The challenges of webcam use have been a key topic of conversation since March in meetings of MI-AHEAD, the Michigan state organization for high-education professionals working with students with disabilities.

Notes for MSU Accommodating Technology Meeting, attended by Aubrey Hanes

- ❏ **Discussion Notes (regarding webcam policy)**
    - ❏ Hearing impairments: auto captioning is not widely used and isn't perfect. This goes for students as well as faculty
        - ❏ The committee is Interested in how can the policy account for this
    - ❏ Virginia Martz: stated that it can be beneficial to some to see who is speaking and their face as well as lipread; however it is not beneficial to others because they have to keep interpreters pinned during the class and not have disruptions that deviate from the interpreter.
        - ❏ Mentioned that for some students, the interpreters are distracting. Having cameras not be required helps students because it allows them a sense of normalcy, they don't want others to know about their disabilities and allows them

to be treated as every other student. It's a fine line between what benefits some students and what benefits others. Not everyone with a disability wants the class to know they have a disability, for some this would be shown if they had to have the camera on. For some students this is freeing

- ❏ Virginia mentioned that if the auto captions are not sufficient to the level that makes the communication accommodating for that student, then there are other things that can be implemented but zoom is more accessible for this than other platforms
  - ❏ For example: cart, auto caption, and transcript would assist in filling in these holes. However it should be noted that implementing this is NOT A SUBSTITUTE IN THE VISA
- ❏ Leslie Johnson: Mentioned that many students prior to this policy had to request to keep their webcams off through the RCPD. She also stated that we need to raise awareness to accessibility issues overall but especially with policies regarding technology. She mentioned that it would be nice to include pieces into the webcam policy about the benefits and downfalls in order to raise awareness or give an explanation.
  - ❏ "Everything needs to be an interactive process we not only need to work with students that are struggling with the change to online formats but we work to educate professors on how to do so and we often hear that accessibility is difficult."
- ❏ Grey Pierce: Noted that the policy should still acknowledge how it benefits some people to turn on the webcam while speaking if the individual is comfortable. He mentioned that it is important to make sure that it is mentioned that there are things that enhance communication by allowing students to see facial expressions and emotion or the visual aspects, these are things that professors using a perfect transcript system or even cart does not have. Grey noted that he felt that it could be beneficial to include in the policy or a separate document but it should be mentioned the benefits and draw backs of this policy. "We need to provide people with things to think about or self educate should they wish even if it's a hyperlink in the policy." Grey stated that there is no right or wrong answer but we should educate about the issues to the MSU community.
- ❏ Kevin: Noted that live transcripts is a two step process and it would be nice to have in the policy to have that available to students if they want that without having to request it. As in professors have to enable it when creating the zoom link and when the meeting is started
- ❏ Tyler Smeltkop: Mentioned that accommodations should differ from person to person. However, we need to highlight that we have hundreds of students that may now be struggling where they may not have before. The transcript option should be made available to all students regardless if they have a disability, this should be a tool that is useful for all not just people with disabilities.
  - ❏ For him personally the transcript has helped so he doesn't have to lip read over a zoom call which is very difficult even on a one on one meeting he could imagine doing so taking notes at the same time.
  - ❏ People with disabilities fail on a daily basis, but we need others to understand that we don't care that they are failing but we need to strike up conversations

about how we can do our part to help them succeed. Every faculty member should keep this in mind when working with students its more vital than ever to be empathetic. We all need to start somewhere.

- ❏ **Discussion notes (somewhat off topic) but could contribute to UCUE**
    - ❏ Touched on a conversation on how some technology platforms are inaccessible to students ie Tophat
        - ❏ This could be something in the future to consider, how are we hurting students and staff by having so many technologies. How do we tell faculty that this technology is not best for accessibility without limiting their academic freedoms.
        - ❏ Not all professors realize or are made aware of the issues with tophat until they have a student taking their course that requires accommodations because of this technology.
            - ❏ Could survey student and their feelings on technology
- ❏ **Members in attendance:** Grey Pierce, Leslie Johnson, Alex Seddon, James White, Brooke Knapp, Andrew Mackoul, Gabrielle King, Paul Heberlin (RHS), Tracy Leahy, Jeffrey Grabill, Michael Hudson, Virginia Martz, Kevin Henley, Christ Shaltry,Tyler Smeltkop, Michael Strokes, Sarah Swierenga, Danielle Fowler, Andrew Mackoul

Notes from Aubrey Hanes's Meeting with Tracy Leahy, MSU ADA Coordinator

Students with disabilities who are registered with RCPD and express anxiety about taking an exam in a full room, may be granted one of the following accommodations:

1. Placed in a separate breakout room (with camera and record button on). The professor/instructor periodically checks in on the student in that breakout. Following the exam, the student shares the recording of the exam with the professor/instructor to review post-exam.
2. Students who are local may be granted an accommodation allowing them to take exams in the testing center. The testing center also offers virtual proctoring options for students.

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