Center for Engaged Pedagogy
BARNARD COLLEGE

Crafting Community Agreements

Overview
Community agreements are the set of principles that a group of learners share and often collaboratively create in order to identify how they will work together for a period of time. Classes, student organizations, and other project-based groups frequently use community agreements as a way of working toward several long- and short-term goals.

These include:

- cultivating senses of belonging and connectedness;
- offering all members an opportunity to voice their needs and specify their expectations of themselves and others;
- describing how the group will use or revise the agreements if conflicts or crises occur;
- nurturing a culture of shared responsibility and accountability.

This resource provides faculty who are interested in beginning to use community agreements with guidance about how to develop them. It also concludes by reflecting on how community agreements can be used to repair relationships rather than police dissent in the classroom. While this resource focuses on classrooms and different class formats, its recommendations can easily be adapted to many kinds of collaborations and projects that involve other faculty, students, and staff. This resource also describes strategies that several Barnard faculty members already use to articulate the development of these shared principles to their other learning goals.

Recommendations
Because community agreements can help build connectedness within your class and encourage all of the students to share responsibility for how they will learn, **we strongly recommend that you work collaboratively with students to develop your course's agreements**. In addition to the benefits of fostering group cohesion, the participatory process of creating agreements can allow you to clarify how they differ from rules or norms. Whereas rules are often imposed and enforced from above, community agreements are made and maintained by everyone; and unlike norms, which are typically implicit standards that are enforced through shame and other forms of social sanction, community agreements ask everyone to explicitly

identify how they want to learn together and how they will manage conflict. If the size of your class makes it impossible to co-create community agreements with students, then you may nonetheless incorporate a feedback process that allows students to contribute to their development (read the "Models" section below to learn one possible way to do this in a lecture course).

Launching the process of co-creating community agreements with a blank slate, however, is likely to prove frustrating for everyone. Instead, **identify a couple agreements that you want to propose as a starting point for the brainstorming and drafting process**. Common ones include statements about the types of behavior that are conducive to discussion (e.g., "Listen actively and respectfully") and those that encourage participants to be reflective and self-regulative about how they participate (e.g., "Step up, Step back: if you tend to remain quiet in class, challenge yourself to contribute; if you tend to speak often and quickly, reserve your contributions so others have an opportunity to participate"), among others. When you are co-creating these agreements, frame these as suggestions that are subject to revision, expansion, or deletion. While there are many common community agreements, they will be most meaningful when groups tailor them to their needs and desires during the time where they are working together.

When Alexandra Watson, a lecturer in First-Year Writing, creates community agreements with her students, she not only brings examples for them to consider but she explicitly draws agreements from groups and organizations whose principles align with the learning objectives and values of her courses. **Relating the process of co-creating community agreements to the subjects, skills, and purposes of your class is helpful in clarifying to students why you see them as a necessary part of the learning that your class offers.** In Professor Watson's courses, where anti-oppression is both a subject the students study and an approach to teaching that she cultivates, she draws on [agreements](#) from groups like the Black Futures Lab, the NYC-DSA Socialist Feminist Working Group, and the Anti-Oppression Resource and Training Alliance (AORTA) to frame the activity and its purpose. This activity includes processes of reflection and discussion, where students individually and as a group respond to a prompt that asks them to think about times they've been part of engaging and respectful class discussions and what specifically made them feel encouraged to participate. It also includes processes of engagement and adaptation, where Professor Watson presents students with both the notes she took on their reflective discussion and the community agreements of other organizations before asking each of them to propose an agreement for their course. As you consider producing your own version of this activity, reflect on how community agreements and their collaborative development can be less an arbitrary exercise than one that advances the skills and forms of inquiry that students will develop in your classroom.

Models
Lecture: It may not be practical to co-create community agreements with all of the students in a large lecture course. However, it is possible to include students in the development process by inviting them to use time outside of class to revise or add to agreements that you have

identified. Depending on your course, you may consider making contributions to the agreements a low-stakes assignment at the start of the semester so that all students contribute or you may make contributions optional, offering students who choose to participate some number of extra credit points.

1. To do this, spend some amount of class time explaining why community agreements are necessary—e.g. because your lecture style is dialogical, because they will be doing group work, because their use aligns with some broader value that the course explores, or some other reason—and present to the students a list of agreements that you are proposing as a starting point.
2. On your course site, make the agreements available to view and establish a period of time and a place (like a digital discussion board) for the students to talk through these agreements or propose additional ones.
3. After this period of time has passed, incorporate any of their revisions and additions that strike you as most appropriate and useful, and then reintroduce the final draft of agreements to the class with an explanation of how you incorporated their feedback.

Seminar: Seminars are arguably the class format in which community agreements make the most immediate sense and can be most easily developed as a group: not only do these classes require students to be in regular dialogue with each other and the instructor, but their scale makes it possible to collaboratively brainstorm and edit agreements during meetings. How exactly you introduce and carry out the drafting process will depend on the kinds of skills and forms of inquiry that students will practice in your course. Below are two possibilities.

Adaptations: If the process of collaboratively producing community agreements aligns well with the topic or learning objectives of your class, you may turn their creation into an assignment or extended exercise. One model for achieving this comes from Cathy Davidson's "How a Class Becomes a Community," an article in which she describes how her class, "21st Century Literacies," managed to "morph, remix, hack, mod, and mash" the Mozilla Manifesto into a form that was appropriate to their exploration of peer-produced documents. You might adapt this practice for your own class by taking some of the following steps.

1. Identify some pre-existing document related to your class and share it with students.
2. Ask them to work individually, in small groups, or with you on identifying what they would change based on the subjects and skills you will be investigating together (this may take place over the course of one or several classes and may be put into dialogue with other course readings, depending on how intensive an exercise you believe it needs to be).
3. Set a deadline for their revisions and, once they are done, post them to the course site and ask the students to ratify them by adding their name to the bottom of the document.

Depending on the duration and intensity of this activity, it may be appropriate to make this an assignment unto itself. This approach resonates with the methods that Alexandra Watson uses in her First-Year Writing classes, as described above.

Stations: If the collaborative production of community agreements can help students engage throughout the class with potentially controversial material, consider using a portion or the entirety of an early class meeting to work together on defining their expectations of themselves, each other, and you as the instructor. As always, begin by explaining why the co-creation of community agreements matters for your course before you take the following steps.

1. Around the room, use white boards or sheets of paper to set up different "stations," each of which contains a unique prompt for students to respond to in small groups. The prompts at these stations can be practical (e.g., "Our expectations of the professor are…," "Our commitments to each other are…") or reflective (e.g., "Think of productive discussions you've been involved in and try to identify what made them successful"), but you should include one or two very broad recommendations at each station so that the groups have a starting point.
2. Put the students in small groups and assign each to a different station for a period of time. After this time has passed, have them rotate to the next station, where they read a new prompt and the responses of previous students, which they then add to or revise. Repeat this process until students have rotated through all of the stations.
3. After the students have completed one full rotation, take their recommendations and adapt them into a set of community agreements that you invite the students to ratify on the course site or during a following class meeting.

This exercise can easily be adapted online through applications like Jamboard or Padlet.

If you use the stations model, you may consider two additional recommendations.

1. First, craft at least one prompt that connects directly to the content or forms of inquiry your class will explore. When Alex Pittman does this activity in "Art/Work: Sex, Aesthetics, Capitalism," a seminar that examines transformations of sexuality, intimacy, and eroticism alongside and through transformations of racial capitalism in the work of feminist and queer artists and theorists, he includes a prompt that reads, "As people engaging critically with legacies and ongoing forms of sexual and racial exploitation, oppression, and violence, we commit ourselves to…." Such a prompt both establishes the nature of the material that students will engage throughout the course and asks them to dwell on how they wish to share space and time together while doing so.
2. Second, ask the groups to move through the stations in increasingly short intervals (for example, eight minutes at the first station, six minutes at the second, four minutes at the third, and so on). This has the advantage of not only giving all the students an opportunity to weigh in on each prompt in a manageable amount of time, but it also accounts for the fact that a group may not have much to add to or revise at a station where two, three, or more groups have already contributed.

On Conflict and Repair

As you begin to incorporate community agreements into your courses, it is important to clarify some things that they are *not*: community agreements are not and cannot be a security measure that preempts and prevents conflict or disagreement between students or between students and you as an instructor; community agreements also are not and should not be a disciplinary measure that can be drawn from to stifle dissent and difference within the classroom. If this occurs, then they have become a policing mechanism rather than a tool that aids in the process of nurturing a setting where people can learn together. If either you or your students recognize that someone is using the agreements in this way, it is time to revisit and revise them.

If community agreements should not be used to guarantee obedience or impose conformity, this is not to suggest that they have no use for working through moments of conflict and crisis. Perhaps one of the greatest (and most complex) uses of community agreements is in establishing what steps people can take to repair the learning community when the threads that hold them together start to become frayed. This can be handled by developing exercises or explicitly asking students to work together on identifying practices for sticky problems: how they will engage in debate with each other; how students can make their concerns known when they feel harmed by a member of the community; how members can take responsibility for transgressions; and how the community will move forward when a person does take responsibility for their transgression. This reparative and transformative, rather than punitive, model for addressing harm, conflict, and crisis encourages faculty and students alike to approach community agreements as a tool for constructing *brave* rather than *safe* spaces: that is, spaces that encourage every member of the community to engage across difference with honesty, respect, curiosity, and vulnerability, and to trust that the space is one that can hold each person's vulnerability in learning as well.

This resource is an adaptation and expansion of material that Jennifer Rosales and Alex Pittman presented during a brown bag lunch session in September 2021. If you have questions or other practices and models you'd like to propose for this resource, please contact pedagogy@barnard.edu.