

Family-Friendly Campuses Plan for Mother Nature

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At many colleges and universities across the northern United States, administrators and faculty are gearing up for the inevitable onslaught of weather-related school closings, often affectionately known as “snow days.”

For others, wind or water or similar extreme weather causes disruptions.

Now that “teaching with technology” has become the mantra of modern-day instruction, the idea of snow days evokes a “we shall overcome” mentality. It urges faculty to tackle obstacles, even those wrought by Mother Nature, through strong will and determination.

Blithely oblivious to what snow days actually entail for those with family responsibilities, well-meaning administrators advise faculty to forge ahead using live online connections, web casts, online chats or virtual lectures.

Family obligations continue

Unfortunately such a “can do” attitude can hide the many competing family obligations that fall, not surprisingly, primarily on women faculty and students.

Many faculty members and students find such advice to be ill-conceived and the expectations to be unrealistic.

For faculty with young children, a snow day entails preparing endless cups of hot cocoa, playing countless rounds of playing Candyland, building snow forts and snuggling up for story time.



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“No school!” also means no daycare and no babysitter, providing a valuable chance to spend quality time with children and adequately supervise them.

Similarly, for faculty or students with elderly or sick family members, a snow day means whoever usually takes care of their loved one will not arrive. Faculty members—whether caring for Grandma or Grandson—simply cannot teach a class, even virtually.

Likewise, students with family obligations shouldn’t be expected to chat online or join in a live online discussion of the latest course postings either, as they too may be occupied with unanticipated family duties.

More than technology

Technology has made it possible to interact with students and continue the “educational mission” outside the classroom walls. However, too often technology doesn’t solve the complex family issues that come with brief, unexpected interruptions in our routine.

Planning for stormy weather in the form of pre-recorded lectures, web casts or written materials may be reasonable for some courses. But expecting faculty to teach, and students to learn, by participating in educational activities live online during the inevitable school closing is not.

In the spirit of having a truly “family-friendly” campus, and thinking about faculty equity as well as students with family responsibilities, I hope campuses will continue to use technology to its advantage when feasible.

Sometimes a truly “family-friendly” campus may need to briefly set aside the educational mission. ■

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Practical Tips to Respond to Mother Nature’s Quirks

Tips for Faculty:

- *Limit expectations of what students can accomplish* on their weather-related “day off.” Don’t give assignments that will unfairly burden those with family responsibilities. Time-sensitive assignments—given under the mistaken impression that students who are homebound have extra free time—disproportionally disadvantage caregivers, most of whom are women. Choose assignments that can be done anytime during the course.

- *Snow-day assignments that require live online participation, such as web chats, are inappropriate* because they pose a disproportionate burden on primary caregivers. Even if they are “optional,” those with pressing family responsibilities miss important learning opportunities that are available to others.

- *Create flexible assignments when you initially plan the course.* Consider what kinds of flexible assignments would be a valuable addition to the course without being time-sensitive within the course structure.

- *The key is flexibility about when the assignment is due.* It may be impossible for the student to complete the assignment on the same day as the weather-related closing. If all students have access to a home computer, assignments might include a pre-recorded lecture, online documentaries, reading assignments or course review materials you’ve posted.

- *Don’t extend the duration of future classes to make up the missed class time.* Adding 30 minutes to later classes may seem easy, but it can pose a crisis for those rushing to pick up children at daycare or school, or to relieve caregivers.

- *Be proactive with administrators,* reminding them to build extra days into the calendar to allow for weather-related closings.

- *Remind students that any extra days built into the school calendar at the end of the semester are regular school days,* and may need to be used as make-up times for missed classes. Students can have their supports in place for those days if needed.

- *Above all, be flexible.* A family-friendly campus requires a family-friendly faculty, who recognize that equity and fairness may require reasonable accommodations.

Tips for Administrators:

- *Creating a truly family-friendly campus requires awareness of expectations* about students, faculty and staff. Family obligations may be acute during weather-related closings, when schools and daycare centers may also be closed and regular childcare or elder care are unavailable. Show that your campus is family-friendly by recognizing the demands on caregivers.

- *Don’t convert faculty meetings scheduled* for the day of a weather-related closing to conference calls or video chats. Faculty who are also caregivers may be unable to participate in the discussion and may miss a debate or even a vote on a key issue.

- *Don’t advise faculty to offer course activities* or assignments that will unfairly burden those with family responsibilities.

- *Schedule each term proactively,* with extra days built in. Inform faculty and staff that those days are regular work days, and may be used to make up for missed classes.

- *Remember that the value of a family-friendly campus is that it supports equity for faculty, students and staff.* While covering all the course material is important, the overriding goal needs to be equity and fairness for the entire campus community. By proactively planning for the inevitable emergency closing, administrators can foster the family-friendly atmosphere in which faculty, students and staff can flourish.