

Instruction Policy: Merging Sections in Online Resources

Summary

Multiple class sections cannot be merged into a single space in an online learning support system, when those sections are a) face-to-face or hybrid classes scheduled in separate rooms or at different times of the day, or b) online courses.

Scope

This policy affects any learning support systems, such as a Learning Management System (LMS, e.g. Canvas), textbook publisher sites (e.g. LearnSmart, MindLinks), and all similar systems where the students register in an online tool to participate in class activities. A separate course shell or course site must be established for each class section/item number.

The following ARE NOT permitted:

- Merging face-to-face and hybrid courses, when those sections meet at different times or in different places. For instance, merging the 8:00, 9:00, and 10:00 sections of a class in one Canvas shell, publisher web site space, or other online resource is not permitted.
- Merging different sections of online courses. For instance, merging two or more online sections of English 101 is not permitted.

The following ARE permitted:

- Merging two or more sections that meet in the same classroom at the same time.
- Merging clustered, linked, or coordinated studies courses.
- Merging sections for modular courses in which students can flexibly schedule their in-class participation.

Background

This policy stems from a recent clarification regarding the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) with regard to combining electronic resources for class sections. While the particular focus of that clarification was courses on a Learning Management System (such as Canvas), the same reasoning applies to other online learning supports for classes.

When enrolling in a section, students have a reasonable expectation that only other students from the section in which they are enrolled can see that they are in the class. This enrollment status is considered protected information by FERPA. When sections are merged in Canvas and other learning resources, students are able to see - and be seen by - students from other sections of the class.

While it is considered appropriate, and legal within the FERPA regulations, for students to know about other students in their class sections, it is not considered appropriate for that to happen across sections that meet at different times (and by extension, online sections). Students may know each other personally and share their enrollment status, but by combining sections, the institution takes responsibility for sharing the enrollment information, which violates the regulation.