

Course Combination (Merge) Process Review

The Texas A&M University System and Office of General Counsel have notified the university that combining course sections within our learning management system (LMS) would constitute a violation of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) without safeguards that restrict access to each student's Personally Identifiable Information (PII) to individuals with a legitimate educational interest (LEI). It is possible that this directive was issued without considering the full utilization of LMS capabilities that benefit both online and face-to-face courses.

Texas A&M views the course as the primary unit of student interaction and utilizes section designations as an administrative tool or tracking mechanism for students otherwise considered to be part of the same course. Examples include, but are not limited to, the subdivision of large lecture courses in various modalities (in-person, hybrid, and online) into lab sections, adding an honors section to accommodate students seeking Honors credit through fulfillment of an Honors contract, "stacking" sections that include additional content required for graduate-level credit, cross-listing courses in related disciplines so that students can receive credit in a subject required for their specific program, or managing tuition and fees that may differ by student program (i.e. distance education, tuition lock). In each of the noted cases that meet in face-to-face settings, students in different sections share a common meeting, within and outside the LMS. In some cases, the number of students enrolled in a particular section (for example, Honors) may be so low as to preclude any pedagogically meaningful interaction with other students within the LMS.

Texas A&M recognizes the pedagogical benefits of merging multiple sections of a course into a unified virtual learning environment. Doing so:

- promotes consistency in the delivery of course materials, learning outcomes, and grading standards across sections,
- enhances student learning and allows for greater collaboration, and
- optimizes the use of the university's resources, including faculty, Teaching Assistants (TAs), technology, and physical space.

The following policy statement clarifies the LEI for students and instructors assigned to merged courses.

Definitions

Instructional Team

For the purposes of this policy, the “Instructional Team” is defined as school officials assigned to perform instructional duties for the course. This includes the instructor(s) of record for each section as well as all TAs, graders, or other employees assigned by the department to support the course, regardless of their assigned section(s).

Texas A&M has identified an LEI for all members of the Instructional Team to access the FERPA records of all students enrolled in any section of the course. Access is granted for the purpose of enabling each Team member to fulfill their course-related responsibilities. Access to FERPA records for any purpose outside of these responsibilities is strictly prohibited. Additionally, FERPA training is required for the Instructional Team every two years. Roles that have elevated permissions within the learning management system are required to complete FERPA annually.

Student Visibility

The names of students enrolled in merged courses may be visible to all other students enrolled in every section of that course. Additionally, more-specific documentation is provided in the section [Canvas Features and Integrated Tools](#). This visibility may be necessary for achieving educational goals and is equivalent to being in a shared physical environment with students from other sections.

Texas A&M University wishes to implement a clear policy that outlines permissible cases in which course sections may be eligible for interaction or shared content. When merges do occur, technical and permission-based solutions will be put in place to ensure only the information needed for effective engagement in a class is exchanged in each case. Policies such as this are common at peer institutions such as at [Cornell](#), [Kansas State](#), and [George Mason](#).

Canvas Features and Integrated Tools

The various components of the LMS allow access to different information across sections, some of which may be determined by control settings. By correctly managing these settings through policies, as is common at peer institutions, it is possible to help ensure only appropriate student information is visible to other students.

The following list contains the technical and permission-based solutions with examples of how managing specific settings within the Canvas LMS can help limit the visibility of student information.

- § **Groups** show all student names in the group regardless of section enrollment.
 - Includes the following control options:
 - “Require group members to be in the same section” - toggle on
 - “Let students organize their own groups” - toggle off
 - Collaborations (when accessed through groups and not the navigation pane) will also show student names
- § **Chat** shows the names of anyone who posts regardless of section enrollment.
 - Can be disabled at the course level by the instructor
- § **Messages** sent to students in different sections can reveal the names of all recipients to each student.
 - Includes a control option to “send an individual message to each recipient” - toggle on (Note: not practical in large-enrollment courses)
- § **Discussions** show all student names regardless of section enrollment.
 - Includes the following control options:
 - “Let students create discussion topics” - toggle off
 - “Create anonymous discussion topics” for full-class discussions (Notes: pedagogical and management implications; cannot be used for grouped or graded discussions)
- § **People** only permits students to see their section as well as any course staff; however, teacher/course associate roles may see all.

- Teaching Assistant roles can be assigned to interact with users in their section only (Note: pedagogical considerations for large-enrollment courses that may necessitate broader access)
- § **Announcement/Comments** are currently disabled and locked at the root level so instructors cannot use them. If enabled at a later time, any comments would be viewable by all.
- § **Third-party tools** may not limit visibility between sections. For example, a Zoom-based synchronous session does not differentiate by section. The only workaround is to run different Zoom sessions for each section or to not run synchronous sessions. Other tools such as Perusall require group creation from Canvas prior to engagement in the platform to limit visibility.

Given the manner in which course sections are utilized at Texas A&M, the ability to set access controls within the LMS, and the ability to establish a clear policy for permissible use, similar to that of institutional peers, it seems reasonable that under certain conditions it may be permissible to combine sections within the LMS and not violate FERPA. A comprehensive prohibition of section combinations risks students' ability to engage meaningfully with their peers. It also creates opportunities for inconsistencies across sections with similar content. With the appropriate safeguards and transparency with stakeholders, we can provide the highest quality of instruction to our students while also fulfilling our due diligence in protecting the confidentiality of their education records, in accordance with FERPA.

Below are some common use cases with associated access permissions and approval requirements:

Shared meetings (face-to-face) – students in multiple sections have at least one regular meeting time in the same location, at the same time, and with the same instructor.

§ **Ability to Combine Sections:**

- Instructors (up until 5 days prior to term start)
- Academic Liaisons (ALs)/Course Managers (up until the night before the term starts)

- DL Support Team (any time following the guidelines on the [LMS website](#))
- § **Approval Requirements:**
 - Instructor of record
- § **Data Access Permissions:**
 - [Canvas: Groups, Chat, Messages, Discussions, People](#)
 - [Potential third-party tools such as Zoom](#)
- § **Example:**
 - CHEM 119 Lecture with multiple Lab sections (face-to-face)

“Stacked” sections (face-to-face and online) – undergraduate and graduate students participate in the same course, but additional requirements are included for those students receiving graduate-level credit.

- § **Ability to Combine Sections:**
 - Instructors (up until 5 days prior to term start)
 - ALs/Managers (up until the night before the term starts)
 - DL Support Team (any time following the guidelines on the [LMS website](#))
- § **Approval Requirements:**
 - Instructor of record and department head. Courses must have prior approval through university’s curricular review process ([Registrar Policy](#)) to be stacked.
- § **Data Access Permissions:**
 - [Canvas: Groups, Chat, Messages, Discussions, People](#)
 - [Potential third-party tools such as Zoom](#)
- § **Example:**
 - CSCE 477 Cybersecurity Risk stacked with CSCE 703 Cybersecurity Risk (both are face-to-face)
 - ACCT 455 International Accounting with ACCT 646 International Accounting (both are online)

Cross-Listed Courses (face-to-face and online) – students in different course subjects participate in the same course, as content is common across disciplines.

§ **Ability to Combine Sections:**

- DL Support Team (any time following the guidelines on [LMS website](#)) or Academic Liaison.
- An instructor of record only if assigned to both courses in the schedule of classes.

§ **Approval Requirements:**

- Instructor of record or department head from both departments offering course credit. Courses must have prior approval through the university's curricular review process ([Registrar Policy](#)).

§ **Data Access Permissions:**

- [Canvas: Groups, Chat, Messages, Discussions, People](#)
- [Potential third-party tools such as Zoom](#)

§ **Example:**

- HLTH 214 Health and Physical Activity for Children cross-listed with KINE 214 Health and Physical Activity for Children (both are face-to-face)
- ECCB 351 Geographic Information Systems for Resource Management and RWFM 351 Geographic Information Systems for Resource Management (both are online)

Multiple sections for organizational purposes (Honors) - students are enrolled in separate sections due to special designation.

§ **Ability to Combine Sections:**

- DL Support Team (any time following the guidelines on [LMS website](#)) or Academic Liaison.
- An instructor of record only if assigned to both courses in the schedule of classes.

§ **Approval Requirements:**

- Instructor of record or department head from both departments offering course credit. Courses must have prior approval through the university's curricular review process ([Registrar Policy](#)).

§ **Data Access Permissions:**

- [Canvas: Groups, Chat, Messages, Discussions, People](#)
- [Potential third-party tools such as Zoom](#)

§ **Example:**

- COMM 323, section 200 & 500 (Honors & Non-honors, both are face-to-face)

- **Multiple sections for organizational purposes (tuition differential) -**

undergraduate students who have a guaranteed tuition/tuition lock are not charged a distance education tuition differential. Those that opt out of the tuition lock are charged a distance education tuition differential. Students with the tuition lock enroll in section 599. Those without the tuition lock enroll in the 700-799 section. Some program-specific fees also fall into this category. The corresponding sections are the same course but have different sections for billing purposes only.

§ **Ability to Combine Sections:**

- DL Support Team (any time following the guidelines on [LMS website](#)) or Academic Liaison.
- An instructor of record only if assigned to both courses in the schedule of classes.

§ **Approval Requirements:**

- Instructor of record or department head from both departments offering course credit. Courses must have prior approval through the university's curricular review process ([Registrar Policy](#)).

§ **Data Access Permissions:**

- [Canvas: Groups, Chat, Messages, Discussions, People](#)
- [Potential third-party tools such as Zoom](#)

- **Multiple sections for organizational purposes (professional didactic cohorts) -** students are enrolled in separate sections based on their program.

There are two general scenarios:

- Professional Didactic Cohorts (Vet Med & Health Sciences). This is used when a cohort of students are admitted and are in lockstep in a standard curriculum with limited electives. Students may be enrolled in multiple sections for course management purposes, but they are enrolled in the same course path. This is a common practice at Professional Schools.

- Interdisciplinary courses (Health Sciences) were designed specifically for medical, nursing, and public health students to interact in one online course. All grades are entered in the combined course (comprised of duplicate sections) and course staff move grades to their appropriate home sections.

§ **Ability to Combine Sections:**

- DL Support Team (any time following the guidelines on [LMS website](#)) or Academic Liaison.
- An instructor of record only if assigned to all course sections in the schedule of classes.

§ **Approval Requirements:**

- TAMU Interdisciplinary Health Science courses are approved through TAMU Health (Dr. Kaunas) and reviewed by Dr. Dellinger.

§ **Data Access Permissions:**

- [Canvas: Groups, Chat, Messages, Discussions, People](#)
- [Potential third-party tools such as Zoom](#)

§ **Example:**

- Professional Didactic Cohort: VLCS 957 300 – 26 Spring Lrg Animal Diag & Therap II
- Interdisciplinary Health Sciences: 26 Spring ISEDH: Interprofessional Social & Ethical Dilemmas in Healthcare, 24 SPRING IPER/PHAR/NURS/MEID/DDDS Ethics

There are additional use cases such as paired face-to-face/synchronous online sections and connected classrooms, connecting different campuses with shared programs and faculty.

A cross-functional team reviewed the current procedures followed at TAMU and believes that the above scenarios do not violate FERPA and should continue to be permitted. However, in reviewing the following scenarios, the team believes the following use cases are quite possibly in violation of FERPA and should be discontinued based on the advice of the OGC:

Face-to-face sections with a single instructor that do not have common meeting times - Current practice is primarily for course management

efficiency for the instructor/TA when multiple sections have the same content/assignments/exams.

§ **Example:**

- ANTH 205:503,504 (meets on same days but different times)
- ATMO 352:501,502 (meets on different days and different times)
- CHEM 257:503,504,508,59,511,514,519,520 (some have same lecture with labs, some are different lecture and labs). The LMS support team will explore options for faculty to minimize the impact this situation may cause.

An online course with multiple sections combined

§ **Example:**

- BIOL 401:981,982,983,984,985,986,987

Different Instructors, Same Department – Combined sections are all part of the same department; there are multiple instructors of record with the same course number, but different sections. The purpose is to share TAs, assignments, and exams.

§ **Example:**

- GEOG 390:500,501,502,504,406,507, GEOG-660:600

Additional scenarios may be impacted and will be evaluated on an individual basis.

Our current workflow allows Academic Liaisons and faculty to merge courses in ORCA, the university's middleware for Canvas. Changes to the above scenarios will require technical changes that will limit these capabilities. Additional information will be shared with Academic Liaisons and faculty once the technical changes are completed.