

Instructional Continuity Planning Inclement Weather & Other Emergencies

Middle Tennessee State University
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Introduction & Background

Maintaining instructional continuity is central to MTSU’s academic mission and our commitment to supporting faculty and students, and preparing for potential disruptions is a critical element of any continuity plan. Technological advancements in learning delivery methods allow us to significantly improve our capacity to plan for a range of scenarios, and to respond to on-campus disruptions when they arise.

This document summarizes institutional preparedness and response when inclement weather and/or other emergencies disrupt university operations. The principles and guidelines below ensure instructional continuity in Academic Affairs, which is the division responsible for academic services at MTSU. The University Provost will activate this plan when university activities are interrupted and after consultation with the President.

When this plan is activated (in cases of inclement weather or other disruption), faculty and students will continue instructional activities remotely. This means that individual instructors must maintain continuity plans for their courses and will communicate these plans to students in advance and during disruption of classes. These may include guidelines for pivoting to remote synchronous learning, a shift to asynchronous information in the learning management system (i.e., D2L), asynchronous assignments, or other instructional methods. Courses not typically meeting on-ground (e.g., online, remote, etc.) will continue with normal operations.

Guiding Principles

1. Maintenance of academic integrity
2. Fairness, and “do no harm”
3. Clear, timely communications
4. Preparation, readiness, continual improvement
5. Accessibility, understandability, clear expectations

Assumptions

1. While always susceptible to disruptions in instructional continuity, Academic Affairs operates based on an “always open” ethos (during normal operating hours), especially regarding instruction, research, and student support.
2. We recognize our shared responsibilities to maintain instructional continuity and to preserve the safety, health, and well-being of the campus community. Faculty and other

key university personnel will continue to support instruction upon implementation of the instructional continuity plan.

3. MTSU faculty and students are familiar with the basics of MTSU's Learning Management System (LMS) and other tools such as Teams, Zoom, and Panopto.
4. This proposal assumes that faculty and students have access to electricity and the Internet. If these services are compromised, then remote/virtual instruction will not be possible and make-up class sessions may be necessary.

Types/Scales of Disruption

Level 1 – *Minor/Limited Disruption*. A temporary interruption of normal instruction, typically not exceeding three days and often limited in scope. No serious effects on the overall functional capacity of the Division or the University, but nevertheless requires some degree of action.

Examples: Inclement weather, localized chemical spill, water leak, plumbing failure, etc.

Level 2 – *Partial/Issue-Driven Disruption*. A somewhat longer instructional disruption, typically lasting from four days to two weeks. May be a slowly developing situation that negatively impacts Academic Affairs operations.

Examples: Extended inclement weather, civil disturbance, unauthorized occupancy of campus areas, tragic local, regional, or national event causing safety issues on campus, etc.

Level 3 – *Major Disruption*. A major event, typically two weeks or more in duration, which poses a significant risk to University personnel, students, visitors, or resources. Equivalent to a campus-wide "state of emergency" necessitating an immediate campus emergency response. May require assistance from external city, county, state, or federal agencies.

Examples: Infectious disease, fire, explosion, extended severe weather conditions/aftermath, earthquake, building collapse, flood, chemical release, radioactive contamination, etc.

Maintenance of Instructional Continuity

If a Level 1 or 2 inclement weather or other emergency disrupts face-to-face and/or hybrid courses, then MTSU will typically and temporarily move to remote instruction rather than cancel classes. Faculty members are expected to use D2L and other supported technology (i.e., Zoom, Teams, etc.) to maintain instruction. Faculty must plan to teach classes remotely at their regularly scheduled days/times and make recordings of class sessions available via D2L, Panopto, etc., to accommodate all students.

Asynchronous/synchronous online, synchronous remote, and other distance courses should proceed uninterrupted. These recommendations and others (by instructional mode) are summarized below.

Instructional Mode	Preferred Instructional Continuity Planning
On-ground, face-to-face	Move classes to online or another alternate format temporarily
Asynchronous online	Proceed as planned, undisrupted
Synchronous online	Proceed as planned, undisrupted
Hybrid	Move classes to fully online or another alternate format temporarily
Remote synchronous	Proceed as planned, undisrupted
Internship, Practicum	Coordinate with internal/external partners
Performances	If on campus, reschedule, if off campus, coordinate with host venue
Study abroad	Proceed as planned, undisrupted, and notify students of disruption
Student teaching	Coordinate with internal/external partners

Maintaining course meeting times enables schools and departments to avoid the challenges of scheduling make-up classes. If remote instruction is not possible, instructors will need to consult with their department chair or school director to reschedule missed classes or to identify other solutions (including asynchronous instruction or assignments) to meet credit-hour requirements. This means that faculty are expected to engage in appropriate professional development to acquire the skills required to utilize technology-enabled instructional methods to maintain instructional continuity. MTSU will provide accessible resources to support professional development, planning, and implementation of instructional continuity plans for instructors.

In summary, all faculty members must be prepared for the possibility of interruption to face-to-face instruction and communicate those preparations to students in course syllabi. Instructional continuity is central to MTSU’s credit-bearing courses and degree programs since course content associated with those courses and programs are required to be covered before the end of the academic term. Canceling classes when instructional continuity is feasible therefore jeopardizes faculty members’ abilities to present and discuss scheduled content and maintain course schedules (as outlined in course syllabi).

A Level 3 event constitutes a much more disruptive scenario of significant duration. Faculty and staff will await further information and instructions from the university.

Timing Considerations

In order to preserve academic integrity during disruption, departments, schools, and programs need to consider how time in classes might be altered to account for remote instruction. For instance, are there opportunities to condense and/or prioritize course materials? How might faculty adapt labs and similar activities? And how might the timing of disruption affect those situations?

- **Weeks 1-4** – Faculty may adjust course workload by altering assignments, even in instances of remote instruction. Faculty may also use activities and assignments in D2L or other technology to augment lost in-person class time.
- **Weeks 5-8** – Disruptions leading up to and during the midpoint of the term may necessitate flexibility with assignments or exams, make-up exams, or alternative assessments. Faculty may record an approximate midterm grade in Pipeline.
- **Week 9-Finals** – Faculty, departments, schools, and colleges may need to redefine what is considered for a course to be completed in this scenario. If there are projects or assignments due, faculty may consider extending deadlines, recording an approximate grade in Pipeline, or otherwise adjusting plans for bringing courses to completion.

Planning Considerations

Faculty, departments, and schools are encouraged to plan well ahead of short- (Level 1-2) or long-term (Level 3) disruptions to MTSU operations.

- Have alternative assignments prepared in advance, where possible.
- Consider ways that the syllabus/curricula may be adjusted, if needed.
- Familiarize yourself with and test technology remotely in advance of disruption.
- Consult online resources, MTSU Online, the LT&ITC, or other sources for ideas and/or assistance with planning for remote instruction.
- Plan for flexibility – remember that power outages or internet disruption on campus and elsewhere may affect faculty and students' abilities to access/engage online.

Communications Planning

The effective exchange of information during times of disruption is paramount, and the Provost's Office will communicate directly with faculty (via e-mail) if/when this continuity plan is activated. To set appropriate expectations for students, faculty should include information related to instructional continuity planning in their syllabi.

For immediate concerns, faculty should communicate directly with their department chair or school director, and chairs/directors should communicate directly with their dean (who will communicate needs directly to the Provost's Office). Just as in normal operations, each level of authority is responsible for those below them in the division hierarchy.

The Provost is also encouraged to establish an Academic Affairs Response Team to coordinate/oversee this continuity plan and to ensure adaptability, responsiveness, and information-sharing during times of disruptions (and potentially, emergency). This group will at the very least, include:

- Vice Provosts
- Deans' representative

- Chair of Chairs Council
- Faculty Senate President

The Provost or their designee will lead this team.

Additional Needs & Recommendations for Implementation

MTSU faculty already have access to video conferencing and collaboration platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Faculty also have access to D2L as an online learning management system (LMS). However, some faculty may also benefit from:

- Training sessions in Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and D2L.
- Access to MTSU Online expertise in effective distance education design, strategies, accessibility, etc.
- MTSU laptops, mobile hotspots, and/or other technical support.

While this report focuses on instruction, other Academic Affairs offices and resources will begin planning for remote operations to ensure continuity during campus disruptions, including but not limited to:

- MT One Stop
- LT&ITC
- MTSU Online
- Academic advising
- International Affairs

Other offices and resources outside of Academic Affairs should also begin planning for remote operations to support MTSU students during campus disruptions, including but not limited to:

- Disability & Access Center
- Dining Services
- ITD Help Desk, technical support
- Counseling Services
- Student Health Services

Recommended Next Steps

1. Distribute this plan for full implementation. Immediate action items for faculty include:
 - Determine how to best deliver course topics and/or assignments remotely during inclement weather or other disruption. This can be as easy as meeting on Zoom/Teams or assigning an asynchronous assignment to keep courses going.
 - Ensure readiness to communicate with students in your course(s) and with your department chair (or school director) during such an event.

- Briefly communicate your course continuity plan to students in a syllabus statement and in early course discussions (i.e., in the case of inclement weather, you can expect.....)
2. Make necessary revisions to MTSU policy, including but not limited to:
 - Policy 311 Class Attendance
 - Policy 322 Withdrawals from the University
 - Policy 725 Inclement Weather
 - Policy 803 Holiday, Administrative, and Emergency Closings
 - Policy 825 Leave Policies
 - Policy 828 Employee Attendance During Inclement Weather
 3. Explore necessary revisions to the MTSU Faculty Handbook, Student Handbook.

Conclusion

Supporting academic continuity is of paramount importance to MTSU's commitment to supporting faculty and students, so it is equally important to prepare for potential disruptions. This report proposes a set of coordinated institutional responses to support continuity of operations in the Division of Academic Affairs. While inclement weather, for example, may temporarily affect campus, MTSU will continue to provide high-quality education, support faculty, and maintain essential residential and safety services for the campus community.

Finally, it should be noted that plans proposed here will require dedicated time, attention, and resources that the institution, faculty, and staff should allocate accordingly. Maintaining academic continuity is a very high priority and is also a process rather than a discrete outcome. This means that at MTSU we should regularly review our planning and response (annually and after any disruptions) and start with continuity measures that can be readily and easily deployed in courses, as described above.