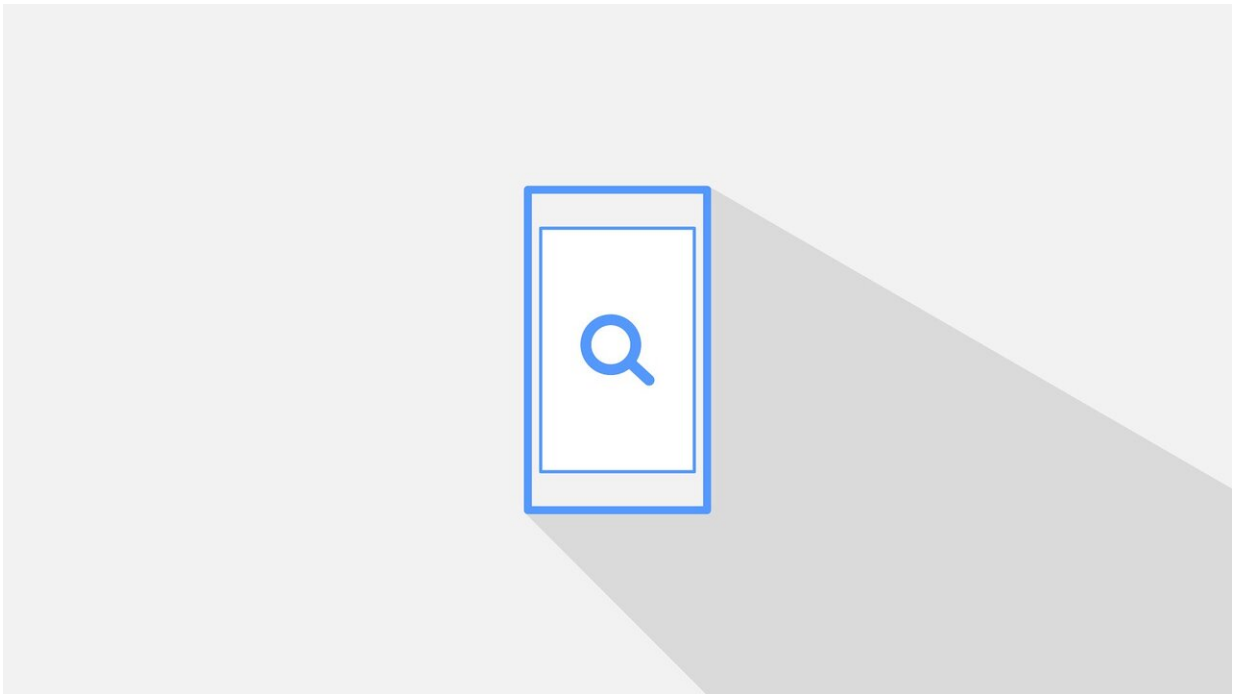


Appearance, social norms keep students off Zoom cameras

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When the semester shifted online amid the COVID-19 pandemic last spring, Cornell University instructor Mark Sarvary, and his teaching staff decided to encourage—but not require—students to switch on their cameras.

It didn't turn out as they'd hoped.

"Most of our students had their cameras off," said Sarvary, director of the Investigative Biology Teaching Laboratories in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALs).

"Students enjoy seeing each other when they work in groups. And instructors like seeing students, because it's a way to assess whether or not they understand the material," Sarvary said. "When we switched to online learning, that component got lost. We wanted to investigate the reasons for that."

Sarvary and co-instructor Frank Castelli, a CALs Active Learning Initiative education postdoctoral researcher, surveyed the 312 students in the class at the end of the semester to figure out why they weren't using their cameras—and to try to come up with ways to turn that trend around.

They found that while some students had concerns about the lack of privacy or their [home environment](#), 41% of the 276 respondents cited their appearance, and more than half of those who selected "other" as their reason for keeping their [camera](#) off explained that it was the norm. This suggested that explicitly encouraging camera use could boost participation without adverse effects, the researchers said.

"We felt it would create an undue burden and add stress in an already stressful time to require the cameras to be on, and we found this could disproportionately affect certain groups of students, such as underrepresented minorities," said Castelli, first author of "Why Students Do Not Turn on Their Video Cameras During Online Classes and an Equitable and Inclusive Plan to Encourage Them to Do So," which published Jan. 10 in *Ecology and Evolution*.

In the survey, Castelli and Sarvary found that among underrepresented minorities, 38% said they were concerned about other people being seen

behind them, and 26% were concerned about their [physical location](#) being visible; while among non-underrepresented minorities, 24% were worried about people behind them and 13% about their physical locations.

"It's a more inclusive and equitable strategy to not require the cameras but to instead encourage them, such as through active learning exercises," Castelli said. "This has to be done carefully so it doesn't create an environment where you're making those without cameras on feel excluded. But at the same time, if you don't explicitly ask for the cameras and explain why, that can lead to a social norm where the camera is always off. And it becomes a spiral of everyone keeping it off, even though many students want it on."

Establishing camera use as the norm, explaining the reasons that cameras improve the class and employing active learning techniques and icebreakers, such as beginning each class with a show-and-tell, are techniques that could boost participation, the authors suggested in the study.

"Active learning plays an important role in [online learning](#) environments," Sarvary said. "Students may feel more comfortable turning on their cameras in breakout rooms. Polling software or Zoom chats are alternatives that can help the instructor assess [student](#) learning, even without seeing nodding or smiling or confused expressions."

The authors also suggested instructors address potential distractions, give breaks to help maintain attention, and poll their students to learn about other potential barriers to camera use or participation.

Though they have not yet formally studied the effect, the instructors in the 24 sections of the laboratory class all observed improved camera participation when they used some of these strategies last fall.

"We wanted to develop an engaging and inclusive virtual learning environment, using the best pedagogical methods," Sarvary said. "That's why we wanted to know why the students are not turning their cameras on, rather than just assuming or, as some instructors do, requiring them to turn their cameras on. We wanted to take an education research approach and figure out the best practices."

More information: Frank R. Castelli et al. Why students do not turn on their video cameras during online classes and an equitable and inclusive plan to encourage them to do so, *Ecology and Evolution* (2021). [DOI: 10.1002/ece3.7123](https://doi.org/10.1002/ece3.7123)

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