

Canvas Templates:

# Crafting a Path Forward for Improved Online Learning

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## Executive Summary


The University of Colorado Boulder's current reliance on the learning management system Canvas for providing an online course structure has revealed to the university's Office of Information Technology that numerous improvements must be made to improve the online learning experience for teachers and students alike.

In the current state of the platform, teachers are easily confused and overwhelmed when it comes to creating their Canvas course, which leads to poor course design and structure and influences many teachers to utilize outside resources other than Canvas.

Students, meanwhile, are overwhelmed by the mental burden required to navigate and use numerous online Canvas courses that are all structured in entirely different ways. Tasks that should be simple for any student, such as locating a course syllabus or accessing a course Zoom link, have become complicated tasks that add to the pressure and stress already experienced by college students.

To improve teacher and student experiences with Canvas, the University of Colorado Boulder Office of Information Technology has developed multiple Canvas templates, which are premade course outlines that aid teachers in creating cohesive and easy-to-navigate Canvas courses. These templates are accessible through the canvas sandbox client and used by some teachers at the university. Looking to ensure the success of these templates moving forward, the Office of Information Technology turned to our group to perform research and provide recommendations concerning Canvas templates.

Using a mixed-methods approach consisting of extensive participant-observer data, informal interviews, and analysis of online discussions, our group identified multiple pain-points of Canvas and Canvas templates from the teacher and student perspectives. We then crafted numerous recommendations for the Office of Information Technology to address these drawbacks and create a more positive online learning experience for both teachers and students moving forward.



To better facilitate *teacher* success, our key recommendations are as follows:

- Make documentation more concise
- Create more video tutorials for the documentation
- Implement a step-by-step guide in the documentation
- Create a “Pathway to Canvas” micro-credential
- Allow teachers to discover, browse, and pre-select Canvas templates
- Recommend that teachers utilize Canvas over outside resources

To better facilitate *student* success, our key recommendations are as follows:

- Utilize student-teacher collaboration in designing templates
- Gather student feedback on individual Canvas courses
- Implement a “Best Practices” checklist
- Ensure a singular online learning hub for students



## Canvas Put to the Test

Following its in-person closure in March 2020, the University of Colorado Boulder turned to the learning management system Canvas to aid teachers in delivering their courses in an online format. While Canvas had been utilized lightly for multiple years before this point, this would be an actual test of the platform's ability to provide 100% online learning for the school.

A year later, it's safe to say that Canvas passed the test... but certainly not with flying colors. Students and teachers both have major gripes with the platform's usability, and while Canvas makes all-online learning possible, it can also make all-online learning rather painful.

## Canvas' Current Pain Points

### Teacher Perspective

It is not surprising that teachers have a hard time creating intuitive Canvas courses, considering the fact that they are presented with a blank page to start with. There is very little guidance for creating a course from scratch. Teachers can either add modules and other resources one by one or load a template into their course. Adding in each individual resource is potentially time consuming, and it isn't always clear what a feature does. The templates available provide a very nice starting point but can be a bit difficult to enable. The current system requires professors to know about the existence of templates, locate the documentation, and follow steps to import a template. This process can be daunting to a teacher who is not comfortable with technology or with using Canvas. As a result, some teachers choose to use a personal website if they find that Canvas doesn't fit their needs.




## Student Perspective

This aforementioned lack of guidance for teachers in creating material on Canvas leads to difficult pages for students to navigate or use effectively, diminishing the positive class experience and hindering students. When teachers don't fully understand how to use Canvas, tools go unused, and links may be broken. This can also make it very difficult to find assignments, Zoom links, or even participate in class correctly. Even with correct course setups, one teacher's class pages often differ wildly from others; this means students may have to learn an entirely new layout for each class. Teachers may even use their own personal or external sites to host content and only use Canvas to link to these new pages, creating even more confusion. Students may need to perform ten or more tasks for any given class - accessing a Zoom link, submitting assignments, downloading files, and otherwise participating in class - and remembering a separate way to do each of these things imposes a significant and unnecessary mental load.

## Our Task

In an attempt to address the problems teachers and students have with Canvas, the University of Colorado Boulder's Office of Information Technology (OIT) developed numerous Canvas "templates" that teachers can use to create attractive, streamlined Canvas courses that improve both the teaching and learning experiences. Teachers need only download a template and upload it to their Canvas course in order to see immediate improvements.

While the templates are currently available and in use, OIT reached out to our team to better understand how the templates can be best utilized moving forward. We were tasked with analyzing Canvas and the Canvas templates from teacher and student perspectives to determine how Canvas templates can be leveraged to take online learning to an all-new level. Upon doing



so, we discovered the strengths and weaknesses of the current Canvas templates, brainstormed the best methods for improving campus-wide teacher adoption of Canvas templates, and concluded that students seek similarly structured, easily navigable Canvas courses from their teachers.


## Methodology

Our team utilized a mixed-methods approach consisting of participant-observer data, informal interviews, and analysis of online discussions to perform this task.

As a group of students, we have spent a significant amount of our time at the University of Colorado Boulder using Canvas courses. With an average of five classes per group member per semester, we have the experience of 120 fully online courses run using Canvas in the past year and a half alone. When our pre-pandemic expertise is taken into consideration (courses still utilized Canvas during this time but relied on them to a lesser extent), we have the experience of an additional 200 courses run using Canvas in some form, making for a total of 320 courses completed using Canvas. It is also notable that our team members have the experience of 5 courses in which they were given a “Teacher” access role to Canvas as a part of their job as Course Assistants. It is this wealth of experience that has informed the majority of our findings and recommendations for this report.

Our group has also performed a number of informal interviews with peers and colleagues to gain their perspectives on Canvas and the state of online learning in general. These interviews served to confirm our experiences with Canvas and online learning as well as to fill in any missing gaps in our knowledge of the two subjects.





In a similar vein, members of our group observed University of Colorado Boulder-centric online discussions in places such as Facebook, Reddit, and Discord. As with the informal interviews, these online discussions served to confirm and augment our own experiences.

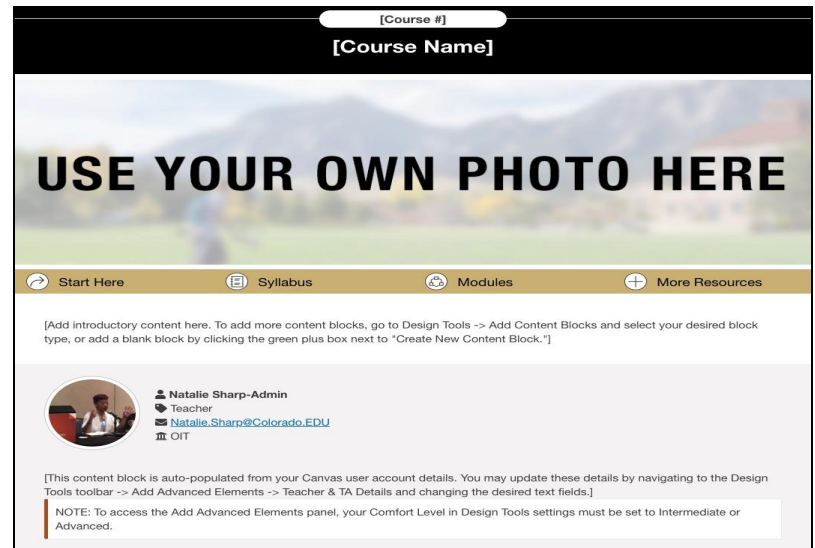
## Constraints

This paper is concerned solely with the use of Canvas templates for improving the online learning experience for both teachers and students at the University of Colorado Boulder. While there are many other aspects of Canvas that could stand to be improved, the underlying design of the online platform itself falls outside the control of the Office of Information Technology at the University of Colorado Boulder. Such design choices are instead under the purview of Instructure, the company that owns Canvas. It is important to understand how the design choices made by Instructure affect teacher and student use of the Canvas platform, but these design choices cannot be directly changed by OIT.

Even within the subject of Canvas templates, there are multiple constraints that our team faces. Firstly, it must be recognized that the University of Colorado Boulder cannot require all teachers to utilize Canvas templates. Strong recommendations can be made in favor of Canvas templates, but no sweeping order can come from the top down. Stemming from this constraint, it must also be recognized that Canvas templates may not be suitable for all course deliveries. The University of Colorado Boulder is home to an incredibly diverse variety of degree programs and class types, meaning there are many course deliveries - such as for courses in music and fine arts - that require their own unique Canvas setup to work best. Finally, Canvas as a platform and the field of online education as a whole are constantly evolving, meaning that Canvas templates too will have to evolve in order to keep up. While examining the effect that technologies such as video communication or no-code software integrations may have on Canvas templates is important, we determined it to be outside the scope of our current research.

## Analysis of Existing Canvas Templates

OIT has already developed numerous Canvas templates that can be utilized by teachers to ease the burden of developing their online courses and improve the learning experience for students. These templates can currently be used on the course home or landing page, the course syllabus page, and the course modules page. When the templates are finally uploaded to the Canvas page (see Our Findings For Teachers for further discussion of the difficulty of accessing the templates), there is no doubt that they offer vast improvements for the teacher tasked with building their course page from scratch.



*A homepage template created by OIT and loaded into Canvas.*

The course homepage templates - “Nav Bar”, “Schedule With Expanders”, and “Tabs With Nav Bar” - all include sections that afford for teachers to provide essential information such as a course overview, the course schedule, a link to the syllabus, and a link to the main “modules” of the course. These templates also make use of large signifiers to aid students in navigating the homepage when they access the course. What’s especially nice about these templates is how every action needed to edit them can be accessed with a single click. Clicking on the large header image, for instance, brings up an “Image Options” popup that makes it easy for a teacher to edit the said image. Likewise, clicking on the “Syllabus” button brings up a “Link Options” popup that makes it easy for a teacher to edit said link. Thus, teachers are not

challenged to learn the complexities of Canvas in order to edit their templates, which makes the templates much more accessible.


The course syllabus template works in a similar fashion. This template easily and discernibly affords for teachers to provide a course description, course objectives, and contact information, and it utilizes numerous signifiers for all sections. Each of these sections is a simple textbox, so it is again easy for a teacher to edit the template without requiring much outside knowledge. Perhaps the only thing missing from this template is a section that indicates teachers should (and affords teachers to) upload a syllabus they already created or have modified from previous years to the page as well. Many students download such documents in case they need to access the course syllabus in a pinch, so constraining the page to not have uploaded documents is not ideal.

<p><b>Module 1 Overview</b></p> <p>Add introduction text here.</p> <p><b>Readings</b></p> <p>(List readings here. If you have pdfs readings, you can add them to that week's module so students can easily access them.)</p> <p><b>Lectures and Videos</b></p> <p>(List the video lectures or other videos here. We recommend not embedding videos here since the page will be long and students will have to scroll a lot.)</p> <p><b>Discussions</b></p> <p>(List discussions for this module here. This is an easy reference place for students and they know exactly what they need to do.)</p> <p><b>Assignments</b></p> <p>(List assignments for this module here. This is an easy reference place for students and they know exactly what they need to do.)</p> <p><b>Any Additional Information</b></p> <p>(Include any other information students may need to know for this module.)</p>
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*The Module template immediately after being loaded into Canvas.*

including assignments. It is notable that interacting with and filling out these sections is much more complex than in the course homepage or course syllabus templates, however. Creating discussions, uploading videos, or linking to assignments are all tasks that can be difficult in Canvas since they may not align with teachers' conceptual models of how they utilized such

Finally, the course module template provides teachers with useful building blocks for constructing the crux of their courses - the actual lessons themselves. Like the course homepage and course syllabus templates, this template includes premade sections for uploading readings, embedding videos, linking to discussions, or



materials in the in-person classroom. As such, it would be useful for these modules to be more fleshed out - such as with the course homepage templates - to include instructions or examples for teachers as opposed to the current short descriptions such as “List discussions for this module here” or “List readings here”.

There is no doubt that these templates are a major step up from the blank Canvas courses that teachers are currently presented with. They greatly reduce the overwhelming feeling of creating a course from scratch; rather than focus on building everything from the ground up, teachers can simply focus on populating the page with information about their course. Perhaps just as important is the fact that, when used by many teachers, these templates serve to create a standardized learning environment for students. Each course using these templates will have an easy-to-find syllabus, similarly structured course modules, and a long-term course schedule, for instance. As mentioned previously, having non-standardized Canvas courses presents a massive cognitive load for students, so this is a great step forward in allowing students to focus more on their studies and less on navigating a bevy of online courses.

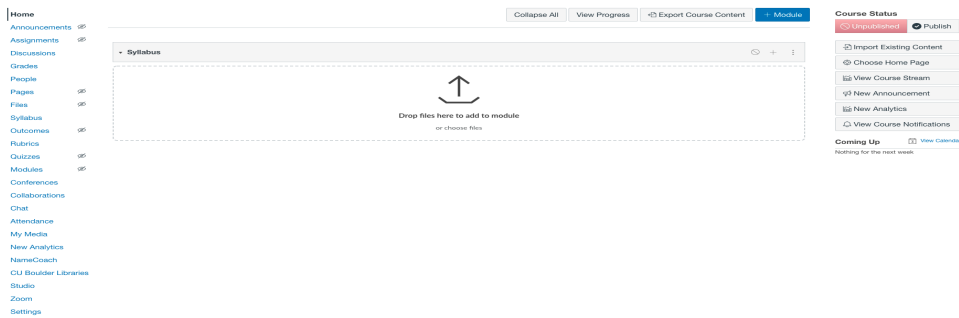
While there are still a few minor improvements that could be made, we applaud OIT for their thoughtful design of the existing Canvas templates. These templates provide a fantastic base for improving the online education experience for teachers and students alike. In the following sections, we will discuss further actions that can be taken by OIT to expand on this base and continue to enhance online education for all.

## Findings

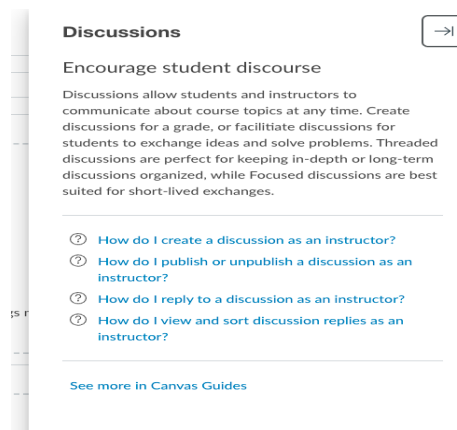
### Teacher Perspective

When teachers are given their course Canvas page at the beginning of a semester, it is completely empty save for a minimalistic outline of the possible “pages” that can be created as a

part of the course. The wide variety of actions that a teacher can take from this point is overwhelming. Would it make sense to set a homepage first? Or perhaps to import course content? Maybe it would be best to fill the homepage with information about the course, but what information should that be? As teachers begin to click around they are provided some direction from Canvas in the form of sidebar “tutorial panels”, but the direction provided is still very minimal. With so many available actions to take - and so few instructions on how to take them - it is understandable that teachers will miss filling out certain sections of their course, place course information in the wrong location, or accidentally create course settings that will hinder the progress of themselves and their students once the class actually begins.



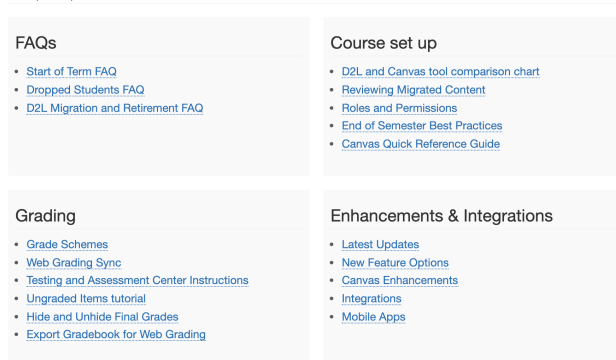
*The empty page teachers see when opening their course for the first time.*



*An example of the minimal instructions provided by Canvas in the form of sidebar “tutorial panels”.*

In one attempt to make creating a Canvas course less intimidating, the Office of Information Technology has created its own extensive documentation of Canvas and compiled outside documentation with the idea of providing teachers the information they need to set up a course correctly and quickly.

Help topics



*The amount of links to click within the documentation is overwhelming.*

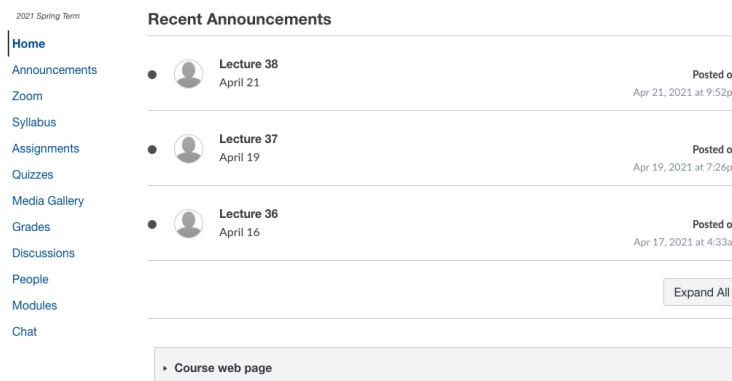
Unfortunately, this documentation is just as overwhelming to digest. It provides no step-by-step instructions for getting a course created from the ground up, but rather provides bountiful information on all aspects of Canvas all at once. Teachers hoping to just get a start by setting up their homepage must sift through information on grading schemes, roles and permissions, assignments groups, or

using announcements and the inbox in order to find what they are looking for. Furthermore, this documentation is provided in a text format. While it attempts to include example pictures throughout, the fact of that matter is that it can still be very easy for a teacher to get “lost” on any given page when they can’t locate the area of the screen that the picture was taken or can’t translate the written instructions to the Canvas course.

It holds that the documentation for using Canvas templates is equally as confusing as the documentation for setting a course up from scratch. Our group was directly provided with links that discuss setting up these templates, and yet it still took our eight members over an hour to discover how to actually get templates up and working. There were multiple “red herrings” (links that looked to provide the information we needed but, upon further inspection, did not) and numerous instances of “hidden information” (information placed in collapsed dropdowns) that made the process much more difficult than it should have been. It is also known that only 1,124 of 3,265 courses at CU have opened the tool necessary to use templates, further proving that

accessing this tool needs more clear instructions. While providing thorough documentation is always a good idea, the documentation must be structured in such a manner that the information it presents is both easy to find and understand. The current documentation does not meet these requirements.

In light of all the challenges that Canvas presents to teachers looking to set up their course Canvas page at the beginning of a semester, some teachers decide to use an outside resource such as Google Sites to create their online course instead. While this is a tempting choice, it must be noted that doing so imposes negative consequences on teachers, the Office of Information Technology, and students. Teachers who take this route are “on their own” when it comes to locating documentation or tutorials for setting up the course and are unable to access the many integrations and improvements occurring in Canvas on a regular basis. The Office of Information Technology is still forced to attempt to support these teachers, however, and must spread their resources such that they can learn about and provide help for a bevy of online platforms rather than focusing on just Canvas. While this will be discussed in greater depth in the following section, students are also forced to deal with the burden of having their courses spread across the internet instead of having everything compiled in one easily accessible location.



*An example of a Canvas course with only a link to external webpage*

## Student Perspective

In any given semester, a student at the University of Colorado Boulder can be expected to be taking approximately five courses. While the mental load of participating in and completing work for these classes is daunting on its own, students also face a challenge in navigating and using the online Canvas course provided by each course.

It is typical for students to face a set of Canvas courses that are all structured completely differently from one another. In an example from one of our group members, one course provides a syllabus on the homepage but leaves the “Syllabus” page of Canvas blank, another provides a syllabus on only the “Syllabus” page, and yet another course does not provide a syllabus at all (the syllabus was sent out via email). This differing course structure places an unnecessary mental burden on students. Locating a syllabus should be an incredibly simple process yet is instead actually very difficult because the student must recall how each course is set up and navigate them properly.

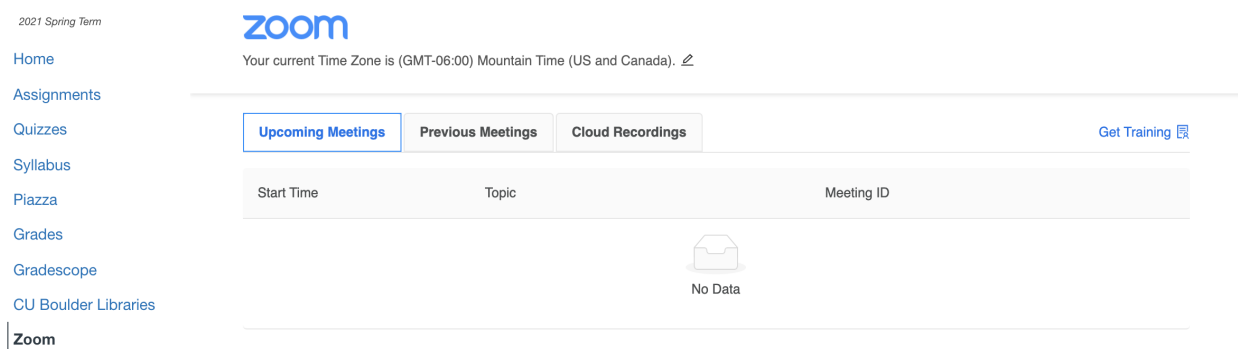
Date	Details	Due
Thu Jan 21, 2021	Quiz 01	due by 11:59pm
Fri Jan 22, 2021	Homework 01	due by 5pm
Wed Jan 27, 2021	Quiz 02	due by 11:59pm

*An example of the syllabus page not being utilized. Instead, it links to an outside source.*

Another example of the effect that differing online course structure has on students stems from the multitude of ways students must use to access Zoom meeting rooms. Some courses



utilize the “Zoom” tab within Canvas, others post a link to Zoom on the homepage, a select few courses place their Zoom links on the course calendar, and there are even courses that only send out Zoom links via email and do not place the link anywhere on Canvas at all. For students switching between multiple classes each and every day, this provides a major headache and often causes students to be a few minutes late to the beginning of their classes.



*An example of the Zoom tab in Canvas not being utilized.*

As mentioned in the above section, it is also common for students to be taking classes in which their teacher has decided not to use Canvas and instead utilizes an outside resource such as Google Sites. In such situations, students no longer have the ability to access all of their courses from one distinct location (the Canvas dashboard). Rather, they now must keep track of their Canvas courses *and* any other courses, whether by utilizing bookmarks, emailing links to themselves, or creating a virtual sticky note on their desktop. Navigating between multiple sites also means that students will be presented with multiple login screens and tasked with remembering numerous usernames and password combinations. Sites created using outside resources also have entirely separate structures from Canvas courses. Whereas Canvas courses all have the same general structure by design of the platform (students know to look at the “Syllabus” page to try and find a syllabus or the “Zoom” page to try and find a Zoom link), courses created with resources other than Canvas may not follow this structure at all. Students

effectively have to double the amount of work needed to familiarize themselves with the online courses, and the mental overhead that comes from constantly switching between formats cannot be understated either.

← → ↻ [home.cs.colorado.edu/~alko5368/indexCSCI2820.html](https://home.cs.colorado.edu/~alko5368/indexCSCI2820.html) ☆

## CSCI 2820: Linear Algebra with Computer Science Applications

Fall 2020

University of Colorado, Boulder

### META

<b>Subject</b>	In brief, this course introduces the fundamentals of linear algebra in the context of computer science applications. It includes definitions of vectors and matrices, their various operations, linear functions and equations, and least squares. It also includes the basics of floating point computation and numerical linear algebra. The list of covered topics are mentioned in details below. In this course, the students will become comfortable working with the basic tools in linear algebra and also familiar with several computer science applications throughout the semester. .
<b>Prerequisites</b>	Mathematical maturity; Requires prerequisite courses of (CSCI 2270 or CSCI 2275) and APPM 1360 or MATH 2300 (all minimum grade C-).  If you have not taken those classes but believe that your background is close to being sufficient, please make sure you have filled up any potential gaps by the end of the second week of classes.  If you are not sure whether your background suffices, please see the instructor.

*Instead of using Canvas for this course, the professor has opted for a personal website.*



## Recommendations

### For Teachers

#### ➤ **Make Documentation More Concise**


While the pages and tutorials offered by both Canvas and OIT are meant to be helpful and allow professors to customize courses as much as possible, in reality it's quite overwhelming to dig through so much information. To make it easier for teachers, the documentation should be much more concise. Teachers should not be expected to use multiple different websites and pages to learn how to create an organized and attractive course for their students. Eliminating redundancies and streamlining the documentation is one less complicated approach to the problem. Reducing the number of links and locations where information is located would also make things much more simple for teachers.

#### ➤ **Create More Video Tutorials for the Documentation**

The current documentation surrounding Canvas utilizes many pictures to guide and instruct the reader. While this is certainly better than having only text, even images can still be confusing and hard to follow. To make the documentation as clear as possible, it is imperative to rely more heavily on short video tutorials. Videos that are less than a minute in length can quickly and clearly demonstrate features of Canvas while not overwhelming the viewer.

#### ➤ **Implement a Step-by-Step Guide in the Documentation**

\_\_\_\_\_As noted in our findings, the first thing that teachers see when they enter their Canvas course at the beginning of a new semester is a blank screen with numerous confusing options and features available for creating course content. The current documentation surrounding Canvas



provides no guidelines or steps to follow, and so teachers may be equally lost when they attempt to read the documentation while searching for help. To alleviate this, a step-by-step guide should be implemented that guides teachers through the basic first steps they need to take to get a skeleton course created before informing them of Canvas' more in-depth and complex functionalities. By creating a strong base to work off of, teachers will feel much more comfortable working in Canvas and will already have a more usable site than if they were forced to guide themselves through the process.

➤ **Create a “Pathway to Canvas” Microcredential**

Creating an optional “Pathway to Canvas” microcredential that provides teachers with in-depth learning and step-by-step guides to Canvas' more advanced features could also serve to be very useful. For teachers with complex needs for their online course, such a microcredential would allow them to learn how to create intuitive and easy to use courses.

➤ **Allow Teachers to Browse and Pre-Select Canvas Templates**

Templates are a great way to improve the design of a course, but currently it's very hard to find and use them. The documentation surrounding templates is confusing, and as mentioned previously, it took significant effort for our team to get templates working. One possible way to increase discoverability is for teachers to receive their courses from OIT with the templates preloaded. When in the process of requesting a course, teachers should be provided with a gallery - or better yet, an interactive sandbox - of courses already preloaded with certain templates. After viewing or engaging with these templates, teachers could select the template they desire for their course and an experienced member of OIT could handle all the work of uploading the template for the teacher.



➤ **Recommend That Teachers Utilize Canvas Over Outside Resources**

Although OIT and the University of Colorado Boulder cannot require that all teachers use Canvas courses, it should provide strong recommendations that all teachers do so and thoroughly illuminate the implications of using an outside resource for creating an online course. If teachers are made aware of the potential consequences of such an action, they are much more likely to stick to Canvas for their course, which will bring benefits to themselves, students, and OIT. Teachers who are very experienced with technology and other online resources may still choose to forge their own path, but they are less likely to require in-depth help and will know that they are doing so at their own risk.

For Students

➤ **Utilize Student-Teacher Collaboration in Designing Templates**

From the student perspective, having Canvas courses of all shapes, sizes, and structures provides a significant mental burden. Ensuring a majority of teachers at the University of Colorado Boulder adopts Canvas templates, as described in the above section, will provide the first main step in unifying the Canvas experience. To make these templates as effective as possible, we recommend that OIT heavily rely on student-teacher collaborative design so that the needs of both parties are represented in the final product. This could be accomplished by creating student-teacher focus groups or workshops in which OIT asks for feedback on specific templates, asks student and teachers to design their own templates, or even narrows the focus to specific aspects about Canvas that feel clunky and unitutive that both students and teachers would like to see improved.



➤ **Gather Student Feedback on Individual Canvas Courses**

Students currently utilize a teacher's Canvas course for an entire semester but have no method of giving the teacher feedback on what aspects of their course are well-designed or could stand to be improved. Rather than missing out on this feedback entirely or placing the burden on teachers to create their own surveys, we recommend OIT create an online form teachers can use to receive feedback on their Canvas course at the end of a semester. By creating the form themselves, OIT would ensure that the questions are crafted in a way that encourages students to give the best feedback possible that could then be implemented by their teachers.

➤ **Implement a “Best Practices” Checklist**

Even if all teachers adopt Canvas templates, it must be noted that teachers still have vast autonomy to decide what pages get populated with content and what information is included on each page. Because this creates extra opportunities to confuse students, OIT should create a “Best Practices” checklist that teachers should strive to meet before their Canvas course goes live to students. This checklist would include items such as “A link to your Zoom meeting is included within the ‘Zoom’ page of Canvas” or “The ‘Syllabus’ page of Canvas includes a downloadable course syllabus at a minimum”.

Since multiple departments across the University of Colorado Boulder are already beginning to implement their own standards for online courses, this checklist should be created such that OIT sets the “base” recommendations applicable to all courses while specific majors, departments, or class levels could optionally add their own recommendations. For example, say within the Civil, Environmental, and Architectural Departments the checklist is expanded such that all lecture based classes are recommended to be created using the same template. With such a checklist in place, students would have a more sufficient understanding of how to navigate their courses because they would be streamlined in the same way.



➤ **Ensure a Singular Online Learning Hub for Students**

As emphasized above, OIT should provide strong recommendations that teachers use Canvas courses instead of other counterparts like Google Sites. Working to streamline the Canvas experience for students will have much less of an effect than is possible if teachers continue to create sites outside of Canvas that utilize their own unique structure and content. The benefits of using Canvas as a singular online learning hub where students need only use one set of login information and are familiar with the modes and methods of navigating the platform cannot be overstated.



## Online Feedback

With our findings and recommendations in hand, we decided it would be useful to request feedback from those people whom these suggestions would affect. We turned to the social media platform of Reddit to consult r/cuboulder, a subgroup populated with both students and professors of CU, with the hopes of maximizing the number of responses we would receive due to the community's large size.

We provided a brief summary of the project and our recommendations, then opened the floor to feedback from professors and TAs. How would they feel about templates, stronger documentation, and optional micro credentials? What else did they want us to know that they loved or hated about Canvas? What mechanics did they have difficulty with or took too long to learn? In the end we received a total of ten high-level replies.

### Teacher Response

The knowledge that there exists such drastic inconsistencies between classes came as a surprise to one teacher, who admitted that it had never occurred to them. They see Canvas as a vast improvement over D2L with few downsides. However, this user claimed that grading via the mobile app is “a terrible experience. It’s full of display bugs and ridiculous UX.” While there is nothing we can do about grading, this user does raise a point about display bugs we had not previously considered: current templates are not optimized for mobile. If the page has not been properly set up so that all links work correctly, students may have difficulty locating material. They were also concerned about the templates being overdesigned with CU branding. They prefer simplicity and they worry about having no control over that.

One professor who works with the Learning Design Group brought up the templates that OIT has already created and responded that they regularly share them with others. Another user replied to them to say that they felt the templates are very good in their experience of using them, which shows promise for any future templates.





## Student Response

Students were overwhelmingly in favor of creating a better Canvas environment, with one user saying that “having standard Canvas layouts/templates would be a game changer from the student side.” A TA contributed to the conversation with their thoughts from both sides of the equation; most notable was their student perspective in saying that Canvas works very well when done right but it’s extremely frustrating when set up poorly. A graduating senior said that they would have loved to have seen templates and they would have wanted to see the Assignments tab used properly more often.

Only one user mentioned the use of alternate mediums to Canvas, specifically Gradescope and Piazza. “As a new student, I was overwhelmed at first with all of the different services I had to familiarize myself with but I did manage to get over it fairly quickly.” While they felt that Gradescope was an improvement on the proprietary Canvas grading system, Piazza didn’t seem to have any clear advantages despite all of its features and was just another thing to keep track of.

## Other Response

The final user is neither professor nor student; their experience with Canvas comes instead from assisting professors with lesson plans. Their insight was that Canvas is “a nightmare unless you know about all the extensions you can add.” They go on to mention that it took them weeks to figure out how to set up certain features such as recurring due dates at different times for different sections. They summarize the experience with “It’s not difficult to navigate, but there are so many issues with little things.”

## Appendix: Reddit User Replies

Subreddit: [r/cuboulder](#)

- [u/mtrademarked](#): “I'm both a TA and a student, so it's been interesting to see both sides of Canvas. Here are my thoughts, which obviously don't represent everyone's opinions.

Main pros: sending announcements, quickly uploading content, speed grading quizzes, Zoom integration

Main cons: inadequate flexibility for unique grading situations, a lot of repeating the same steps for creating assignments (maybe a better way exists?), limited options when making quizzes

As an instructor, I generally like Canvas. For me, the pros outweigh the cons and I like that my students can find everything in one place.

As a student, I really appreciate when professors have their Canvas pages nicely set up and well-used. When they don't properly use Canvas, it's truly infuriating.”

- [u/Nickolai1989](#): “A mere student here, but I've noticed that several of my classes use gradescope instead of the built in assignments system. One class opted to use piazza instead of the built in discussion system. As a new student, I was overwhelmed at first with all of the different services I had to familiarize myself with but I did manage to get over it fairly quickly.

Gradescope was actually fairly slick and seemed to have a better system for feedback than the built in one.

Piazza has lots of bells and whistles but I didn't really see any compelling advantages over the built in discussion system.”

- [u/bolharr2250](#): “I think a template would be awesome. While I'm a graduating senior, honestly the most helpful thing was for a class to have accurate Assignments with correct dates. It was so useful to see when stuff was due, what the expectations of the assignment, and upcoming assignments in the dashboard. Since you can sync your calendar with Canvas, that was also super useful. If every class used assignments as intended, it would make planning my school week a breeze.”


- [u/oxbudy](#): “It was such a blessing to finally have all of my professors fully utilize canvas for my last semester. After years of juggling partial assignment and class info between various platforms, it saved me a sizable amount of stress to always know exactly what was expected for assignments and when.”
- [u/ntnsndr](#): “A professor here. Canvas is such a huge improvement over D2L, I mostly don't notice the downsides. I would love to see more best practices of how others are using it; the student comments here about inconsistencies between classes are honestly something I don't even think about.

One fear I have about templates (based on my past experience working with Continuing Ed) is that they would be over-designed with CU branding and stuff that's easy to break. I like to keep my materials on Canvas as simple as possible, while providing all the information students expect, but nothing more. It often feels like the institution inclines us toward excess in our syllabi and related materials, which increases the chances that students will glaze over the stuff that is most directly pertinent to the course. But I would love to hear student perspectives on that.

Another thing: Grading on the mobile app (Android) is a terrible experience. It's full of display bugs, and ridiculous UX (like a slider for choosing grades, when obviously one is never looking to enter an approximate grade).

Above all, thank you for making the switch to Canvas and working on continual improvements.”

- [u/TheBryanScout](#): “I'm neither a TA nor a prof but having standard Canvas layouts/templates would be a game changer from the student side. Everything would be so much easier that way.”
- [u/PhantomDeuce](#): “Include the option to add paragraphs and list to modules, not just text headers.”

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- [u/brianckeegan](#): “I’d be lost without Canvas for managing readings, submissions, and grading. I’ve become a huge fan of Rubrics as well. I’m also one of the 1% of users who uses the API to handle some tasks programmatically.”
  - [u/Sara\\_Renee14](#): “I’m not a prof, but I work with the chem profs on their lesson plans. Canvas is a nightmare unless you know about all the extensions you can add. It took me weeks to figure out how to set up recurring due dates at different times for different sections. It’s not difficult to navigate, but there are so many issues with little things.”
  - [u/OptimisticOrwell](#): “Make it possible to bcc on emails through Canvas. Make the email function more streamlined in general. Make Canvas more friendly to qualitative, non-points-based courses, which also means letting people opt out of the default setting that displays class grade averages (this is especially problematic for small classes that have components like presentations, where the grades/process do not all occur on the same day). Make the analytics more detailed/useful.”