

FERPA Compliance Guidance for Merging Courses in Canvas at De Anza College

Purpose

This guidance is intended to help De Anza College faculty use **merged Canvas course shells** while protecting student privacy under FERPA. In Canvas documentation, this process is often called **cross-listing**; in De Anza's Canvas Site Manager, faculty may see language such as **"Combine Section into Existing Course."** For purposes of this document, the term **merging courses in Canvas** refers to combining multiple Canvas sections into one Canvas course shell for course management.

This guidance focuses on practical steps faculty can take to prevent students in one section from seeing or interacting with students in another section when that interaction is not part of the officially scheduled or approved class experience. FERPA regulations define education records as records directly related to a student and maintained by an educational agency or institution, and personally identifiable information may include a student's name, identifiers, or other information that could reasonably identify the student.

When Merging Courses in Canvas May Be Appropriate

Merging courses in Canvas may be appropriate when an instructor is teaching multiple sections and wants to manage course content, grading, announcements, assignments, and communication in one Canvas shell. However, merging sections creates privacy responsibilities because students may be able to view names, posts, comments, messages, group membership, attendance, recordings, or other information that identifies students outside their enrolled section.

General rule: If sections do not meet together as one class, students should not be able to see or interact with students from other sections unless the interaction is part of the approved instructional design, permitted under institutional policy, supported by student consent, or otherwise handled through a FERPA-compliant process. Sections that physically or synchronously meet together at the same time as one class may be handled differently, but faculty should follow De Anza College and district guidance before relying on shared student interaction across sections.

Merging courses in Canvas is **not the same as official schedule cross-listing or registrar cross-listing**. A Canvas merge is an LMS management action. It combines Canvas section enrollments into one Canvas course shell so the instructor can manage the course in one place. It does not change:

- the official class schedule,
- student enrollment records,
- CRNs or section designations,
- transcript records,
- assigned meeting times,

- modality,
- instructor of record, or
- other official registration information.

Canvas/Instructure describes merging as moving section enrollments from individual courses into one course; section names do not change when sections are merged. Instructure also recommends completing this while courses are unpublished because coursework is retained with the course shell, not with the section of enrollment.

Faculty Checklist for FERPA-Conscious Canvas Course Merges

Action	What to Do in Canvas	Why It Matters
Merge early	Complete the Canvas merge before publishing the course and before students submit work, post discussions, or receive grades.	Merging after student activity can disrupt access to submissions and grades because coursework remains with the original course shell, not the moved section of enrollment.
Confirm the parent course shell	Identify the correct course shell that will become the main merged Canvas course before combining sections.	Combining a section into the wrong course can create privacy, access, grading, and support issues.
Limit student visibility by section where available	When appropriate and available, use Canvas settings that limit users to only interacting with users in the same section.	This can help reduce cross-section visibility in certain Canvas areas. However, Canvas notes that this limitation affects Collaborations, People, and Conversations, but not Discussions or Pages.
Limit course navigation	Disable or hide navigation items that may expose student identities across sections, especially People, Chat, Conferences, Collaborations, or external tools that show full course rosters.	These tools may reveal names, rosters, messages, collaboration spaces, or participation outside a student's enrolled section. Canvas also allows instructors to hide the section column from students on the People page, though section information may still appear elsewhere.
Use section-specific assignments	Use the Assign To field for assignments, quizzes, discussions, and other assignable activities when content, due dates, availability dates, or participation should differ by section. Avoid using Everyone when only one section should receive the item.	Canvas assignments are assigned to everyone by default, but instructors can assign work to a course section, individual student, or other available assignee type.
Separate discussions by section	Create separate discussions for each section, or use group discussions with groups limited by section. Do not use a shared discussion if students from different non-meeting sections should not interact.	Standard discussions and Pages are not limited by Canvas section restrictions. If students should only interact within their enrolled section, discussions must be intentionally designed that way.
Configure groups carefully	When creating or assigning groups, use the option requiring group members to be in the same section when available. Review group membership after creation.	Canvas group tools can mix students from different sections if section restrictions are not selected. Canvas includes an option to require group members to be in the same section during random group assignment.
Manage announcements	Use section-specific announcements	Announcement comments can create

	when needed. Do not allow comments on shared announcements if replies would expose students across sections.	cross-section interaction. Canvas allows instructors to allow or disallow participant comments on announcements.
Use care with Inbox/Conversations	Avoid sending messages in ways that reveal student names or participation across sections unless the communication is appropriate for all merged sections.	Canvas Conversations may expose recipients or participation across sections depending on settings and use.
Use care with Zoom, ConferZoom, recordings, and meetings	Do not host meetings, post recordings, or share chat transcripts in ways that identify students from one section to students in another section unless the shared activity is approved and appropriate.	Names, faces, voices, chat messages, attendance, and participation may identify students outside their enrolled section.
Review external tools	Check third-party tools, LTIs, publisher integrations, collaboration platforms, attendance tools, and video platforms for roster and participation visibility.	External tools may not follow Canvas section visibility settings in the same way Canvas-native tools do.
Review before publishing	Use Student View where helpful, but do not rely on Student View alone. Also review discussions, groups, assignments, announcements, navigation, and external tools.	Canvas Student View is useful, but Canvas notes that some tools, including Conversations, Collaborations, groups, external apps, peer reviews, and differentiated assignments, do not work for the Test Student.

Recommended Process Before the Term Begins

1. **Confirm that merging is appropriate.**
Verify that the sections should be managed together in Canvas and that any planned cross-section interaction is approved or appropriate.
2. **Identify the parent Canvas course shell.**
Decide which Canvas course shell will serve as the main course where content, grades, assignments, and announcements will be managed.
3. **Merge sections before publishing.**
Complete the Canvas merge before students submit work, post discussions, take quizzes, or receive grades.
4. **Confirm section enrollments.**
After merging, verify that each section appears in the merged Canvas course and that students remain associated with the correct section.
5. **Limit visibility and interaction where needed.**
Review Canvas settings that limit students to their own section, but remember that section limitations do not apply to all Canvas tools.
6. **Set up section-specific content and dates.**
Use section-specific settings for assignments, quizzes, discussions, announcements, due dates, and availability dates when sections should have different access or deadlines.
7. **Separate student interaction spaces.**
Create section-specific discussions or section-restricted groups if students from different sections should not interact.

8. **Hide or disable risky navigation items.**

Consider hiding People, Chat, Conferences, Collaborations, or other tools that may reveal rosters or participation across sections.

9. **Review recordings, meetings, and external tools.**

Confirm that Zoom/ConferZoom sessions, recordings, publisher tools, Google/Microsoft collaborations, peer review tools, and other apps do not expose students across sections.

10. **Ask for support review when uncertain.**

Before publishing, ask Online Education, Canvas support, or the appropriate campus office to review any uncertain settings.

11. **Publish only after review.**

Publish the merged course only after section visibility, interaction settings, and due dates have been checked.

De Anza Canvas Course Merge Steps

If instructors have permission to merge courses in Canvas through De Anza tools, the general workflow is:

- 1) Locate the **Canvas** card in **MyPortal**.
- 2) Open **De Anza Canvas Site Manager**.
- 3) In the De Anza Canvas Site Manager, select the appropriate term to view the courses that have been provisioned.
- 4) Review the available **Options** for the course sections.
- 5) Choose **Combine Section into Existing Course** for the section that should be merged into the parent Canvas course shell.
- 6) Carefully confirm the destination course before completing the merge.
- 7) After the merge, open the parent Canvas course and verify that:
 - a) the correct sections are present,
 - b) students remain in the correct sections,
 - c) the course is still unpublished if setup is not complete,
 - d) assignments and due dates are correct by section,
 - e) discussions and groups are separated when needed, and
 - f) course navigation does not expose students across sections
- 8) If the De Anza Canvas Site Manager options are unavailable, unclear, or do not match the expected workflow, contact Canvas support or Online Education before proceeding.

Tools and Practices to Avoid in Merged Canvas Courses

Avoid the following unless the activity is part of the approved course structure and has been reviewed for FERPA compliance:

- shared discussions where students from multiple non-meeting sections can see or reply to one another;
- shared announcement comments where students from different sections can view or reply;
- People, Chat, Conferences, Collaborations, or external tools that reveal a full merged-course roster;
- peer review that assigns students across sections unintentionally;
- group work that mixes sections when the sections do not meet together or are not approved for shared interaction;

- Zoom/ConferZoom meetings that combine sections without an approved instructional reason;
- posting class recordings that show or identify students from one section to students in another section;
- sharing chat transcripts, attendance reports, participant lists, or collaborative documents across sections;
- using **Everyone** for assignments, discussions, quizzes, or announcements that should only apply to one section;
- relying on Student View alone to confirm privacy settings; and
- merging sections after students have submitted work, posted discussions, taken quizzes, or received grades.

Suggested Faculty Statement for Syllabus

This Canvas course may include multiple sections managed in one Canvas course shell. To protect student privacy, course activities, discussions, groups, messages, recordings, and other student-facing tools will be configured so that students only see or interact with students in their own enrolled section unless a shared activity is part of the approved course structure.

When to Ask for Help

Contact Canvas support or Online Education before merging courses in Canvas if:

- the sections do not meet together, but you want students to interact across sections;
- students have already submitted work, posted discussions, taken quizzes, or received grades;
- you plan to use group work, peer review, Zoom/ConferZoom, external apps, publisher tools, collaborative documents, or shared recordings;
- the sections have different instructors;
- the sections have different modalities, meeting times, date ranges, or substantially different course requirements;
- the sections include different student populations that should not be visible to each other;
- you are unsure whether a Canvas tool exposes names, posts, attendance, grades, submissions, messages, recordings, or participation data across sections; or
- you need to undo or correct a Canvas merge.

References Consulted

- [U.S. Department of Education, Student Privacy Policy Office: FERPA](#)
- [U.S. Department of Education: Personally Identifiable Information for Education Records](#)
- [Instructure Canvas Guide: How do I cross-list a section in a course as an instructor?](#)
- [Instructure Canvas Guide: Limiting users to interact only with users in the same section, including limitations for Discussions and Pages.](#)
- [Instructure Canvas Guide: Assigning assignments to students, sections, or other assignee types.](#)
- [Instructure Canvas Guide: Creating group discussions and using group sets.](#)
- [Instructure Canvas Guide: Requiring group members to be in the same section when assigning groups.](#)
- [Instructure Canvas Guide: Allowing or disallowing announcement replies.](#)
- [Instructure Canvas Guide: Student View capabilities and limitations.](#)
- [San Diego Community College District: FERPA Compliance and Student Interaction in Merged Canvas Sections](#)