

THE CHRONICLE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION®

Coping With Coronavirus

**How faculty
members can
support students
in traumatic
times**



Cover illustration by Randy Lyhus

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How Faculty Members Can Support Students in Traumatic Times

Everyone is under stress trying to cope with the novel coronavirus pandemic, but students are especially vulnerable: They've lost access to their friends, their campus communities, and the structure and rhythm of the academic year. Seniors are mourning the traditions and rituals they will miss, and worrying about what comes next — assuming they can graduate. Many students have additional worries, including how to help their families financially and how to transition to online education, sometimes in regions where access can't be taken for granted. Above all, the virus continues to spread, and students worry that the health of loved ones — or their own health — could be at risk.

This special collection, available online and free, includes some of our strongest pieces on how faculty

members can help students cope. Professors, after all, are on the front lines, even if that line is now a virtual one. Of course, some of the advice may need to be adapted for a scenario that nobody envisioned, but the coming months are likely to offer plenty of opportunities to hone pivoting skills and demonstrate agility. (And if you need help in making the online transition, check out another free *Chronicle* report, "[Moving Online Now](#).") Our latest collection includes articles on how to make online teaching more sensitive to student concerns, how to spot potential mental-health issues, and more. As Georgia Tech's Karen J. Head says, "integrating empathy and compassion into our courses is now a critical part of the work we must do." We hope these resources will help.

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Shock, Fear, and Fatalism

As Coronavirus Prompts Colleges to Close, Students Grapple With Uncertainty

By **ALEXANDER C. KAFKA**

Effectively booted off campus in an effort to contain coronavirus contagion, hundreds of thousands of college students are reacting with shock, uncertainty, sadness, and, in some cases, devil-may-care fatalism. Even as they hurriedly arrange logistical details, the stress of an uncertain future is taking a toll.

“A lot of people are anxious because not everyone can afford a flight home or a flight to campus to pick up their stuff,” says Alana Hendy, a Georgetown University junior studying international relations. She is among the rapidly growing number of students nationwide who were urged not to return to campus after spring break as courses shift online.

Hendy too is anxious, she says, but she is more confused as she sorts through uncertainties concerning her living and academic arrangements. A low-income student from Bowie, Md., she says it would be better if she stayed on campus because her father suffers from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and diabetes, and is particularly vulnerable to Covid-19, the illness caused by the new coronavirus.

Among the questions on her mind: What will happen to her work-study job in the dean’s office at the School of Foreign Service? How will her responsibilities as a teaching assistant in a geography class change with the new online format?

But counterbalancing the uncertainties, she says, is support offered by the university. It is helping defray low-income students’ costs for shipping medication, books, and other necessities, for example. And the cam-

pus’s food pantry is open and stocked twice a week, which, she says, “we’re grateful for.”

So she’ll cope with the situation, week by week. And after law school or a doctorate in history, when she’s a professor, she imagines she’ll look back at the Covid-19 pandemic as a case study.

For Rachel P. Angle, a Georgetown senior from Middletown, Conn., studying government and living off campus, the academic disruption should not be too drastic. But, she says, “It’s my senior spring. There were so many things I was planning on doing, and now that’s sort of thrown into flux.” Her grandparents had planned to go to D.C. for her graduation.

Angle knows, however, that “there are a whole lot of people suffering a lot more from this. I have a safe home to go to, parents who are happy to take me in. It’s mostly just the stress of uncertainty.”

‘UTTER PANDEMONIUM’

Not everyone is adjusting so philosophically. Students are “definitely freaking out,” says a junior at Harvard, who asked not to be named for fear of reprisal by the university. The week before spring break is academically hectic, so students were turning in problem sets and papers, then heading home, when they learned their classes would move online and they were to leave campus. In some cases they zipped right back to Cambridge, Mass., to try to pack up, store, or ship their belongings.


“It’s utter pandemonium on campus right now,” the student says. “Everybody is partying all day or incredibly stressed out about

homework, or both. People really seem upset and confused.”

And they’re not exactly following the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s protocol, the student says, with parties outdoors and in, “scorpion” punch bowls, and games of beer pong, “one of the least sterile things to be doing right now.”

Similar seize-the-day mayhem broke out at the University of Dayton, when it said its

classes would be moved online. What was initially reported to be a protest against the university’s anti-virus measures was in fact, the administration says, “one last large gathering before spring break, and the size and behavior of the crowd required police to take action.” More than 1,000 students gathered in the streets, according to local news coverage, and when some students stood on cars and the situation grew rowdier, the po-



Alana Hendy, a junior at Georgetown U., is now at her family’s home, in Bowie, Md. Speaking of her classmates, she says, “a lot of people are anxious because not everyone can afford a flight home or a flight to campus to pick up their stuff.”

lice launched “pepper balls,” which contain irritants, into the crowd.

“Students are often accused of living in a ‘campus bubble,’ immune to wider social concerns, so it doesn’t seem surprising that on some campuses there would be outbreaks of partying,” says Mikita Brottman, an author and psychoanalyst who teaches literature at the Maryland Institute College of Arts.

“It’s hard for some students to take the virus seriously. They’re often cynical about ‘media panics,’ and even if they do follow the mainstream media,” she says, they feel that “this is a virus that targets ‘old people.’”

“Beyond that,” Brottman says, “I think the celebrating reflects both a feeling of disaster-inspired togetherness — and togetherness is part of the spring-break tradition anyway — along with a sense of social constraint collapsing.” The partyers “are like the inhabitants of Prospero’s palace” in Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Masque of the Red Death,” she says, “getting drunk while plague ravages the nation.”

‘STAY IN THE ROUTINE’

The stress of uncertainty can be very unnerving, says Alise G. Bartley, a clinical assistant professor in the department of counseling and director of the community-counseling center at Florida Gulf Coast University. The most constructive way to approach it is “to focus on what we do know” staves off illness: wash hands, avoid high-density groups, get sufficient sleep, eat well, and exercise.

As students are yanked from their campus settings, it will be crucial for them to retain structure in their academic and personal lives, she says. They need to “stay in the routine and feel like there’s a purpose so that they don’t fall into depression.” If they’re used to Friday pizza night with friends, then they should have pizza night together online.

Counselors, in person or in teletherapy sessions, need to push beyond vague recommendations to help students “operationalize” good habits and a positive outlook. Don’t just advise them to get exercise, says Bartley. Talk through with them exactly what walking, jogging, or bike route they’re going to take, for how long and how

often. It’s a disconcerting time, she says, but “there’s a difference between healthy concern and fear. ... Let’s make smart choices, but let’s not be afraid.”

Gregory Roper, a freshman at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, is more afraid for his grandparents than he is for himself. He was already visiting them, in Fairfield, Conn., during spring break, and “it looks like I might be doing that for a while longer,” he says, now that the New York college has announced that classes are going online and students must move off campus. His parents are in Santa Clara County, Calif., which has a high concentration of coronavirus cases. They’re considering going somewhere safer, so he won’t be joining them at home for now.

A computer-science student, Roper says a lot of his coursework was already online, but the lab sessions in his biology class “are still completely up in the air.”

Reactions to the crisis among his friends, Roper says, “are very much a mix.” Some think fears are “sort of overinflated.” Others, particularly “friends with weak immune systems, are very scared.”

“Students are often accused of living in a ‘campus bubble,’ immune to wider social concerns, so it doesn’t seem surprising that on some campuses there would be outbreaks of partying.”

In addition to fear, students are aggrieved over losing life experiences like spring of senior year, says Nicole Danforth, director of outpatient programs for child and adolescent psychiatry at Newton-Wellesley Hospital, in Massachusetts. Acknowledge that grief, Danforth recommends, but challenge yourself “to limit how much you let your

anxious brain take over.”

The bachelor-of-fine-arts students of Jillian Harris, an associate professor of dance at Temple University, felt “a strong sense of disappointment” that showcase performances of their senior choreography projects couldn’t proceed when Temple announced courses would move online.

But “everyone is trying to be creative,” producing instead online rehearsal-progress portfolios with written analyses, Harris says. On stage and in life, she says, “fortunately dancers are very good improvisers.”

Technology will be a defining aspect of the mental-health challenge, Danforth says. A life behind blue screens can already be isolating, she says, and we’re in danger of succumbing further to that. But teletherapy options are more sophisticated and plentiful than ever, and if Covid-19 leads to greater use and acceptance of them, she says, that is “a win for everybody.”

Laura Horne experienced the trauma of displacement herself as an undergraduate at Loyola University New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina struck, in 2005. Her family lived in the city’s suburbs, and she couldn’t go home. She transferred to Louisiana Tech University for a quarter, and though she tried her best to keep up with friends through Facebook, email, and phone calls, “a lot of students relocated to other schools and never came back,” she says.

“I had to somewhat mourn and be OK with letting that go for a time,” she says, “and engage with the new environment.” Many students this spring might also “go through a period of mourning, and that’s normal,” says Horne, now the chief program officer for Active Minds, which supports mental-health awareness and education for students.

She offers coping tips for students on the Active Minds website, but “if what you are feeling seems like more than just a bad day,” she writes, “seek help from a professional. ... If you need it, contact the Crisis Text Line by texting ‘BRAVE’ to 741-741.”

‘UNCHARTED TERRITORY’

Active Minds chapter leaders across the country, like Stephanie Cahill, a se-

nior studying psychology at Arizona State University, have a front-row view of their peers’ anxieties. Even before the university announced that it was moving classes online, Cahill says, a lot of students were “nervous and scared” and just not showing up.

“There’s a difference between healthy concern and fear. Let’s make smart choices, but let’s not be afraid.”

Active Minds meetings on campus saw a surge in attendance — to groups of roughly 25 — and visits by administrators like ASU’s associate vice president for counseling and health services helped ease students’ worries, Cahill says.

Information is key, but colleges “have to acknowledge that we’re in uncharted territory here,” says Kevin Krueger, president of Naspa, an association of student-affairs administrators. “We don’t have a playbook.”

But they’re writing one quickly as they go along. Seventeen hundred participants signed up for a Naspa webinar, and they’re sorting through best practices on housing and food for low-income students, provision of mental-health services, and, in the longer term, engaging students in the online environment — not just academically, but in critical services like academic advising, orientation, career services and job fairs, and campus culture and Greek life.

As a new normal slowly forms for students, Krueger says, it’s also important to recognize that fatigue is setting in among administrators, staff, and faculty: “There’s a toll that comes from being in a crisis mode in these situations.” ■

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10 Tips to Support Students in a Stressful Shift to Online Learning

By **KELLY FIELD**

When Hurricane Katrina struck the southeastern United States in 2005, it forced widespread college closures and scattered an estimated 100,000 students across the country.

In the chaotic days that followed, Andre Perry, then a professor at the University of New Orleans, lost touch with a number of his students. Many never returned to the campus.

Now, as colleges nationwide cancel classes and send students away, that disconnection is happening on a much larger scale, with what Perry worries will be devastating results. He is urging faculty members whose institutions have closed to check in with their students often, even daily, during these critical first weeks.

“As someone who has been through the tragedy of Katrina, I can tell you that faculty have an obligation to reach out and connect with students,” he says. In times of disruption, when people’s educations and lives have been upended, he says, “relationships matter more than ever.”

Decades of research show that relationships with professors play a key role in students’ retention. If such relationships weaken or lapse entirely in the shift to online learning, thousands of students could flounder, even drop out.

Staying connected to students and cultivating a sense of community are harder at a distance than in a classroom. But those goals are not impossible, says Perry, a fellow in the Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings Institution. “People get married from online relationships,” he points out. It’s just that many faculty members aren’t accustomed to interacting with students only virtually.

Of course, the faculty can’t be solely responsible for engagement and retention; student success is, and must remain, an institution-wide effort. But as professors



SHARON FARMER

“As someone who has been through the tragedy of Katrina, I can tell you that faculty have an obligation to reach out and connect with students,” says Andre Perry, a fellow in the Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings Institution.

become the primary or even sole point of contact for many students, their role in meeting students' emotional needs will matter more than ever.

"They have to deliver," says Perry, "or we may collectively lose thousands of students across the country."

Following are 10 tips, drawn from experts on the ground, to support students at a time of crisis through the transition to remote learning.

1. Survey students about tools and platforms. Find out which technologies they have access to and are comfortable using, says Gina Foster, director of the teaching and learning center at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, part of the City University of New York system. That's not just for coursework, but also faculty-student and peer-to-peer interaction. Students who are in similar circumstances can be grouped together, she says.

When choosing among technologies, solicit students' opinions, says Tamara Daily, a professor of psychology at the University of Mount Union, in Ohio. When she asked students if they preferred a new platform over the old, imperfect one, they picked the latter. The message was: "Don't throw anything new at us," she said. "I took that advice and am going to stick with what's familiar."

But if you do decide to try a new technology, and you aren't sure it will work, be upfront about that, says Daily. "That way they know we're all in the same boat, and we're going to figure it out together."

2. Co-construct your class. Giving students some control over their learning can help combat feelings of helplessness in the current circumstances, says Jody Greene, associate vice provost for teaching and learning at the University of California at Santa Cruz.

When making decisions about deadlines for outstanding assignments, for example, or how to measure learning going forward, seek students' input. That doesn't mean relinquishing your decision-making authority; you still have the final say. But making students partners in their education can be empowering for them and instructive for

you, says Greene.

"We are in uncharted territory," she says. "We can be collective in making decisions."

3. Favor asynchronous approaches. Many colleges that have moved classes online are continuing to hold them at their regularly scheduled times.

While that may provide consistency for students, it disadvantages those who have to work, take care of family members, or share a computer. Requiring students to sign on at a particular time can compound the stress of the switch to remote learning. Those who don't have internet access at home might have to find a coffee shop or public library to log in (if any are even open during the quarantine), and international students will be dealing with a time difference. Are you really going to ask a student in Saudi Arabia to attend an online class at 2 a.m. local time?

"We absolutely can't have synchronous learning," says Anthony Abraham Jack, an assistant professor of education at Harvard University and author of *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students*.

If your administration insists on a synchronous approach, find ways to accommodate students who can't join at the given hour. Record your lecture so they can listen later, then share their responses with the class the next time you meet, "so they still feel part of the community," says Christopher Heard, director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Pepperdine University, which transitioned to online learning for several weeks following a 2018 wildfire.

"The key is to keep students feeling like a class, rather than scattered individuals," he says.

4. Go low tech and mobile friendly. Be sensitive to students with limited data plans or weak Wi-Fi. Choose open textbooks that enable downloads over programs that require constant connectivity, says Kaitlyn Vitez, higher-education program director for the Public Interest Research Groups.

When assigning work, consider what it would be like to complete it on a mobile phone, because for some students, that will



COURTESY OF ANTHONY ABRAHAM JACK

"We are scared, too," and it's OK to let students know that, says Anthony Abraham Jack, an assistant professor of education at Harvard University.

be the only option.

And be wary of commercial products that offer temporary free access in exchange for personal information, says Vitez. "Think about the student data-privacy considerations of any products you're signing up for."

5. Temper your expectations. That goes for both your students and you. Everyone is dealing with a lot right now.

With students, be flexible with deadlines, offer alternatives if someone can't complete a particular assignment, and don't assign high-stakes tests on a new platform. Be sensitive to the additional responsibilities students may be expected to assume, like taking care of younger siblings.

"It's really important not to make anyone's life more difficult than it needs to be," says Bri Rhodes, director of international-student advising at Mount Holyoke College.

Let go of your lesson plans, too. Decide what students really need to know, and prioritize that, says Amy Young, an associate professor of communication at Pacific Lutheran University. "We have to strip it all the way down," Young wrote in a widely circulated Facebook [post](#). "This one is hard for me. But these are not normal circumstances."

Young suggests talking to your students

about why you're prioritizing certain things. "It improves student buy-in because they know content and delivery are purposeful," she wrote.

Don't demand perfection of yourself, either. You won't be able to recreate your classroom online, and you can't build the model online course on the fly. "Distance learning, when planned, can be really excellent. That's not what this is," wrote Young. "Thinking you can manage best practices in a day or a week will lead to feeling like you've failed."

And try, if you can, to approach this disruption as a learning opportunity, says Carol B. Wilson, an English professor and coordinator of academic advising at

Wofford College.

"The transition to online learning is stretching us," she says. "My hope is to couch some of it as growth — because it is growth."

6. Share your story. Telling students how your life has been disrupted by the coronavirus, and inviting them to do the same, can create a sense of togetherness and community, says Laura Horne, chief program officer for Active Minds, a national organization that supports mental-health awareness and education among students. The message you're sending is: "I don't just care about academics; I'm here for you as an individual," she says.

Jack suggests that faculty members treat the first online meeting as a check-in. "This is not business as usual," they might convey, "there are new goals now, and this is how we'll manage, together," he says.

And be willing to be vulnerable. "We are scared, too," Jack says, and it's OK to let students know that. "We are people. We are not automatons that are able to spew data and facts regardless of the circumstances."

7. Offer support and resources. Many of your students are dealing with depression and anxiety right now. For students with existing mental-health conditions, or

housing or food insecurity, those struggles could become acute.

Simply letting students know you're there for them, even if you can't meet in person, can provide a huge comfort, says Mariah Craven, a communications consultant for the National Foster Youth Institute.

"If they're struggling for any reason, they should know that their faculty member is a safe person to talk to," says Horne.

That doesn't mean faculty members have to double as counselors. Still, they can show they care about students, she says: "Lend a listening ear, connect them to resources, and report any concerns" to staff who can help.

With homeless students, in particular, sharing resources can be more helpful than asking if they are homeless, says Marcy Stidum, who directs a program for homeless and foster youth at Kennesaw State University, in Georgia. Some will deny it, and others will panic, thinking you're going to treat them differently. She suggests saying: "If you're struggling with food or housing, these are the resources."

"A lot of students are alone, or feel alone, and you want to give them clear, concise, reliable information," she says.

8. Create opportunities for students to process the moment. In William Horne's first-year seminar at Villanova University, the reading assignment for the first class that went online was John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*, which features an influenza epidemic. It was pure coincidence, but Horne used it to get students talking about how that fictional outbreak compared to the current one.

Traditional discussion wasn't possible in the online format, so Horne recorded a video prompt and asked students to record their responses.

"Some of them were frustrated because, in their words, 'the university kicked them off campus,'" said Horne, who is married to Laura Horne, of Active Minds. "A few said the closures were important, as part of a mitigation strategy."

Jean Giebenhain, a professor of psychology at the University of St. Thomas, in Minnesota, is working with the university

archivist to document students' experiences with Covid-19. Those in her "History of Psychology in Social Context" class record their reactions in a weekly diary, answering prompts like, "Where were you when you found out classes were going to be canceled? What were you thinking and feeling?"

Approaching the pandemic this way, looking at its context and legacy, gives them a bit of distance to reflect, she says.

9. Don't forget about students with disabilities. With the shift to online learning, some students will require different accommodations than they had in the face-to-face class; others will need accommodations for the first time.

In the latter case, a professor may not even be aware that a student has a disability, says Kelly Hermann, vice president of accessibility, equity, and inclusion at the University of Phoenix.

So even if you included a note on your syllabus telling students to contact disability services at the start of the semester if they needed an accommodation, a reminder could help ensure they get the services they need, she says.

While students' needs will differ, a good place to start is captioning videos and making sure that any material you post online is in an accessible format for a screen reader, says Kristie Orr, director of disability resources for Texas A&M University and president of the Association on Higher Education and Disability.

"We encourage universal design, but at this point, with everything going online so fast," that probably isn't realistic, Orr says.

10. Assign self-care, and model it. Start a lecture with a mindful moment, or share a mediation exercise with your students, suggests Laura Horne, of Active Minds. Task them to do one thing a week to prioritize themselves, and report back what it was.

And take care of yourself, too. Take a break, take a walk, practice self-compassion. In this unprecedented moment, when so much is uncertain, says Rhodes, of Mount Holyoke, "you need to show grace to your students and yourself." ■

ADVICE

Let's Add Compassion to Our Online Courses

By **KAREN J. HEAD**



JOYCE HESSELBERTH FOR THE CHRONICLE

As the coronavirus crisis escalates, faculty members across the country are rushing to retool their courses online. Given the emotional and psychological toll of the changes brought on by the pandemic, integrating empathy and compassion into our courses is now a critical part of the work we must do.

Many of us, but definitely most traditional-aged college students, are about to face losses unlike any we have ever encountered. Whether that is the loss of life of people close to us, the loss of our own good health, the loss of income, the loss of opportunity, or the loss of security in ways large and small, all of us will be changed by Covid-19.

The accompanying sense of insecurity should be a focus of course redevelopment as we move to remote delivery, because we need first to focus on the human part of this experience. Students may not have access. They may be distracted by sick relatives. They may be forced to work to help their families financially. They may have to look after younger siblings. They may not have a safe place to live off campus. They may be ill themselves.

As the virus spreads, faculty members have been discussing how to build accountability into their courses, and this concerns me because that should not be our first priority. Long ago, as a new graduate student, I opted to participate in a teaching mentoring program. In an early workshop about designing courses, I made a rookie observation based on what I thought mattered most. In a nutshell, I worried about not letting students “get away with anything” and making sure I was being rigorous enough. I was too naïve to understand that being rigorous is not synonymous with making sure students are not cheating. What my mentor said to me came to define my pedagogical strategies: “You don’t have to build a trapdoor for your students to fall through. It’s your job to point out there’s a hole in the floor.”

If evaluating your students is your starting point in this new process, please

reframe your teaching approach. You absolutely should be thinking about continuing to meet learning objectives. However, you should also be thinking about the new challenges your students are facing. Their biggest obstacle is likely to be access, so creating a variety of pathways for completing assignments is crucial. Again, students’ lives have been upended, and they are struggling to deal with all these changes. Access isn’t just a question of getting online, and students’ distraction or lack of interaction does not necessarily mean they are trying to game the situation. Make it a new habit to assume good intentions.

“You don’t have to build a trapdoor for your students to fall through. It’s your job to point out there’s a hole in the floor.”

Once we have considered the emotional elements of this crisis, faculty members have many practical issues to negotiate. Generally speaking, I think we have expectations of what we hope students will learn. But even in face-to-face courses, we do not always consider whether changes in our course design could work better for students. Instructors who have been trained to regularly reflect on and revise their teaching methods are probably having an easier time pivoting online. Even so, courses that were not originally designed for online delivery cannot seamlessly move into that space.

That was a lesson I learned in 2012, when I taught one of the first massive open online courses in composition. That MOOC adventure forced me to navigate the challenges of teaching first-year writing, with qualitative feedback, to 22,000 students on six continents. In the same way that MOOCs were unfairly seen at that time as representative of all dis-

tance education, it is now unfair to compare crisis-response remote delivery to well-designed distance education. I have spent the past few days telling my colleagues to stop trying to “replicate” their courses online, because that simply isn’t possible.

We have to revise our teaching goals, assignments, and practices. We need to be prepared to fail in ways we have never imagined. Everyone will have to embrace flexibility — a lesson our team of 19 learned quickly when designing that MOOC. Despite months of careful planning, there were many problems we did not anticipate, and, more important, problems we could not solve. Individual instructors, too, will have unsolvable problems. Show yourselves some of the same kindness you offer your students. This will take some trial and error.

By definition, words like distance and remote are antonymous with connection. Restoring as much of a connection as possible, as soon as possible, is critical to the continuity of your course. Do what you can to replace face-to-face interactions with ones that emphasize our human relationships with students. While teaching the MOOC, I felt a deep sense of loss for the personal connections I would never have with these students. I had never stopped to consider how much I valued those connections, or how much they valued their own connections with me. That experience made me refocus on the human elements of my practice.

Some instructors will naturally be more comfortable interacting personally with their students, but each of us needs to approach reframing our courses in ways that acknowledge our shared humanity. Begin by asking how you can lower stress for everyone. Can you dispense with coursework that is really more about keeping students busy? Can you break complex concepts into smaller modules? Would daily updates be helpful, or would weekly digests be better? Do students need multiple ways to complete assignments? Can you be transparent about your own struggles so students trust that you’re all in this together? Are you being

clear about when and how students can interact with you now that you aren’t on campus?

Sometimes the smallest gestures mean the most. It doesn’t take much effort to send encouraging messages, for example. Because it’s midterm, you and your students have already formed a community. What are some of the personal themes that have arisen? I once taught a creative-writing course in which frogs became a frequent reference point, so everyone began sharing funny frog photos and videos. Some might argue that such things had nothing to do with the course. However, this kind of bonding has everything to do with making people feel that they are part of something bigger. That makes them feel supported, which, in turn, helps them be more successful.

Faculty members are undoubtedly feeling overwhelmed by all this adaptation, because the work is neither quick nor easy. One thing I found remarkable while teaching the MOOC was how proactive students could be. For example, some students translated course materials into other languages, without being asked or rewarded. So consider this: Can you allow students to offer suggestions about how the course might operate more effectively for everyone? I encourage you to try this. Again, it is a way to strengthen the sense of community.

Making education work for the next few months is going to involve many sacrifices, but you may also have some joyous and illuminating moments. If we all begin from a place of shared humanity, if we’re careful to point out trapdoors to one another, we can continue to help our students keep learning — and learning is, after all, the goal we have always had. ■

*Karen J. Head is an associate professor in the School of Literature, Media, and Communication at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Her book *Disrupt This! MOOCs and the Promises of Technology* (University Press of New England, 2017), describes her experience teaching a MOOC and the attendant pressures on professors to embrace new technologies in the STEM era.*

ADVICE

How to Help a Student in a Mental-Health Crisis

By DAVID GOOBLAR



This essay includes advice on how faculty members in a traditional setting can help spot mental-health problems among students. Some of it may not apply to the new, online-only world that has only recently become a reality — professors can't see students' distress as readily, or simply hand them the phone to call the counseling office. But faculty members remain, as always, on the (now digital) front lines in their students' lives — and some may find new ways to adapt as the coronavirus pandemic plays out.

As faculty members, because we see our students on a regular basis, we often can tell if they are struggling emotionally. Yet we're not mental-health professionals. Most of us don't have the training to know how to offer support and guidance to students who are suffering with mental-health issues. So how should we help?

Anxiety, in particular, seems to be on the rise among undergraduates. The most recent data from the American College Health Association suggest a mental-health crisis on American college campuses. In its 2017 survey of 26,000 undergraduates, 40 percent said that at some point in the previous 12 months they had felt "so depressed that it was difficult to function," 61 percent had experienced overwhelming anxiety, and nearly 13 percent had seriously considered suicide. Those are worrisome numbers, and many faculty members see the fallout in our classrooms every day.

To find guidance, I spoke with Barry Schreier, director of counseling services at the University of Iowa, where I teach. He has been working in campus mental health for 27 years, and maintains that instructors have a significant role to play in helping students with their mental health. He recommended a three-step response.

Step No. 1: Notice. Only about 15 percent of students who have killed themselves on a college campus had any interaction with their institution's counseling service. At the same time, research strongly suggests that those who do attempt or complete suicide are telling people before they do it. "If they're not telling the counseling center, who are they telling?" Schreier asked. "They're telling the people they know." That

includes faculty members, since we are regular fixtures in their lives over an extended period and are in a position to notice when something's not right.

It's the noticing that is crucial, Schreier said. You don't have to diagnose a mental illness; you just have to recognize that someone is in distress. That's not as difficult as it might seem. Distress might manifest itself as a downturn in a student's hygiene. A student suddenly might start missing class or failing to turn in assignments. Or someone who is normally alert and engaged might now be falling asleep in class.

Those signs don't require a lot of training to spot — they just require you to be paying attention. If you feel that something is going on with a student, Schreier said, you're probably right. "You're going to notice distress. We often have an intuitive sense of that." Trust that intuition.

Step No. 2: Ask. So once you've noticed their distress, what do you do next? Schreier is adamant on this point: Ask them about it. "Lean in on your students," he said. "Lean in and ask them about themselves. Help them tell their story a little bit."

That doesn't require much more than talking with a student after class. You can say something like, "Hey, you seem a little off these days. Is everything OK?" You can send an email. You can ask a student to come by your office. The idea is to show concern and give the student a chance to talk about the problem. Maybe it's the usual stuff

You don't have to diagnose a mental illness; you just have to recognize that someone is in distress.

— academic stress, interpersonal drama, not enough sleep. But maybe it's not. Many of us have a natural inclination to explain away irregularities. It's probably nothing, we tell ourselves. And a lot of the time it is noth-

ing. But, Schreier said, we have to push past that inclination and reach out to students. They may feel uncomfortable opening up to us. That's their right. But we have to give them the chance.

But isn't it risky to get so personal with our students? Won't students feel as if we're overstepping our bounds?

While acknowledging that instructors need to stay within the limits of their faculty role — don't, for example, invite a struggling student to come stay at your house — Schreier maintains that the risks of inaction are far greater than the risks of action: "What's the worst that could happen? The student might tell you, 'Bug off. I can't believe you asked me that.' But I'd rather that was the case than the student vanishes because something terrible has happened and then you sit, thinking, 'Dammit, I knew something wasn't right.'"

In short: Go out on a limb, show your students you care, and inquire when you notice potential distress.

Step No. 3: Refer. Keep a piece of paper in your office with the phone numbers of relevant mental-health and student-services offices on the campus. Bookmark your institution's counseling center. Be ready to point students in the right direction. If necessary, you can even call the counseling service yourself, and hand the phone to the student. Or you can walk the student there. A little preparation — just knowing what resources exist and how to seek them — can go a long way toward being able to help if such a situation arises.

Like many instructors, I include information about campus mental-health resources on my syllabi, along with a brief paragraph telling students about the many people working on the campus to help take care of them. I tell students on the first day of class: These people's jobs are to help you; that's what they are here to do. There's no shame in taking advantage of resources created with you in mind.

Instructors can do that basic step — acknowledging in advance that students might need help, and letting them know where to get it — even when students don't show signs of distress, Schreier said. Let

them know you understand that college is stressful sometimes, that there are resources available, that they are not alone.

Let students know you understand that college is stressful sometimes, that there are resources available, that they are not alone.

I asked Schreier if students ever mentioned to the counseling staff any specific things that instructors did that were helpful, and he had a ready answer. He's heard over and over again that when a faculty member starts class by asking students how they are, even briefly, it makes a difference. "They hear it," he said. "Whether they answer you or not, they heard that you did it. It means you've thought about them. You weren't just thinking about the job you have to deliver."

None of these steps require a lot of time or planning. You don't need to be an expert in mental health to be able to look out for your students. You don't need to radically change your syllabus, your lesson plans, or your pedagogical approach. You just need to care about your students, invest a little time in preparation, and do something if you notice that something is off. As the human face of your institution, you are in the best position to connect students to the help they need. ■

David Gooblar, a former lecturer in the rhetoric department at the University of Iowa, is now associate director of Temple University's Center for the Advancement of Teaching. He writes about teaching for The Chronicle. His new book, The Missing Course: Everything They Never Taught You About College Teaching, was published in August by Harvard University Press.

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GETTY IMAGES

How to Make Your Online Pivot Less Brutal

By KEVIN GANNON

Well, this is not the semester I ordered.

My university, like [dozens of others](#), has decided to enact a “social distancing” policy, effective after spring break. Any gathering over a handful of people is discouraged, or has been canceled. All of our face-to-face and blended classes will be moved into a fully online environment. I knew we were heading to this point, but I’m not sure what I expected. Honestly, I’d silently been preparing myself for something like the parade stampede scene at the end of Ani-

mal House, with me and my teaching center collectively serving as the [Kevin Bacon character](#) screaming, “ALL IS WELL,” before getting trampled.

In actuality, there’s a sense of calm determination on my campus — that, while this is a crappy hand we’ve been dealt, we’ll play it the best we can for our students and their learning. The stark reality is there’s not really a blueprint for any of this: “moving online” at such a scale, with breakneck speed, and often with merely hours’ worth of advance notice. (Maybe that’s why that movie scene was playing in

my head.)

So what do we do? How do we “pivot online” and — to put it bluntly — not have it suck? How do we ensure that our students are getting at least a modicum of the learning experiences that our institutions promised them? And how do we do so as a faculty which, in many quarters, has little to no experience teaching in a fully online environment?

I wish I had easy answers. Yet it’s not impossible (really). From my perspective, as both a faculty developer and an online teacher at a university making this pivot, here are some suggestions for navigating this new, very weird, normal:

It’s OK to not know what you’re doing. Because, honestly, none of us fully do. When you think about moving your courses online in this particular context, it’s easy for your thought process to go straight to “I can’t even keep up with email; how the hell am I supposed to teach online now?”

But you’re not alone in this endeavor, and there is much [collective wisdom](#) in places like Twitter and other social media as members of the higher-ed community have offered to share resources, communication plans, and a variety of tips and tricks.

Particularly useful is the “[Keep Teaching](#)” community hosted by Katie Linder, executive director for program development at Kansas State University, and her colleagues at the university’s [Global Campus](#). You can “follow” several groups within the community, including a faculty group that is already a lively exchange of ideas and support. On the local level, if your institution has a teaching-and-learning center, that should be your first stop as you begin to transition your course.

Good teaching is good teaching. I don’t mean to be flippant, but that is a general truth, regardless of the mode of instruction.

There is a nearly infinite number of ways in which a course can be moved from an in-person to an online experience, and what works for you will be the product of your own pedagogy, choices, experiences, and proficiencies. There will be tons of ed-tech vendors marketing themselves as the “solu-

tion” to our suddenly online instruction. There will be well-meaning colleagues (and *Chronicle* columnists like me) who deluge you with advice — Zoom! YouTube! Discussion boards! Facebook Live! Semaphore! — and it will begin to feel overwhelming. Don’t overload your own capacity, as this is hard work that we’re doing right now.

Good pedagogy requires:

- Regular, effective, and compassionate communication with students.
- Flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances.
- Transparency in course materials, like tests, assignments, and activities.

All three serve you well in your regular teaching, and all the more so now. As you pivot to an online learning space, those principles should guide your specific decisions about course materials, assignments, activities, and other nuts-and-bolts aspects of the course.

Keep it as simple, and accessible, as you can. A sudden move from in-person to distance learning is disruptive enough — there’s no need to add to it by introducing complicated, unnecessary tools and procedures.

Start with what you’ve already been do-

What works for you will be the product of your own pedagogy, choices, experiences, and proficiencies.

ing online as a regular part of your course: email, maybe various functions of your campus learning-management system (such as Canvas), and perhaps Zoom or Skype video-chatting. Those are your foundation for going forward. If you add new digital tools, be sure to provide your students with guidance (detailed screenshot instructions, brief tutorial videos) as to how to use them.

But what if you don't even regularly use your institution's LMS? You probably will have to start. Your students will likely expect the LMS to be the "location" for this new incarnation of your course.

So start by contacting your campus LMS administrator, and see what you need to do to at least get going with the basics. If your institution is anything like mine, the LMS works with your student-information software to automatically create and populate sites for each course section offered. So you may already have a course site ready to go. Then it's a matter of working with colleagues who have online-teaching experience (or teaching-center staff and instructional designers) to decide on the best way for you to proceed.

Whatever the case, be mindful that not all of your students will have access to high-speed internet if they're not on the campus, and some will likely be using their phones as their primary digital device. At the very least, ensure that what you're doing is mobile-friendly.

As the variance in internet availability demonstrates, accessibility becomes an even more crucial consideration when we move courses fully online. Captions, transcripts, and descriptive text should accompany media materials as much as possible, for example. The campus teaching center and disability-services office are go-to sources for advice and support in this area, and have a crucial role to play in any online pivot.

Expect turbulence, change your flight plan accordingly. These are not the circumstances any of us imagined teaching in when the year began, and it's useful to acknowledge that to both yourself and your students. Recognize that it's not a matter of if, but rather when, you will need to rethink things like grading, due dates, assignment design, and class participation. For a lot of us, a re-examination of what we think we mean by "rigor" is also in order.

Online learning does not mean dumbing-down material. But it does mean that your course material — as well as the ways your students engage with it and learn from it — will look *different*. Some courses

will become primarily asynchronous, for example, while others may preserve an element of synchronicity via video-conferencing tools.

There's no uniformity to what all this will look like. You will have to improvise and adjust on the fly, as will your students. Be patient with yourself, your colleagues, and your students. Your newly online courses will be most successful if you acknowledge and work within this reality.

Online doesn't have to mean impersonal. Most important, remember that teaching and learning are inherently social acts, that this is an eminently human enterprise. As [Sean Michael Morris](#), a senior instructor in learning, design, and technology at the University of Colorado at Denver, has said: When it comes to online education, teach *through* the screen, not *to* the screen.

Technology doesn't teach; teachers teach. There are lots of tech tools out there, and they can do some pretty cool things — but they're still just tools. Ask yourself: How can you use those tools to remain present with your students within the course?

The best tool for a particular task isn't always the newest, flashiest, or most elaborate one. Maybe email is the best tool for you and students to chat. Maybe it's a WordPress blog or the discussion board on your college's LMS. Maybe it's video-conferencing.

Your own experiences and proficiencies will figure into your decisions, but so, too, should the tech capabilities of your students. Because the best tool is the one everyone can use. Regardless of medium, remembering to be human and allowing your students to do the same is essential.

I hope that the above principles provide some useful guideposts for your efforts in these unusual and trying circumstances. It may be inaccurate to claim, as Kevin Bacon did so frantically, that "all is well," but if we commit to the important principles behind our work, perhaps it will be soon. ■

Kevin Gannon is a professor of history at Grand View University and director of its Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. His Twitter handle is [@TheTattooedProf](#).

ADVICE

Small Changes in Teaching: Making Connections

3 ways that faculty members can help students link course content to the world around them

By **JAMES M. LANG**

DRAFTER123



stepped out into the backyard at 10 p.m. on a cold, crisp evening. While the dog took care of his business, my eyes wandered up to the night sky and my mind drifted to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem “Frost at Midnight”: “I was reared/In the great city, pent ’mid cloisters dim,/And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.” I had just taught the poem in my British-literature survey, and Coleridge’s depiction of the stars as a city-dweller’s lifeline to the natural world struck me with fresh intensity.

The next morning I climbed onto the elliptical in my basement for my thrice-weekly torture session, and started watching the second episode of *Run*, a short-lived British television series depicting life among London’s tough underclass. As I watched a heartbreaking story about the fate of a recent immigrant to the city, I made a mental note to recommend the show to my survey students when we read Zadie Smith’s short story “The Waiter’s Wife” later in the semester.

Small connections between course material and everyday life pop up all the time, in almost any course I teach in my field. That probably happens regularly to you, too, both with your classes and your research projects. When we are deeply embedded in our intellectual pursuits, the world seems to orient itself around them. New connections form continually. Reading the news, watching our screens, talking with peers or our children — all of those things become moments of potential connections with our disciplinary passions.

That phenomenon, according to research in teaching and learning, is what separates you (an expert in your field) from your students (novice learners in your field).

As the authors of *How Learning Works* argue, “One important way experts’ and novices’ knowledge organizations differ is the number or density of connections among the concepts, facts, and skills they know.” Experts have thick tapestries weaving together all of the many things they know. New experiences are threaded easily into that tapestry, continually expanding and reshaping it.

By contrast, new learners tend to have information, ideas, or skills lodged in their

minds in discrete, isolated places. Connections that seem obvious to us may never occur to them. New information and experiences do not automatically slot into the places where we (as the experts) might expect them to go. And while we can help by giving students suggestions for how to organize their knowledge and make connections, true learning occurs when students make new connections on their own.

Small connections between course material and everyday life pop up all the time, in almost any course I teach in my field.

If we want students to develop expertise in our fields, then, we have to help them thicken up the connections — from the first week of the semester to the fifth, from the last course they took in our discipline to this one, from the course material to their lives outside of class. The more connections they can create, the more they can begin to formulate their own ideas and gain a wider view of our fields.

In this series on small teaching changes we can make to improve student learning, I wrote first about the [moments before class starts](#) and about the [first five minutes](#) of class. Now let’s look at three easy ways that faculty can help students develop thicker webs of connection with our course material.

The commonplace book. One of the earliest methods that readers and scholars used to create connections among the things they knew was the commonplace book. A unique [combination of diary and scrapbook](#), commonplace books served as a repository in which people could record passages from their favorite books, treasured quotations and epigrams, inspirational Bible verses, recipes, thoughts, and almost anything else that the person wanted to preserve or

remember. They were such a useful and popular item that the English philosopher [John Locke wrote a guidebook](#) for commonplace-book writers.

Commonplace books can serve the same function for students today as they did for people hundreds of years ago — helping them retain and connect what they know and what they are learning. You can ask students to use good old-fashioned notebooks or whatever digital platform you prefer (such as Evernote). The random juxtapositions that happen when people keep commonplace books not only helps with retention and connection, but it can also spur creative thinking as students see course topics intersecting with other ideas in new and original ways.

You could ask students to keep commonplace books on their own time, but see if you can reserve 10 minutes at the end of class once or twice a week for a “Connection Ten” — 10 minutes in which students can make entries in a course commonplace book, either paper or electronic. Ask them to:

- Write down the most important thing they learned that day, and why it matters to them or to society.
- List one way in which the day’s course content manifests itself on campus or in their home lives.
- Identify a television show, film, or book that somehow illustrates a course concept from class.
- Describe how today’s course material connects to last week’s.

Make this a regular, low-stakes activity (i.e., collect their commonplace books once or twice a semester and give them a participation grade). Instead of ending class by trying to rush in one last point while students are packing up, use commonplace books to engage students directly one last time before the semester ends.

If you have a few extra minutes, invite a handful of students to share their ideas. You will find yourself surprised — as I have many times in these conversations — at the fascinating connections that students make between your course material and the world around them. But you won’t hear those con-

nections — and they might not get made at all — unless you ask for them.

Social-media connections. If you don’t have time in class for Connection Ten, try bumping the activity to social media. I have [experimented with Twitter](#) for this purpose in the past, but you could also use Facebook, Instagram, other social-media sites, or even the discussion boards of your virtual learning environment. I like social media for this because, as we all know too well, students have their phones with them everywhere. Popping onto a course-specific social-media site to post something — or using a course-specific hashtag on Twitter or Instagram — can be done instantly when the connection occurs to them.

Build in a low-stakes assignment like this throughout the semester, or offer it as an participation option for quieter students. Assign them to post one or two links a week to a connection they have observed or discovered. An economist might use Instagram to ask students to post pictures of commerce in action from their daily lives; an environmental scientist might ask students to post to a class Facebook page their images and observations of interactions between the natural and built environment of the campus; a mathematician might require students to Tweet when they see math in action on television or film. (For more ideas, you can listen here to a [great podcast](#) about the use of Twitter in college and university courses.)

The more connections they can create, the more they can begin to formulate their own ideas and gain a wider view of our fields.

Here, too, set aside up to 10 minutes in class once a week, throw the social-media feed on the screen, and ask three or four stu-

dents to tell you what they posted. Having them articulate the reasoning behind their posts helps deepen the connection for them.

The minute thesis. A dozen years ago I began using an in-class exercise at the end of the semester to help students see connections across the various works we had read. I wrote the names of the seven novels we had read on the board in a single column. In a second column I wrote a list of themes from the books.

I handed a marker to a student in the front row and asked her to walk up to the board and circle a single theme, and then draw lines connecting that theme to two different novels. Then I asked students to spend a minute thinking about a thesis that would explain how those two novels both connected to that theme. A brief silence ensued, and then a tentative hand was raised and a tentative student made a tentative statement. I praised the remark and asked for another idea. More hands raised, more confidently, and more ideas emerged. After five or 10 minutes, I stopped the discussion and handed the marker to another student, asking him to circle a new theme and connect it to two different novels, and the process began anew.

Over the course of a class period, students created dozens of brief thesis statements that connected the novels and themes in new and interesting ways. Later, many of the students took ideas they had expressed in that class and developed them into their final papers.

I use this brief little connection-building activity in the final week of every class I teach now. The potential variations in how you might conduct it are endless: Use three columns instead of two. Have students create the columns. Selecting one of the stu-

dents' ideas and spend 10 minutes spelling out what the argument might look like. To have a look at the messy but densely interconnected weave of authors and concepts in a British-literature course after playing the minute thesis, and another from a faculty development workshop, you can view [two samples](#) on my blog.

Reading the news, watching our screens, talking with peers or our children — all of those things become moments of potential connections with our disciplinary passions.

Deep knowledge is connected knowledge; we have that as faculty members, and we want it for our students. With an investment of just a few minutes every class period, or even just one class period a week, you can help students see the stars of your course content in an entirely new light. ■

*James M. Lang is a professor of English and director of the D'Amour Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College in Worcester, Mass. He is the author of *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons From the Science of Learning*. Follow him on Twitter at @LangOnCourse.*

Originally published February 8, 2016

How to Help Students Keep Learning Through a Disruption

By **BECKIE SUPIANO**

The following is from a recent issue of Teaching, a weekly newsletter from a team of Chronicle journalists. [Sign up here](#) to get it in your inbox on Thursdays. Below you'll find advice that colleges are giving students on how to keep learning during the coronavirus disruption, and links on finding the silver lining in social distancing.

This is shaping up to be a difficult semester for students. Many will unexpectedly be completing some or all of their coursework remotely. They may have been encouraged or told to leave campus — which, for residential students, [means much more](#) than not being in the classroom. And, of course, they're grappling with the same broader uncertainty that the rest of us are.

How can students keep learning at a time like this?

A number of colleges have compiled guides. Some make a point of acknowledging the stress that students are under, both in general and when it comes to their classes. "With so many things changing in your courses, you might be reliving that first-week-of-class confusion at finals-week pace," says a [resource](#) from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor's Center for Academic Innovation.

Michigan's guide encourages students to organize what they need to do for each course, make a schedule, and avoid multitasking. "Your study habits may need to change," it emphasizes near the top. Students might consider the sort of environment in which they usually prefer to study

— the library, say, or a coffee shop — and "see if you can recreate that at home. Maybe it's studying in a chair, rather than on your bed or couch, or moving to a new spot when you change tasks. If you feel you need background noise, consider a white noise app."

The guide also offers suggestions for staying in touch with professors, classmates, and friends and family during what could be an isolating time.

Other guides, [like this one](#) from St. Joseph's College, in New York, and [this one](#) from Virginia Commonwealth University, emphasize the tools available to help students work remotely — and what to do if accessing them is a challenge. Virginia Commonwealth's guide describes how students can purchase or check out a laptop. It also makes a point of directing students to other campus resources, including their academic adviser and counseling services. It reminds students that there's lots of misinformation about Covid-19 floating around, and encourages them to get their news on the topic from the university's website.

Supporting students, of course, is about more than mechanics. The tone of these kinds of messages matters a lot. Virginia Commonwealth emphasizes that it "aims to approach all aspects of academic continuity

with flexibility, care, compassion, kindness, creativity, and positivity.”

Michigan ends its guide with a reminder that the situation won’t last forever. “If Covid has disrupted your travel plans, ended a lab experiment you were excited about, or for any reason feels like it came at the worst possible time, remember: this is temporary. You’ll find your way when it settles down. You’ll get back on track, and things will get back to normal. We don’t know when, but it will happen. Until then, take a deep breath, do your best, get some rest, and wash your hands.”

Are you conducting or preparing for emergency online teaching? What kinds of questions and concerns have you heard from students, and how are you responding? Let me know, at beckie.supiano@chronicle.com, and your example may be included in a future newsletter.

SUPPORT FOR INSTRUCTORS

By this point, professors who’ve been called upon to shift quickly to remote instruction may feel awash in suggestions — and outright sales pitches from ed-tech vendors.

For anyone looking for a place to start, I’d suggest the *Chronicle* advice piece ([see page 18](#)) from Kevin Gannon, a professor of history at Grand View University and director of its Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. Gannon works through a response to this pressing question: “How do

we ‘pivot online’ and — to put it bluntly — not have it suck?”

NOT ALONE

For many of us, this period has been an adjustment, with reduced human contact and disrupted routines. In times like these, there can be some comfort in witnessing examples of the triumph of the human spirit. Or, perhaps, the penguin spirit.

Mary Wessel Walker, an executive assistant in the Jean & Samuel Frankel Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor — and my lifelong friend — shared a couple of videos that have been going around about how folks are making the most of life in quarantine. Enjoy.

- [From Italy](#)
- [From Chicago](#)

Thanks for reading Teaching. If you have suggestions or ideas, please feel free to email us: dan.berrett@chronicle.com, beckie.supiano@chronicle.com, or beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com.

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Originally published March 19, 2020

Learning From Crisis

Although nothing could have prepared colleges for an event on the scale of the coronavirus pandemic, past crises in academe — natural disasters, racist violence, campus shootings, and opioid deaths, among others — may offer some guidance on how faculty members and their colleges can support students during extraordinary times. Following are excerpts from Chronicle articles that examine how institutions have coped.

How to Lead in a Crisis

Scott Cowen served as president of Tulane University during Hurricane Katrina.

Keeping in touch via technology is critical. Videoconferencing and messaging tools and apps, as well as social media, play a big role in bringing a campus closer together in times like these. The college leadership has to establish a rhythm of communication that responds to the different needs of various stakeholder groups in terms of frequency, format, and channel of communication. And while community-wide communication from the top is essential, institutions should also ensure that groups within the larger campus community — such as individual programs, clubs, and student organizations — remain in close dialogue and find ways to still pursue their interests and plans.

Originally published March 16, 2020

A UVa Historian Talks About Charlottesville's White-Supremacist Rally a Year Later

Claudrena Harold, a professor of African American and African studies and history at the University of Virginia, spoke to The Chronicle about the campus climate at her institution on the anniversary of a deadly event.

One of my primary concerns going back to Grounds [a term used at UVa in the place of “campus”] in August was the safety of my students. There were students returning who had real concerns. There were parents of African American students

who contacted me with questions such as, “When are the white supremacists coming back? When they come back, what measures does the university have in place to guarantee the safety of my child?”

I felt as if I was a part of a community of individuals and institutions addressing these issues. I did not feel isolated. The history department decided, for example, to have a series of conversations and forums related to matters of race and social justice. The forums ranged from conversations about the history of racism on Grounds, black-student protest, and anti-Semitism to matters of racism related to fraternities and sororities. The idea was to provide a space for intellectual engagement, for healing, and also for students to get answers to questions that they had.

Originally published August 9, 2018

What to Say After a Student Dies

Catherine Shea Sanger is interim director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning at Yale-NUS College, a liberal-arts college in Singapore established in 2011 by Yale University and the National University of Singapore. She is also a lecturer at the college.

In these moments of grief and bewilderment, faculty members are left wondering how to proceed on a more intimate scale: What should I say in class today? Should I acknowledge what happened? Should I give everyone an extension? Should I cancel class?

Here is some language you might use as a starting point: “In light of our community loss I wanted to confirm that I do plan on

holding class tomorrow. Some of you might have apprehensions or discomfort about coming to class. I will, too. While recognizing that possibility, my recommendation is that if you can, you do come. Learning together is what we are here to do, and I believe we will be able to move forward better if we do so together. If during class you feel you need to take a break please do so — you can step out, have a water, walk around the courtyard, come back, and that is perfectly fine. And of course, if you are feeling very overwhelmed and need to take a break from classes, I understand but do ask that you contact your [academic dean, residential-hall director, or other support staff] and copy me so I know that you are getting appropriate care. If you have individual concerns about attendance or anything else, please let me know.”

Originally published October 24, 2017

‘We’re Going to Do This’

How a determined mother helped a community college, devastated by opioids, fight for its students’ lives

After Anne Seaman’s son, Stuart Moseley, died of an overdose, she worked to help other students avoid a similar fate.

On an August afternoon, Anne stands in a small, rectangular room in a building on campus and digs around in a toolbox. It is three days before the fall term begins and just over a year since Stuart’s death.

The college has named the room the Reset, envisioned as a gathering place for students who are in recovery or who want to be. Above all, it’s meant to ease the isolation felt by students struggling to get out from under addiction. There will be a volunteer or faculty member in the room at all times.

Stuart wanted to get better, and Anne

wonders how things might have been different if, on that July afternoon, there had been a place where he could have gone to sit and feel, even for just that moment, a little less alone.

Originally published October 6, 2018

Coping With Trauma: What a Psychologist Learned at Virginia Tech Could Help Northern Illinois

Russell T. Jones, a psychologist at Virginia Tech who studied people’s responses after the 2007 shootings there, discussed what he learned from that tragedy, and what another university could expect after experiencing a mass shooting.

“The first thing is to provide safety and stability on campus,” he said. Then comes the job of letting students know that help is available.

“At Virginia Tech, we had two counselors available in each classroom right away,” he said. “Our counseling center was open 24 hours a day. And we gave out pamphlets explaining normal reactions of distress following frightening events.”

It’s essential, Mr. Jones said, to create a culture “where kids know it is OK to share their stories, their feelings, their thoughts. This can happen in dorm rooms, in coffeehouses, in churches.” And, of course, with mental-health providers. This culture, Mr. Jones said, helps provide the crucial sense of social support.

The administration also needs to speak with professors. “You must make sure they are even more sensitive to students’ needs during this distressing time,” he said. “If a student begins missing classes, that could be a sign of trouble. Professors need to call the student’s adviser, and start reaching out.”

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