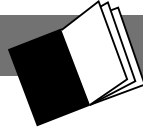


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How Are You Caring for Students This Year?

By Katie Rose Guest Pryal

This school year has been different, hard—for us, for our students and for *everyone* in higher ed.

Obviously, by this point, we can all agree that higher ed work has been much more difficult than usual. In my last two columns in this series on higher ed work during COVID-19, I wrote first about letting go of anxiety about academic rigor by cutting back on students' workload and trusting that you would be covering enough material. And last month I reflected on what I'd done well and what I could have done better this semester. (One of them was that I could have cut back on my students' workload *even more* than I did.)

As this semester draws to a close, all my students have expressed to me one thing, no matter who they are—top of the class or struggling with their grades. That one thing is that they're all stressed, worried and afraid. Not one of my students thinks that anything is easy. In fact, this is the hardest school year that they've ever experienced.

Why? My students have lost their regular support systems, some they didn't even realize they'd had. They don't have their friends or study buddies on campus. They don't have their favorite places to study. They have to work at home under wildly suboptimal conditions. The list goes on and on.

I know about this list because I asked. I asked because I realized that one of the very few things they have left is us, the higher ed workers who see them a few times a week in a little square on a computer screen or over the phone for an administrative purpose. We have a heavy burden, heavier than usual, because, in many cases, we're the people who have the opportunity, perhaps the duty, to make sure our students are okay.

Now it is the end of the semester, and for many, it is time for exams. Many schools have already made the call to teach remote courses again next semester. We must notice—or learn to notice—the signs that our students are in trouble. Are any starting to fall off in attendance? Are any failing to turn in work or turn it in on time? I urge you to resist any tendency to punish this behavior, but rather to use it as a way to notice when your students may be struggling most during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some of you have already noticed which of your students are struggling, even suffering, and some of you have already reached out to them to support them. But if

you're teaching during COVID-19, it might seem hard to support your students in ways that you are accustomed to. Here are some ideas for how to do so.

Create Space for Them to Share Experiences With Other Students and With You So That They Know They're Not Alone

I got this advice from a colleague of mine, a fellow legal writing professor at UNC School of Law named Alexa Z. Chew (and a past winner of the school's prestigious teaching award). Here's what she did: She sent an email to all of her students past and present who are still students at the law school. She sent it via various channels—organizations she advises or is close to, for example, and to upper level students that she's still close with even though she primarily teaches first-year law students.

The message traveled wide, that she would be holding chat sessions with students in groups ranging in size from two or three up to eight. Then, she put up a signup using her meeting software and waited. The spots filled.

Students across all years of law school wanted to chat. In the larger groups, some students didn't have to speak, but could listen to others share their stories and feel less alone. In the smaller groups, students could have Professor Chew's close attention.

What happened was that her past students could build community around a shared experience—their experience as Professor Chew's students—and meet one another in a non-classroom environment. They were able

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to find connection when connection is so hard because all of their classes are remote.

Know Who to Refer Students to and Set the Bar for Referrals VERY Low

If someone isn't meeting your course expectations, I strongly suggest that you presume they're suffering, not slacking. Many of you do this already, even when we're not in a pandemic. I know I do.

But this presumption is even more important now. If you notice a student is always turning in late work, or suddenly their work is going downhill, don't get annoyed, get concerned.

How do you express your concern?

As I wrote in my book, *Life of the Mind Interrupted: Essays on Mental Health and Disability in Higher Education* (Blue Crow, 2017), higher ed workers are often unprepared to help students in distress—unless providing such help is in your job description.

Here's a summary of what I advise higher ed workers do when we know a student needs help, but we don't know how to give it.

First, and most importantly, you need to know whom to ask for help when you have a student in distress. It's true that you are likely not prepared to help your student—but someone in your institution is. Find out who that person is. Before you even encounter a student in distress, you need to have a plan in place—and the first part of that plan is knowing who to call or email.

Second, introduce yourself to this person before the semester begins. Send an email, tell them how much you respect what they do and ask them how they would prefer to receive referrals from you.

Third, you need to know what to say to a student when you are going to make a referral. How will you broach the subject?

We're the people who have the opportunity, perhaps the duty, to make sure our students are okay.

If you do all of this work in advance, when you have a student in crisis, you won't be scrambling. You'll have a plan. I do this every semester, not just now because of COVID-19.

But because of COVID-19, I have made one significant change. I have lowered my standards for what "a student in crisis" means. That bar is very, very low. When a student turns in one late assignment, I reach out and ask if they're okay. When a student misses one class, I do the same. It is wild how many of them reply with far more than I expected: an outpouring of grief, anxiety and sadness.

I'm not a therapist or academic support worker. But because I prepared, I know how to reach them, and quickly.

Building community for your students and paying closer attention to their potential for crisis may seem like more work for you, but it isn't—especially if you've already cut back on the material that you are trying to cover in these strange times. Trust that your students are learning. Have faith in your own teaching. Take care of yourself, first. Otherwise, you'll be no good to your students. And then, set your students up for success by teaching them how to do the same. 📌



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