THE CHRONICLE
of Higher Education

❮ Back to Search Results

TEACHING

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

By Kelly Field | MARCH 30, 2020

✔ PREMIUM

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 have canceled classes, shifted online, and sent 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


M. Scott Brauer for The Chronicle

Anthony Abraham Jack, an assistant professor of education at Harvard: "We are scared, too," 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."

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 education and lives have been upended, he says, "relationships matter more than ever."

Coronavirus Hits Campus

As colleges and universities have struggled to devise policies to respond to the quickly evolving situation, here are links to *The Chronicle's* key coverage of how this worldwide health crisis is affecting campuses.

- The Pandemic Is Already Hitting Sectors Unevenly, Never Mind the Hitches in Federal Relief

- 'On a Desert Island With Your Students': Professors Compare Notes on Teaching Remotely in a Pandemic

- Virtual Bingo and Minecraft Graduation: During the Pandemic, College Students Recreate Campus Life at Home
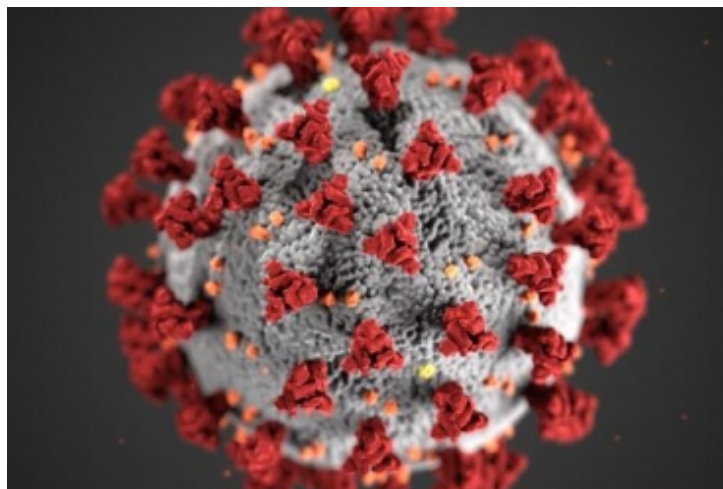
Decades of research show that relationships with professors play a key role in student retention. If such relationships weaken or lapse entirely in the shift to online learning, thousands of students could flounder, even drop out.

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 the 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, faculty members can't be solely responsible for engagement and retention; student success is, and must remain, an institutionwide effort. But as professors 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. **Each can make a difference:**

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 says. "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 in the future, 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 puts at a disadvantage 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-zone 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 lectures so they can be listened to later, then share those students' responses with the rest of 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," he says, "is to keep students feeling like a class, rather than scattered individuals."

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. For some students, that will 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, such as 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, in Massachusetts.

Let go of your lesson plans, too. Decide what students really need to know, and make that the priority, says Amy Young, an associate professor of communication at Pacific Lutheran University, in Washington. "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, in South Carolina.

"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, she says, is that "I don't just care about academics; I'm here for you as an individual."

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," says Horne, "they should know that their faculty member is a safe person to talk to."

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 members 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," she says, "are alone, or feel alone, and you want to give them clear, concise, reliable information."

8. Create opportunities for students to process the moment. In William Horne's first-year seminar at Villanova University, in Pennsylvania, the reading assignment for the first class that went online was John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*, which involves an influenza epidemic. The assignment 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 Saint Thomas, in Minnesota, is working with the campus archivist to document students' experiences with Covid-19. Those in her "History of Psychology in Social Context" course are recording their reactions in a weekly diary, answering such prompts as "Where were you when you found out classes were going to be canceled?" and "What were you thinking and feeling?"

Approaching the pandemic in that 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 a 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 for 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 at College Station 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 meditation exercise with your students, suggests Laura Horne, of Active Minds. Assign them to do one thing a week to make themselves a priority, 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."

Kelly Field is a Boston-based freelance writer and former Chronicle *staff member.*

This article is part of:
Coronavirus Hits Campus

1255 23rd Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037