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## TEACHING

# 'Don't Worry About the Class': How One Professor Responded to a Student With Covid-19 Symptoms

By *Beckie Supiano* | APRIL 09, 2020



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Melissa Wong, adjunct lecturer in the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

The shift to emergency online teaching that has consumed so many professors this semester wasn't an issue for Melissa A. Wong: She was already teaching online. But she faced a direct effect of the pandemic — one that growing numbers of professors will surely also confront — when a student wrote to say that she was experiencing Covid-19 symptoms and apologized for handing in work late.

Wong, an adjunct lecturer in the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, had already adjusted her courses, scaling back her expectations a bit. The pandemic, Wong said, has made everyday life more burdensome — just think of what grocery shopping has become — so it only made sense to reduce students' workload. That's true for students in general, says Wong, who teaches library and information sciences, and certainly for the graduate students she teaches, who often have jobs and families on top of coursework.

For some students, at least, things were bound to get worse, Wong thought. "It was inevitable," she said, "that some of my students are going to get sick, just like I think we all know that some of our family and friends are going to get sick."

So when her student told her she had symptoms, Wong's response emphasized the importance of the student's health — she asked if she had another adult at home and enough to eat, among other things. Wong shared the message and the thinking behind it on Twitter, figuring her tweets might register with a handful of professors who follow her. Instead, they have racked up tens of thousands of likes and sparked discussion among educators, students, and others.

*The Chronicle* spoke with Wong this week to hear more about the message she sent her student and the response to it online. The following conversation has been edited and condensed.

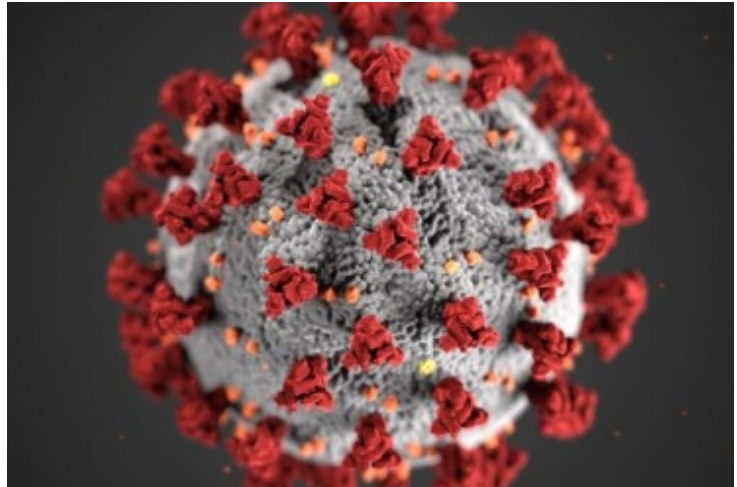
### **What happened with your student?**

We had an assignment due, and she had already asked for an extension, which was totally fine. She emailed me on Sunday morning, apologizing profusely, and said, I have the following symptoms, all of which would be the symptoms for Covid-19, but there's no testing. And then she said: I don't even know what to do, I already asked for an extension. Should I just take an incomplete in the course?

Our course doesn't end for another six weeks. I was like, No, no. We are not going to pull that trigger yet. What I wrote back was, basically, what I wrote in that post: Don't worry about the class. When you're healthy again, we can talk about the assignment. We'll figure out how you can get caught up and finish the semester. And then — because I knew that she had children — I said: Do you live with an adult partner who can care for you and the kids, and do you have enough food?

## 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.



- Low-Income Students Count on Finding Jobs. But the Pandemic Has Halted Their Job Training.
- How Has Grading Changed Since Coronavirus Forced Classes Online? Often, It Depends on the Professor
- How Should Colleges Prepare for a Post-Pandemic World? ✓ PREMIUM

I did hear back from her later that day: Yes, I have a partner, and we have enough food, and we have great neighbors who've already said they'll start bringing us more food when we run out. Which was hugely reassuring.

### **What might you have done if your student hadn't had those basic needs met?**

For me, Step 1 is: Connect students to resources on campus. Sometimes students just aren't aware of what resources there are — or they may be hesitant to ask for that help because they're not sure if they qualify, or if their need is great enough. So think what campus resources would be there for that student, and make sure they have the contact information, and encourage them to take advantage of those.

The second step would be to help connect them with their community resources. Now, my students are all over the country, so that means figuring out where they live. But I'm a librarian. I can do some research.

### **Why did you tweet about this interaction with your student?**

I knew from conversations and other social-media posts that students are sometimes not getting the response that they really need from faculty, which is really hard. Students who say, My faculty member hasn't changed the workload at all, and won't let us turn in late

work.

You can even see, in the replies to my tweet, students who say: The faculty member gave us more work, because they said we're just sitting at home doing nothing.

I mean, it's so not true. Students are always doing more in their lives than just taking our classes. And now even the chores you have to do — going to the grocery store takes twice as long. Everything is so much harder. And students are really, really anxious. They're having trouble focusing.

So my Sunday-night tweet was just saying: Hey, students are starting to get sick. And we need to respond to that with compassion, and support, and flexibility. Like, who cares when a student turns in an assignment? I'm more concerned that they turn in good-quality work.

### **What kind of guidance has your university offered on how to respond in these cases?**

The guidance we've gotten has been around support for faculty switching to remote instruction, which is great, because they need that support. And then we do get regular emails about resources for students, people whom you can contact or whom you can put students in contact with. The fact that counseling services now offer online appointments for students who are struggling with mental-health issues.

I don't remember communications or policies around things like flexibility, but I've always given my students a lot of flexibility.

### **Why do you think your tweets got such a big response?**

We are collectively living through this really traumatic, anxiety-producing time. We're all looking for those moments of compassion.

Also, oftentimes people — either students or people outside higher ed — look at the faculty as these really intimidating authority figures. So seeing an instructor who advocates compassion and that human approach — and the idea that as a student, you could actually email your faculty member and say, I'm really sick, and they would just give you an extension — may be really reassuring.

*Beckie Supiano writes about teaching, learning, and the human interactions that shape them. Follow her on Twitter @becksup, or drop her a line at [beckie.supiano@chronicle.com](mailto:beckie.supiano@chronicle.com).*

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