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Ways to Connect with Students in a (Suddenly) Online Environment

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With the spike of mental health issues, and the fear, loss, and uncertainty students are facing in the middle of this coronavirus pandemic, connecting with students is critical. In some cases, life-saving. Yet, amid our transition to online teaching, the complete disruption of “normal,” and personal issues to deal with, creating a connection with students can seem prohibitively difficult just when we need it most.

Can this time of crisis present an opportunity for us to be conduits of hope, assurance, and inspiration to students?

In a time when students are fearful as they face uncharted territory, we can help calm their fears and encourage them, by sharing our own struggles and how we overcame them. Our personal stories of overcoming challenges communicate to students that everything will be ok—that they will make it through this dark time.

When my institute, Palm Beach Atlantic University, responded to our county order to close the campus, many students were distressed and scrambling to find a new residence. Seniors felt great loss as the reality sank in that they may not see their roommates, classmates, or professors again, and that there would likely be no graduation ceremony. How could I reassure

and comfort the class?

In our live conference, I talked about my own struggles. I began by admitting that I had uncertainty—I couldn't yet answer most of their questions about residence, graduation, or internships. I disclosed that for me this pandemic had triggered memories of a trauma I experienced several years ago and had heightened my anxiety, and that with the world "falling apart," I, too, was finding it hard to stay focused and motivated. I added, with a bit of humor, that the most stressful item keeping me awake at night was fear of running out of toilet paper and diapers for my baby! (Focusing on the minute is a typical response to trauma.)

Then, I shared the story of when I survived a near-death experience and a difficult recovery. I made it through, and in the end, I was much stronger for it.

Sharing our struggles builds immediate rapport with students. They realize that we've lived through hardships like theirs. We survived, and so will they. Our times of crisis—whether relational, health, financial, or otherwise—built our character, made us wiser, helped define who we are today, and revealed that we were stronger than we thought. This is a message that our students need to hear!

It's risky and humbling to share the story of one's trauma or hardships, but our vulnerability creates a safe space that invites students to respond with openness and honesty. Letting students get to know us provides the personal connection that increases student learning. This atmosphere of student learning and engagement is vital for our current online settings.

How can you connect to students in your online classes? Here are some practical suggestions:

1. **Create time and space** in your class for connecting. Set aside the first few minutes of class time (or a conference) to give the students an opportunity to discuss how they are doing. It doesn't need to be emotional or drawn out—you can say, "We only have a few minutes, so just take just a few seconds each and let us know how you are doing." Assure them that it's fine to be "great" as well. Jot down any major issues. Follow up with those students when the class is next together—perhaps invite them to give an update. (Remembering their comments and following up is a powerful demonstration of a truly caring professor!) These few moments provide insight into how the class is doing overall and can help you know their learning needs.
2. **Tell the students you support them**, you care about them, you are thinking about them. These simple words can be life-giving—assuring the students that they are not alone. Remember, many of our students lack positive role models and a support network. You might be the only voice of reassurance and comfort to your students in this time of crisis.
3. Communicate to the students that you understand and can **relate to the struggles they are facing**. This has never been easier because we actually *are* facing the same issues! Share some of your own difficulties in working off campus, changing your routines and schedule, and needing to stay isolated.

4. Create a venue for students to share with one another and support each other, such as a **discussion group**.

Have you connected with your students in other ways online? Please share below.

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