

From: [Summers, Greg](#)
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Colleagues,

Some folks have asked for additional guidance regarding how best to have discussions with students during next week's Covid Check-In. So, at the risk of filling your Inboxes with one more lengthy message, I write to share some thoughts below.

Our colleagues in University College have been hard at work today talking with students and gathering additional context. We have learned more acutely that students are struggling to connect in addition to grappling with workload, and these two challenges can reinforce one another. The pandemic has shown us just how important in-person teaching and learning is to an education. But among the things we are missing is the chance to get to know one another as people.

So, perhaps connection should be the principal theme of the week. In addition to checking in with students about how classes are going, perhaps faculty can introduce students to the dog or cat that occasionally wanders into your Zoom background, or share your own quirky strategies for dealing with the isolation of our current environment. Give students a chance to do the same, and to unplug a bit as a group from the academic priorities of the day. Not every student will need this kind of interaction, but many clearly do. As one student today reported:

I have felt very alone in all of this. It is so reassuring to hear I am not the only one, and that as a University you truly care. I felt like I never got a chance to be on point with any of my classes, as it seemed every single class started on day one as a race and we were off and running with no time to stretch.

If we take a moment to listen and to make meaningful adjustments based on what we hear, perhaps we can foster some of that human connection that makes the work of teaching and learning more enjoyable.

Regarding your courses and class expectations, Lindsay Bernhagen offers the following advice:

What I advise for instructors in general are three really standard questions:

- What about this course is helping you to learn?
- What's making it more difficult?
- What specific changes would you recommend to help you to learn?

Ideally, this feedback can be collected via an anonymous survey, then aggregated and

used as fodder for discussion with the rest of the class. For example, “Several of you said that having weekly due dates is helpful, but a few of you wanted more flexibility. What do we think would be reasonable as a class to keep the structure that’s working while providing more wiggle room?” That gets us out of the business of singling out any individual student, gets students hearing from their peers (so it helps with the “I’m the only one struggling this much, right?” kind of anxiety), and it gives some shape the conversation that’s focused on—though not necessarily limited to—the academic aspects of the course and, more importantly, allows the instructor to address/explain their choices and what they can/can’t control or adjust.

I actually already have a [template set up in Forms](#) to do this that you can share with faculty. They’ll have to duplicate it in order to gather their own results, but it’s a start. I recommend sending this out in classes before the scheduled time to check in, but it’s not impossible to take 10 minutes of a class and have students respond then. Take a break as the instructor to digest the feedback, then come back and have a whole group discussion about it.

Several faculty members have written to note that taking time away from teaching will disrupt their classes and may add to the difficulty of meeting learning outcomes, especially the No-Class Day on November 4. I recognize that this is true. However, among the things we simply need to acknowledge is that this year is different—for so many reasons. I know that the time we invest in striving to make connections in the coming weeks won’t solve these problems in any perfect way. But I remain hopeful that it will be worthwhile. Thank you all for trying.

In the meantime, there are big, white snowflakes falling outside the window of my converted home office, and I’m delighted. “Winter is Coming” is a phrase with too many foreboding connotations for my taste. Personally, I’m tickled, and I hope the snow this year is deep.

Have a good weekend, everyone.

Greg

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