

The importance of staying connected

Like many universities across the nation, the Fort Hays State University on-campus academic experience changed considerably this year. This fall, our students were offered three types of classes: on-campus, face-to-face courses, offered in a condensed, eight-week format (the first half of the semester); hybrid courses – classes offered through both face-to-face and online; and online courses offered completely online.

Every semester, I talk to students about their classes. Many share stories about how much they are thriving in an environment rich with challenges. Others tell me they have figured it all out. And some tell me about their struggles. The college journey is about all of those experiences. The key to success is, I believe, how our faculty embrace those very different realities and create supportive learning cultures that both challenge and support students. In the midst of this atypical year, I find our faculty working even harder to do just that – creatively challenging and supporting our students.

Dr. Betsy Crawford, assistant professor of teacher education, has daily “morning meetings” with students at the beginning of each class to find out how the students are doing. In the first two class periods, they researched and discussed the use of morning meetings in K-12 settings. “Each of my hybrid classes chose how we would use the best practices of morning meetings in our class. Not only does this allow my students to practice a sound classroom management system now, but it also allows me to gather information about them and how they are doing. I find out if they are worried about COVID-19, don’t understand an assignment, or want to tell me something exciting that is happening in their life. Also, the students get to hear from each other. They are thus building relationships between students.”

Another strategy Dr. Crawford utilizes is the old-fashioned art of note writing (I, too, am a fan of notes!) Betsy shared, “I love to send (and get) handwritten cards. This semester, I have set a goal to hand write a postcard to every one of my students, advisees, and the students in the Learning Communities. As someone who teaches future teachers, this is an excellent opportunity for me to reach out to the students and also a model for them how they can reach out to their future students.”

Managing the physical space is also a great technique. For example, Dr. Cheryl Hofstetter Duffy, professor of English, takes advantage of her smaller classes, by moving chairs into a circle – maintaining a 6-foot distance – so that the class discussion can be more conversational, more person-to-person. Dr. Duffy says, “This also makes it easy for students in this configuration to ‘pair off’ for discussion simply by turning toward the person sitting next to them (well, ‘next to them’ at a 6-foot distance).”

In her larger class, when students are on their laptops participating in a peer-response group with two other classmates, Dr. Duffy has students move their chairs so that each group of three forms a triangle – again, maintaining a 6-foot distance.

“So while they are not sitting shoulder-to-shoulder and exchanging printouts of their essays as we used to do, they can still see one another and ask direct questions as they read and responded to essay drafts in the online discussion board. Some groups of three involve one or more classmates who join class via Zoom (because of quarantine and other reasons). In this way, they can see one another and still visit/discuss through the “chat” feature in Zoom.”

Fun is also a great connector. Dr. Duffy said, “During one Zoom class session for my Advanced Composition class, I was Zooming from my campus office. Since students don’t have a chance now to visit my office in person, I gave them a “squirrel tour” of my office’s many squirrel features – everything from a squirrel pillow to a reading squirrel figurine to a singing squirrel.”

Several professors, as well as other leaders, talk about the importance of vulnerability. For example, Dr. Crawford shared, “I am transparent with my students on the struggles I am having with adjusting to teaching students face-to-face and on Zoom at the same time. We are all learning the best way to make it work, and the students feel comfortable providing feedback so I can improve my processes. They have great ideas that I can use to improve my teaching.”

Faculty are also using technology to facilitate one-on-one connections. “Students have always had access to an app that syncs with my calendar. They can schedule a meeting with me at a time that is convenient for them. This practice saves countless emails back and forth to establish a mutual time to talk,” Dr. Crawford said.

Last weekend, I met with a group of students. They talked about how impressed and grateful they were for the many ways in which faculty were connecting and working with them. Our students embrace technology and therefore really appreciate our faculty who are using calendar apps and a variety of other technologies to help connect with students and track assignments and due dates. The students describe, with great appreciation, how their professors have “bent over backwards” to ensure students in isolation and quarantine were not being left behind. They described FHSU professors as flexible and caring and shared how truly impressed they were with how faculty are embracing creativity to amplify teaching and learning at Fort Hays State University.

I join these students in expressing my deep gratitude and admiration for the Fort Hays State faculty who continue to embrace excellence in teaching – no matter what challenge is placed in our path.

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