

CTE Campus-Wide Message
March 12, 2020

Dear Colleagues:

In my role as CTE Director, I've spent the past few days listening to faculty colleagues, students, and administrators offer advice, weigh options, and ask questions. Recognizing that what I've heard and the conversations I've been involved in represent only a portion of the possible responses to the developing Covid-19 situation, I'd like to offer a few pieces of advice as we prepare to transition to distance teaching and learning. They come in the order they came to mind, and, written in some haste, are wordier than I'd otherwise like.

Before that, a reminder that I'm available for meetings and consultations at least through the end of the workday on Tuesday of Spring Break, and by email approximately until the end of time. Some of our consultants will also be available, at least virtually, during Spring Break, too. Please feel free to email me at craig.owens@drake.edu with questions, particularly about teaching strategies and tactics to make the next few weeks doable. If I can't answer your question, I'll connect you with someone who can.

Now, some bits of advice:

- First be kind to yourself and others; exercise patience; and convey optimism, gratitude, and grace in your interactions with colleagues and students. This is stressful for everyone, and we'll all remember and appreciate acts and words of patience and kindness even after our memory of other details of this experience fades.
- Determine the highest-priority core learning goals in your class and attempt only to pursue those. Our goal is to provide learning opportunities that are sufficient to achieve our main goals. Our in-person classes, as we've designed and taught them, provide enriched learning beyond the essential learning goals and outcomes. Do not feel obligated to provide that non-essential, enriched experience to students in a distance learning context under the circumstances. Remember: We are in a situation that makes it impossible for most of us to more than approximate the learning experience students encounter in our classes.
- Use Blackboard, the online learning management system, whenever possible. Students have voiced concern over the many many different kinds of tools beyond Blackboard their professors are asking them to become proficient in: Zoom, Teams, Skype, Facebook, and so on. The greater the extent students can expect to learn through the same interface from course to course, the more cognitive bandwidth they'll have to actually do the learning we're asking them to engage in.
- If at all possible, avoid real-time (synchronous) interfaces as a requirement for student engagement with the course material or for student learning. There are so many possible obstacles facing students' ability to get online reliably and engage with learning

in a real-time environment under the circumstances. We need to be careful not to make assumptions about student access to high-speed internet, for instance, and to remain aware that they are not in an ideal learning environment: Disruptions of all kinds—from travel to the distractions inherent in any non-school space—are likely to prevent some students from being able to engage in real time or to learn effectively in the environments they're in. Loss of income from on-campus jobs they can't attend means that many will need to scrape together gigs or part-time jobs with little control over their schedules while away.

- Provide timelines and due dates to guide students in their engagement with course materials. Please don't just dump two weeks of material into Blackboard and ask students to self-pace and take quizzes or complete assignments on their own time. Students who have enrolled in our in-person classes have grown accustomed to ongoing guidance about time management, preparing to meet deadlines, and instruction that is responsive to how they've performed on scheduled assessments. So give students deadlines, or at least a timeline, that breaks the two weeks' worth of material into manageable chunks with defined time periods for completing it to stay on track.
- You can use Blackboard Collaborate Ultra, available in the Tools menu on Blackboard, for real-time video, audio, and chat communication during one-on-one or small group conferences.
- Communicate frequently and fully: Err on the side of over-explaining changes to the usual practice, reminding students of expectations and due dates too often, and providing more explanation than might be necessary. Also, make more time than usual for receiving and responding to student communication. A discussion board inside Blackboard is a great way of managing course-wide communications with a dedicated Q&A thread.
- Ask students what their capabilities and limitations are with respect to their access to online material, and build your expectations with those limitations in mind.
- Ask students for feedback on how the course is going for them, and be ready to adjust your practices and expectations accordingly. Expressing your interest in the student experience will go a long way toward keeping students engaged and receptive.
- Praise your students more than you usually would. This is hard for them too, even if they are digital "natives."
- Communicate across at least two platforms: For instance, using the Announcements function in Blackboard and checking the box that will automatically create and send an email version of that announcement is one way of ensuring that communication is coming to students in more than one way.
- Be transparent with students about the challenges you're facing. Letting them know that you, too, find these changes disorienting and that you would ask for their patience and understanding will help to reinforce the interpersonal and ethical bonds that sometimes weaken in distance learning.
- At the same time, exercise lenience with respect to deadlines, provide more time than you usually would for completing work, and adjust your expectations for the quality of work students can reasonably be expected to execute under the circumstances.
- Do the same for yourself.

Above all, take care of yourself, stay human, and practice forgiveness.

Yours,

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