

CTE Campus-Wide Message  
April 16, 2020

Dear Colleagues:

We're now into our fourth week since we made the turn to remote teaching and learning (but who's counting), and I continue to hear from our colleagues about their experiences; it sounds like, for the vast majority of us, we're really beginning to get the hang of things.

This comes as a check-in and update about developments related to the Center for Teaching Excellence's ongoing efforts to support both individual faculty as well as institution-wide efforts to maintain a distinctive learning environment for our students.

### **Late-Term Check-In**

If you haven't done so, now would be a good time to conduct a general check-in with your students about their experience in your class and with remote learning so far. Nothing elaborate: a few questions about what other kinds of support they may need from you or from the institution; whether they're reliably able to access the resources—online materials, Blackboard, and so forth; and generally, how they're holding up.

If you discover that some of your students find themselves at serious disadvantages in the new modality, please be flexible with due dates and other fungible requirements that don't seriously affect the quality of the learning itself. At the same time, set reasonable limits for flexibility, too. Nobody wants a completely unstructured experience or a dozen incompletes or in-progress grades hanging over their heads after the end of the semester.

### **Quality of Student Experience**

When we began this endeavor, I advocated aiming toward sufficiency in the deployment of our remote teaching and learning plans. However, as we become more adept at working with the remote-learning tools we have available, and as we gain a sense of how things will unfold for us, as educators, for the remainder of the semester, we might begin to incrementally raise our expectations for our own work and, as appropriate, for that of our students.

Here are three suggestions:

Consistent Communication: Like all of us, students are receiving many more messages from many more sources than before spring break: emails, Starfish alerts, due-date reminders, Teams chat, and the like. And, like us, their capacity for reading and processing every communication is limited. So, try to plan your communications with students to come at consistent times each week and in the same form each week.

- If, for instance, you called your weekly email an “Update” last week, keep calling it an “Update.”
- If you’ve been using the Blackboard email function to send class-wide emails, continue to use the same tool.
- If you’ve been sending a lot of small reminders throughout the week, consider consolidating them into a single message that you send as an email but also post as an announcement inside Blackboard for students to easily find and return to.
- In any case, communicate your communication plan to students and, as much as possible, stick to it.

Pushing beyond “Good Enough”: If students have gotten into the habit of meeting lower-than-usual or minimal expectations since Spring Break, effectively moving them toward a fuller realization of course outcomes can be a challenge. Here are some tips for moving them in that direction without derailing them entirely.

- Take small steps: For instance, in my writing classes, I have focused mainly on coaching students on the development of high-level concepts in their writing. The finer points of voice and structure have taken a backseat. As we move forward, though, I’ll want to bring those expectations back into play—but not all at once. One week, we may focus a little more on sentence structure and syntax. The next week, on the use of transitional language to signpost analytical moves. The following week, macro-structure and organization. This is all to suggest that you think of ways of breaking up the larger goals you’ve set aside for the moment into smaller pieces and begin introducing them incrementally.
- Demonstrate what you have in mind: Whenever possible, use examples to show what achievement at the next level looks (or sounds) like. A brief video, additional web-based resources, and step-by-step demonstrations that really focus in on the small improvements you want to introduce today or this week will go a long way as supplements to high-level or technical explanations. Now, more than ever, anchor expectations with examples and demonstrations.
- Acknowledge the shift—and the challenges: If you’ve cut back on the amount of work you expect from students or if you’ve set aside some expectations and are now ready to reintroduce them, let your students know explicitly that you’ve done so, what your plans are, and why you’re doing it now. In our face-to-face classes, we often take for granted that students are able to see clearly the why and how of the moves we’re making in class. In remote-learning mode, it’s more important than ever to signal explicitly our reasoning and to highlight the pedagogical and tactical choices we’re making. Couch those decisions in terms of student achievement and express confidence in their ability to take on new challenges at this point.

Adding a little polish: None of us will have become expert video editors overnight or second-nature users of an online learning management system in just a few weeks. However, it might

be time for all of us to challenge ourselves to take small but determined steps in polishing our own self-presentation or the presentation of our materials.

- For example, if you've relied on text-only communications with your students, think about adding in video or audio content.
- If you've been updating your schedule of readings and assignments on a weekly basis, now might be the time to produce a comprehensive revised schedule.
- If you've been sharing changes to course policies in a one-off way, perhaps think about taking some time to completely revise the documents you've been amending in piecemeal fashion.
- If you've been posting resources in various places over the course of the past few weeks, perhaps its time to think about consolidating links, documents, and other course materials in a one-stop shop online.
- If you've been doing everything aynchronously, maybe start planning face-to-face, "real"-time check ins or office hours, even if you're not going to conduct a "class" online.

Enriching Communication: Because we don't have the luxury of the information-rich in-person experience, we're left mainly with words on a screen as a primary mode of communication. So, those words now have to do a lot more communicative work than they used to, because we don't have the physical presence of our students, their body language, facial expressions, and groans of acquiescence—or our own—to supplement what we say. So, to repeat some advice I offered earlier, try to make sure that your written communication with them provides ample detail; that it organizes itself in ways that make intuitive sense; and that they include expressions of warmth and genuine interest in student work and well-being. These little touches go a long way.

### **Student Survey and Course Evaluations**

In the last week of April, the CTE will launch a survey that asks students to share their impressions of their over-all experience with Drake's transition to remote teaching and learning in the second half of the semester. The information gleaned from this survey...

- ...will inform ongoing faculty development around achieving excellence in distance learning in preparation for any future disruptions we may face.
- ...will inform institution-level planning as we prepare to meet future challenges caused by the ongoing pandemic.
- ...will help shape the faculty survey to be deployed after the end of the term.
- ...will **not** ask about students' experience with particular instructors, courses, or programs.
- ...will **not** substitute for course evaluations.

Given the timing of this survey in a particularly survey-dense time of the year, please do not begin soliciting course evaluation feedback from students in your classes until on or after May 4<sup>th</sup>.

### **Informal Remote Learning Exchange Opportunities**

Some of our colleagues have asked whether the CTE could arrange for occasional informal virtual get-togethers for faculty members who want to share ideas and ask questions about teaching in a time of coronavirus, or who just need to connect with colleagues. And so, beginning April 16<sup>th</sup> and April 17<sup>th</sup>, every Thursday and Friday, from now to the end of August, there will be a Teams room available [here](#).

You can log in to see who's there or you can arrange to meet others there at a specific time, even outside the scheduled gatherings. More information is available on the CTE webpages [here](#), under the "Remote Learning Exchange" tab.

You'll need to use the Teams app on your smartphone or the Teams app or web interface on your computer to join the meeting. There won't be formal agendas and conversation can be as free-flowing or as structured as those who join the room would like. I might pop in from time to time, but I certainly won't be there every time.

As I've been saying a lot lately, "sufficient unto the day is the email thereof"—and this email is certainly long enough to suffice several days. As always, I welcome questions and comments about any aspect of teaching and learning: you can email me at [craig.owens@drake.edu](mailto:craig.owens@drake.edu) or contact me through the CTE's email address: [teaching.excellence@drake.edu](mailto:teaching.excellence@drake.edu).

Yours,

Craig

**Craig N. Owens, PhD**  
Professor of English  
Director, Center for Teaching Excellence  
2014 Madelyn M. Levitt Teacher of the Year  
Drake University  
Howard Hall 322  
(515) 271-3876