

CTE Campus-Wide Message  
April 27, 2020

Dear Colleagues:

This semester seems to move both slowly and quickly. On the one hand, continuing to make adjustments large and small to our approaches to teaching in response to changes in our own situations and those of our students is certainly taxing and bandwidth-intensive (digital and cognitive alike); and that intensity brings with it very real and valid feelings that we're trudging along a never-ending loop. By contrast, this past weekend would have been Relays, the harbinger of the semester's end and the beginning of the annual scramble to catch up, finish up, and close out the semester: For me, at least, Street Painting and Relays came and went so silently this year that I'm surprised they're already behind us.

So, in offering the following updates, suggestions, and reminders from the Center for Teaching Excellence, I also want to acknowledge that we've all experienced this semester differently; please read what I have to offer below in the context of your own experience and, as far as you can, balance your commitment to what is ideal with an awareness of what is wise.

**Reminder: Student Experience Survey**

Today—Monday—the CTE launches a survey of students to learn more about their experience as distance-learners at Drake since Spring Break. While we already have responses from students to a national survey that shows us what they've experienced as learners and gives us insight into the way their own situations affects their experience, today's survey is somewhat more granular in its questions and tries to find out what's working well (and what's not) for Drake students in particular.

Three notes:

1. The survey does not ask questions specific to divisions, programs, courses, or instructors. Instead, it asks students to consider their over-all Drake experience since Spring Break.
2. Thus, it will not stand in for course evaluations, which we will still conduct individually this semester. (See "Course Evaluations," below).
3. So as not to create confusion, please do not launch your own course evaluations until on or after May 4<sup>th</sup>. (Again, see "Course Evaluations," below).

If you have the opportunity, please encourage your students to respond to the survey. Results from the student survey will help us prepare for to support one another as we plan for the fall amid uncertainties and to create a faculty survey that invites you to respond to student feedback. Please expect an invitation to take that latter survey in or near the last week of May.

**Course Evaluations**

While conducting student course evaluations this year is still a requirement in all courses, the inclusion of results as part of faculty evaluation materials is optional, and that option can be exercised without bias; the decision whether to include results rests with each individual faculty member alone.

Because every college and school conducts evaluations differently, it's up to department chairs, program directors, and divisional leadership to work with faculty on the logistics of creating and deploying course evaluations this year and on gathering results in a way that protects faculty's sole access to those results.

To the extent your divisional or departmental protocols allow you to do so, please consider using course evaluations this semester to elicit specific suggestions from students about how you might improve the learning experience if and when the next disruptions to normal in-person teaching occur. If possible, asking students for written (discursive) responses to questions rather than—or in addition to—numerical ratings will serve the formative goals this semester's evaluations are meant to serve better.

The downside to specifically asking for critique and suggestions is that, inevitably, we learn about our shortcomings and failures—never pleasant, and sometimes disheartening. I don't take lightly the fact that we're all more vulnerable and raw now than ever, or that the last thing most of us want is to hear about ways students' experiences have not been what they hoped for or what we have striven for. To invite critique takes courage and strength, both of which are already stretched thin.

Relatedly, implicit (and sometimes explicit) cultural biases make asking for critique more fraught for some of us than for others. Overwhelming research shows that women, people of color, people whose gender or sexuality do not conform to cis-hetero norms, users of English as a non-native language, and others whose identities and self-presentation do not reinforce dominant cultural norms already receive disproportionately negative reactions from student course evaluations. This disparity is compounded by the fact that students with strong feelings are more motivated to respond to online, asynchronous course evaluations in the first place. No one should feel obligated to invite even more damaging, biased responses than they already receive.

So, in crafting your questions, you may find that prospective questions, rather than retrospective ones, will give your students the opportunity to join you in looking forward to greater success rather than channeling their generalized frustrations into what did not go as well as they (and we) had hoped in a particular class. So, asking explicitly about the next time you teach the course may be a worthwhile approach to explore. Likewise, it may make sense for you to ask about how your students envision improving in the future: What do they know about themselves now they wished they'd known earlier, and how might that discovery affect how they engage in learning in the future, whether in-person or not?

The advantages to making carefully worded invitations for truly constructive feedback, and to framing them as opportunities for students to help make the experience of those who follow

better, are enormous. And, when we acknowledge at the outset that under the circumstances, we've all done amazing work just keeping our students engaged and moving forward, the reservations students may express lose some of their usual sting. Just asking our students the question "What could I do better next time?"—whatever the answer—reminds them of what is distinctive about their Drake experience: That their professors care about them, their learning, and their well-being. Likewise, just asking that question enables us to begin the reflection and processing necessary for making strides in our own work as educators.

So, as you are able to turn your attention to questions of refinement and improvement, and to the degree your departmental or divisional practices allow, please consider asking your students to offer their their honest advice for the future.

### **Resources for Surviving, Coping, and Thriving**

We continue to periodically update the [CTE's Teaching, Learning & Student Support page](#). Those resources are now categorized according to the focus the linked information, thanks to the ongoing hard work of Sandra Harris.

Here, I'd like to offer two more links that have less to do with working and more to do with taking care of ourselves and making time outside work to give our own domestic lives, health, and well-being at least a modicum of attention. There's a ton of advice like this on the web, some more targeted and some more general. But, if you haven't had the time or energy to search it up for yourself, maybe these two can get you started.

The first comes from Edutopia and focuses specifically on the [stresses educators experience](#). It touches briefly on several different types of self care, from social connectedness to sleep and exercise to mindfulness and reflection. If you continue to scroll down, you'll find additional resources and insights for educators, as well.

[The second resource, from the CDC](#), speaks to anyone contending with the Covid-19 pandemic and the associated pressures and stresses, including secondary traumatic experiences. It's much more wide-ranging than the Edutopia piece above, and the side-bar menu it provides advice on domestic life, childcare, socializing, and stress and coping. A section on "Communities, Schools, and Workplaces" offers advice and information we educators may find more specifically helpful, too.

If you have come across virtual resource that have proved particularly helpful to you, please let me know. We can continue to add them to our online menu.

### **Stories from the Field**

I would be interested to learn more from you about successes and challenges you have experienced—particularly those that surprised you or spurred you to think about how we can do the work of educating in new ways. More than ever, we're at a time when innovation and agility are critical. By sharing your accounts of successes—however large or small—and the challenges you have been contending with that you think require novel approaches, you can help the CTE

lay the groundwork for effective mentoring and faculty development in the weeks and months to come.

Please know that, although I hope to share what I learn from you, I'll keep your responses anonymous, unless you expressly invite me to include your name in association with your response.

### **Finally, an Addendum to my Last**

Ten days or so ago, the last time a CTE update went out to campus, I announced that a virtual collaboration and conversation space for faculty was available in Teams. I did not, however, suggest a time frame for joining those conversations. So, here's what I wrote in that earlier email, with suggested times to make planning perhaps more straightforward.

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>, **between 11 and 1** 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.

### **Will This Email Ever End?**

I know there's a lot to deal with just to stay one step ahead of the many demands that come our way, and I appreciate your pausing for a minute to make your way through missives like this.

Can we think of these emails as part of a dialogue? I hope so. The more I hear from you, the better able the CTE will be to help. At the same time, it's great to see and hear evidence that, as a faculty, we really are up to the hard work we face. When Dave Remund, our director of marketing and communications, and Annie Kremer, dean of admissions, ask for my input on how we continue to promote learning at Drake at times like this, it is a pleasure to be able honestly to say that our colleagues' expertise and dedication to students—to their learning, of course, but to their complete well-being—are as much in evidence now as when things were "normal," if not more so.

Thanks for your continued hard work and commitment, and please, keep in touch.

Best,

Craig