

Connecting with students: Suggestions for making contact before your Fall 2021 course begins

As we move closer to the start of the fall semester, we need make initial contact with students so they can begin to feel connected to us, can learn about the course they will be taking with us, and can learn about our plans for keeping them safe. This initial contact should not be so detailed as to overwhelm them but will lay out a course for further communication. Most importantly, this is also an opportunity to find out about challenges they are facing, concerns they have about returning to campus, access to technology and internet, and so on. Below, you will find sample language for this initial contact, survey questions that will help you understand students' situation and suggestions for how to use the information you gather from students.

Sample language for email to students

Dear students,

I hope this email finds you safe and healthy. As the summer starts to wind down, we are all starting to think about and plan for the fall semester, and that can bring uncertainty and worry. That's the reason I'm reaching out to you—to remove some of that uncertainty. I've been spending time the past several weeks developing plans to ensure that the course you're taking with me is a positive and effective learning experience. I'm writing to check in, tell you a little bit about our course, and gather some information from you that I can use to make sure this semester is successful for you and all students!

First, let me tell you a little bit about our course. Our course is an in-person course, which means that we will meet face-to-face during our scheduled class meeting times. I am making plans to ensure that the course will provide you with opportunities to engage with me and with your peers in support of your learning. When the semester starts, I'll give you detailed information about what will happen during class meetings, how to prepare for them, and how I have planned those meetings so that you will learn and succeed this semester. And, most importantly, I'll explain how we will stay safe when we meet, following all the safety recommendations that will keep us healthy!

Now that you know a little bit more about how we'll be learning together this coming semester, it's time for me to ask you some questions so that I have the right information to ensure that our course is successful.

(At this point in your email to students, direct them to answer these questions in one of the following ways:

- *Email their responses to you. (This is one way to establish a connection with students that can increase their sense of belonging in your course.)*
- *Open a link to a survey in [Qualtrics](#). (You may choose to have students identify themselves on that survey or you can make it anonymous.)*
- *Log in to your course in Blackboard, where they can take an anonymous survey. (Your course must be available to students in order for them to use this option. Please contact*

ITLAL at teachingandlearning@albany.edu to request a version of this survey that can be uploaded into your Blackboard course.)

Thank you for taking the survey. I am sure that other instructors will be asking you similar questions, but it is so important for us to learn about your situation so that we can make the best plans for the fall. I'm excited to meet you soon and I wish you continued health as you enjoy the rest of your break! Be in touch!

Sample survey questions

1. Do you have a device that allows you to use Blackboard and (other technologies)?
Possible follow-up questions: What device do you have? Have you had any problems using that device to go to classes remotely or to use Blackboard or to do other required course work? Are you the only person using that device? If you have to share that device with another person, what concerns do you have?
2. Do you have reliable high-speed internet so that you can access course materials in Blackboard?
Possible follow-up question: What concerns do you have about your internet connection?
3. Do you have work, family, or other obligations that you think might interfere with the time you need to study or prepare for class?
Possible follow-up question: What are your concerns about your schedule and time commitments?
4. What other concerns do you have? Please share with me any challenges or questions that you have about the coming semester, about learning face-to-face, and about our course.

Using the information you gather from students

Students may provide information in the survey that will require you to make some small changes in how you approach teaching. Below you'll find guidance about what the survey may indicate and how you can respond to students in helpful ways.

Survey indicates: Some students do not have a reliable device, have limited access to a device, or certain software does not run on their device.

Instructor response: You can begin by normalizing the challenge those students face (they may feel ashamed by their situation). Then troubleshoot specific needs students have, such as not being able to run required software by contacting ITS or colleagues to find a workaround. Communicate this plan and the resulting recommendations to students.

Survey indicates: Some students do not have access to reliable high-speed internet.

Instructor response: You can begin by normalizing the challenge those students face (they may feel ashamed by their situation). Reassure students that it is acceptable to turn off their visual feed during any Zoom office hours that you hold as that can help with connectivity. You can also let them know that you will remain flexible with deadlines for submission of assignments and assessments due on Blackboard. You can accept work from all students across a span of time and

this ensures that students with unreliable internet will likely be able to access Blackboard at some point in that time span.

Survey indicates: Some students have concerns about other obligations that may interfere with their work in your course.

Instructor response: You can begin by normalizing the challenge those students face (they may feel ashamed by their situation). Remind students of the ways in which you have designed the course to help them manage the workload and build in practice opportunities for major assessments and assignments. Make sure that the course schedule is clear and show students how they can use that schedule to manage their time and efforts.

Survey indicates: Some students have concerns about health and safety when returning to the in-person classroom.

Instructor response: You can begin by normalizing these concerns. Explain that you are also concerned about everyone's physical and mental health and that you have given careful thought to safety concerns when designing the work students will do in the classroom. Clearly and explicitly explain the protocols you'd like to practice to ensure the classroom is as safe as possible, and invite students to contribute any ideas they have.