**Connecting with Students: Suggestions for making contact before your hybrid-synchronous simulcast course begins**

*As we move closer to the start of the fall semester, we need make initial contact with students to help them refocus on the coming academic year, feel connected to their instructors, and learn a little about the course they will be taking with us. This will help them begin to prepare for the fall. 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 information related to their access to technology and internet, challenges they are facing, their living situation, 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 healthy and still enjoying the summer, even if it's been one of the most unusual summers we've ever experienced. As the summer starts to wind down, we are all starting to think about and plan for the fall, 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 this summer 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 what's called a "Hybrid – Synchronous Simulcast Course," which means that some students will be in the actual classroom face-to-face with me at every class meeting while some students will be attending class through Zoom. In other words, we will all meet during scheduled class time, but some will be present in person and some will be present remotely through Zoom. We'll also use some tools in Blackboard to communicate and for you to do and submit various assignments. 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. I'll also introduce you to the Blackboard tools we'll be using. 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](mailto: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 summer! Be in touch!

## Survey questions

1. Where will you be living during the fall semester? (Dorm, Apartment in Albany, Home away from Albany but in the U.S., Home outside of the U.S.)

   Follow-up question: What concerns do you have about where you will be living? For example, if you are in an apartment in Albany, do you have concerns about getting to our class meetings on time? If you are living in a time zone that is different from New York time, do you have concerns about class meetings or making deadlines for activities or exams?

2. Do you have a device that allows you to use Zoom, Blackboard, and _____.

   Follow-up questions: What device do you have? Did you have any problems using that device during the spring semester 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?

3. Do you have a camera and a microphone that allow you to speak and be seen on Zoom?

   Follow-up question: What concerns do you have about your camera and microphone?

4. Do you have reliable high-speed internet?

   Follow-up question: What concerns do you have about your internet connection?

5. Do you have a quiet place to do your school work in your home or dorm?

   Follow-up question: What are your concerns about working in your home or dorm?

6. Our course is a "Hybrid – Synchronous Simulcast Course." You can join our class meetings remotely or in person. Do you expect that you will be more likely to attend most classes remotely or in person?

7. What other concerns do you have? Please share with me any challenges or questions that you have about the coming semester 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 have concerns about getting to class on time or indicate that they live rather far from Albany and are concerned about transportation.

Instructor response: Let students know that you understand the complexities of navigating the campus with the complexities of the pandemic and indicate that you expect students to be arriving and getting settled in class during the first 5-10 minutes of class. Remind them that you will take their situation into consideration if they are late to class and that you intend to be flexible with students.

Survey indicates: Some students live in a different time zone and have concerns about joining the class remotely.

Instructor response: Make sure students understand that you are sympathetic with the situation and that you realize it might be difficult for students to share their video during class time if the time difference makes that awkward. Reassure students that deadlines for work submission on Blackboard can be shifted to make allowances for time differences. If you class involves peers working together, consider how you will create groupings that allow all students to find times to meet.

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) and then help them by referring them to the resources the university provides on pages 13 and 14 of the Fall 2020 Return to UAlbany Student Guide. 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 a webcam.

Instructor response: You can begin by normalizing the challenge those students face (they may feel ashamed by their situation) and then help them by referring them to the resources the university provides on pages 13 and 14 of the Fall 2020 Return to UAlbany Student Guide. Students may need a webcam to participate in synchronous Zoom class meetings, synchronous Zoom office hours, in Zoom meetings with classmates, or for other instructional purposes. Until they are able to they are able to purchase or borrow a webcam, you can suggest students use the chat function to interact during synchronous Zoom meetings and use email and phone to connect with you and with classmates. Make sure that you structure these forms of interaction for students so that they feel fully included. You can, for example, review the chat at a few key moments during class meetings or office hours to respond to student ideas and questions.

Survey indicates: Some students do not have reliable high-speed internet in their home.

Instructor response: You can begin by normalizing the challenge those students face (they may feel ashamed by their situation). You can assure students that it is acceptable to turn off their visual feed during synchronous Zoom class meetings or office hours 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 are in a home or dorm situation that makes it difficult for them to study or join synchronous Zoom class meetings, office hours, or Zoom student work sessions.

Instructor response: You can begin by normalizing the challenge those students face (they may feel ashamed by their situation). Suggest that students may wish to join synchronous Zoom sessions with their video off and that they may keep their audio muted when they aren't speaking. Assure students that they are welcome even when they need to participate in these ways. Remind them that chat is a good way to communicate during meetings if they don't want to unmute themselves.

Survey indicates: How many students plan to participate in class meetings remotely and how many plan to be in the classroom.

Instructor response: Use this information to conceptualize how you will include both groups of students in activities and discussions. Be particularly mindful of how you will design class meetings so that you thoughtfully and deliberately include remote students and how you will help build community among remote and in-person students.