Communication Guide

**Communicating with Students in Times of Uncertainty**

The emergence of the novel coronavirus as a world-wide pandemic and public health emergency impacted higher education in unprecedented ways, altering the ways that we teach, serve, and support our students through periods of crisis or uncertainty.

The College Transition Collaborative (CTC) developed this communication guide to support administrators, instructors, and campus leaders as they supported students through the challenges they faced related to COVID-19. While written in direct response to the pandemic, this guide includes practical suggestions for how to communicate with students in other periods of adversity or transition as well. Building on our experience as educators and researchers, CTC has developed example language and talking points for responding to concerns we know many students face -- on our own campuses and around the world.

This language assumes a two-way conversation, for use in telephone, video conference, or email communication. But similar language can be adapted for mass communication in emails or on course management websites.

**You know your students.**This resource is not an exhaustive list of all of the challenges our students may face, nor is it a perfect roadmap for navigating difficult conversations. But we hope it provides a base that you can adapt using your knowledge of your students and your experience working with them through significant challenges in the past.

**How to use this Guide:**

CAPS is offering this as an open-source resource.

**Guiding Principles for Communicating in Times of Uncertainty**

In the following pages, we provide suggested language according to the following principles for communication during a collective crisis that takes students’ psychological experiences into account:

1. **Normalize** the experience of finding the current situation difficult and upsetting
2. Convey **compassion and understanding** for students’ concerns and challenges
3. Reassure them that these are highly unusual times and college leadership, staff, instructors, and students are **learning how to handle it, together**
4. **Validate and address** their concerns or questions as well as you are able given the information available to you, and your own capacity
5. **Acknowledge** that the situation is changing quickly, and that solutions are changing as circumstances change
6. **Connect them** to places where they can get updated information as plans continue to unfold

As you employ these principles in your communications with students, keep in mind that messages that contradict students' experiences - however well intentioned - have the potential to backfire.  In all communications, take care to ensure that the message you convey is accurate for your context based on the current circumstances and information available.

**This Resources Provides Suggested Language for Communicating About:**

[**Uncertainty: Addressing concerns about changing circumstances in a period of upheaval**](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vQsUTSWTSEECnTm1P0a0rkSnDi2IR6QpGckJNQUSiJUJUpbqFJo4IOwpMs2mTct9cna5Ejh16e98Qvq/pub?embedded=true#h.j4z06e5qe1s1)

[**Academic Progress: Discussing academic options and trajectories when education is disrupted**](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vQsUTSWTSEECnTm1P0a0rkSnDi2IR6QpGckJNQUSiJUJUpbqFJo4IOwpMs2mTct9cna5Ejh16e98Qvq/pub?embedded=true#h.rgqw3xowz20i)

[**Financial Insecurity: Addressing the impact of financial hardship**](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vQsUTSWTSEECnTm1P0a0rkSnDi2IR6QpGckJNQUSiJUJUpbqFJo4IOwpMs2mTct9cna5Ejh16e98Qvq/pub?embedded=true#h.tfp05mw3370i)

[**Health and Safety: Addressing public health and safety concerns**](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vQsUTSWTSEECnTm1P0a0rkSnDi2IR6QpGckJNQUSiJUJUpbqFJo4IOwpMs2mTct9cna5Ejh16e98Qvq/pub?embedded=true#h.bs13lrir6zsv)

[**Online learning: Discussing transitioning to distance learning**](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vQsUTSWTSEECnTm1P0a0rkSnDi2IR6QpGckJNQUSiJUJUpbqFJo4IOwpMs2mTct9cna5Ejh16e98Qvq/pub?embedded=true#h.dn2pznl0grj5)

[**Self-Talk: Coping with what YOU need in times of uncertainty**](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vQsUTSWTSEECnTm1P0a0rkSnDi2IR6QpGckJNQUSiJUJUpbqFJo4IOwpMs2mTct9cna5Ejh16e98Qvq/pub?embedded=true#h.9gu8zaf04p5p)

**Uncertainty: Addressing concerns about changing circumstances in a period of upheaval**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ***What they say*** | ***How You Can Begin to Address It*** |
| I’m scared. | This is an unprecedented and difficult situation. ***It is completely normal to be scared.*** Could you share more with me about what’s worrying you? |
| What is going to happen with [plans not yet solidified]? | I don’t know the details, but what I can tell you is that CSN is working on a plan to address this. It would help me to understand how this impacts you. ***What are you most concerned about related to [plans]?*** |
| The college is making new decisions and changing policies every day. Why? | Our primary concern is for the safety of our students. We are trying to make the best decisions for everyone, using the information available to us at the time. I know this feels chaotic, but the situation is changing rapidly, here and around the country. ***I will do my best to share updated information with you as soon as I have it.*** |
| I don’t know what’s going on. Why isn’t CSN telling us more about what is going on? | ***I know things are uncertain right now, and that’s very difficult. Here is what I can tell you***about CSN’s planning process for this situation. |

**Academic Progress: Discussing academic options and trajectories when education is disrupted**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ***What they say*** | ***How You Can Begin to Address It*** |
| I am supposed to graduate this term. Will graduation happen? | ***You’ve worked so hard to get to this point.*** CSN is doing everything we can to honor that hard work while also protecting the health and safety of our community. ***I imagine it is hard not knowing what graduation will look like this year.*** Here are our current plans for this situation, but college leaders are meeting this week to talk about it, and plans are continuing to evolve as they get new information from public health officials. Please feel free to check back in a few days. Hopefully we will have some updates by then. |
| I need [X] for my major, and now it’s been canceled. I am worried about my academic progress. | CSN is doing the best we can to continue offering our normal courses/opportunities to our students, but we have had to change some things because of this situation.***I wish things were different.***Let’s talk about your options / Let me connect you with someone who can go over your options with you. |
| I’m having trouble concentrating. | This is such a tough situation. ***I think anyone would have trouble concentrating under these circumstances.*** I am here to support you. Can you tell me more about how this is impacting you? |
| I need to pause my education right now to focus on my/my family’s basic needs. What are my options? | ***Thank you for sharing this with me.***You are certainly not the only person making this same difficult decision right now. Let’s talk about your options, and how we can make it as smooth as possible for you to start courses again when your situation allows. Even during normal times, it is common for students to pause their education due to circumstances beyond their control, and then to resume their education at a later time. |

**Financial Insecurity: Addressing the impact of financial hardship**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ***What they say*** | ***How You Can Begin to Address It*** |
| I lost my job. | ***I am so sorry. I know this is a difficult situation***, and I wish things were different. Can you tell me a bit more about how this is impacting you? |
| I am homeless or worried about becoming homeless during this situation. | ***I know this is a scary situation.*** Your health and safety are very important. Can you tell me more about your situation? ***I will do my best to connect you with resources to help.*** |
| I am hungry or I don’t have enough to eat. | ***I’m sorry you’re going through this.***You are not the only student who is experiencing this. Let me connect you with some campus / community resources to help with food insecurity. |

**Health and Safety: Addressing public health and safety concerns**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ***What they say*** | ***How You Can Begin to Address It*** |
| I’m worried I have coronavirus or am worried about getting coronavirus. What should I do? | ***That concern is understandable.*** Here is where you can find the most up to date information from [our school / county / state / public health department] about what to do next. |
| I’m worried about my vulnerable family/friends. | ***I think many people share your concern right now.*** This is such a difficult situation. Can you tell me a bit more about how this worry is impacting you? |
| My family member or friend is sick, or in the hospital. | ***I am so sorry to hear this.***(Silence] How can I support you at CSN right now? |
| My family member or friend has passed away. | ***I am so sorry for your loss.*** [Silence] How can I support you at CSN right now? |

**Campus Housing: Addressing concerns related to university housing and campus closures**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ***What they say*** | ***How You Can Begin to Address It*** |
| Do I have to leave campus? | In order to best protect our students and our campus community [school name] is currently asking / requiring that students \_\_\_\_. ***Do you have questions or concerns about this?*** |
| I have nowhere to go. | [School name] understands that not all students have the ability to leave campus.***Your health and safety is very important.***Let’s talk about your options / let me reach out to someone who can tell us what options are available. |
| I’m far from family and have no money to get home. | ***I am so sorry. I imagine it’s very difficult to be far from family in this situation.***Let’s talk about your options / let me reach out to someone who can tell us what options are available. |

**Online learning: Discussing transitioning to distance learning**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ***What they say*** | ***How You Can Begin to Address It*** |
| I don’t have reliable internet access at home. How am I supposed to attend class? | ***Thank you for sharing this with me.***There are a number of students facing a similar situation. Individual instructors, along with campus leadership, are working on some solutions in the way courses are designed. In the meantime, it would be a good idea to reach out to each of your instructors to let them know that you may have difficulty accessing the materials. You may also be able to reach your academic advisers by phone at [www.csn.edu/advising](http://www.csn.edu/advising) to talk about how to approach this. |
| I don’t know how to use the online course setup. Does it mean I can’t succeed? | Experiencing challenges during this transition is***completely understandable, and not a sign that you can’t be successful***under these circumstances. Online courses are new for many students, and many instructors. ***We’re all figuring this out together.*** Can you tell me more about the obstacles you’re facing? |
| I’m having tech issues that are hindering my coursework. Should I just give up? | Technological issues are a ***common experience, and not at all a sign that you cannot succeed.***Please tell me more about what you’re experiencing. |
| I was having a hard time keeping up with course material during regular courses. How will I keep up now? | ***I understand your concern.*** I suggest you reach out to your instructor to let them know about these concerns and see how they are planning to approach the transition to online learning in their class. [School name] may also have some resources to help support your learning in this course (e.g., online tutoring). Can you tell me a bit more about what has been challenging for you so far in this course? |
| My kids are out of school. I am worried about taking care of them and keeping up with my courses. | ***This is such a difficult situation.***There are a number of students facing a similar situation. Many individual instructors, along with department and campus leadership, are working on ways to accommodate student learning under these circumstances. It would be a good idea to reach out to each of your instructors to let them know that you are balancing care responsibilities with your school work. They may have already planned for flexibility in their course to address this. |
| My instructors are carrying on with course assignments as though nothing has changed or giving us more work than usual. Do they not understand what I’m going through? | ***I imagine this feels very frustrating and worrisome***. Many instructors are new to online courses and may not be fully aware of the challenges that students are facing in this transition. If you feel comfortable doing so, it may be a good idea to reach out to your instructors to let them know about any challenges you are having adjusting to distance learning.  Would you like me to help you draft an email that addresses your concerns? |
| I share a computer with other members of my family and can’t be online when classes are scheduled / use it enough to complete all of my coursework. | ***This must be very challenging.***There are a number of students in a similar position. Individual instructors, along with campus leadership, are working on some solutions in the way courses are designed. In the meantime, it would be a good idea to reach out to each of your instructors to let them know that you may have difficulty attending class / completing assignments. |
| I have asked one of my instructors for accommodations under these circumstances, but I have not heard back. What should I do? | ***I can imagine that this feels very stressful.*** Right now, instructors are working hard to move their courses online, many for the first time. This is a large and challenging undertaking, and they may be having a difficult time responding to individual student emails in a timely manner. Please know that many instructors, and school leaders, are working on solutions for accommodating students through this transition. For the time being, do what you can to participate in the course, and if you haven’t heard back in a few days feel free to follow up again. I will document that we spoke about this as well. |
| I have asked one of my instructors for accommodations under these circumstances but was denied my request. What should I do? | ***I am sorry to hear that. That must have been really difficult to hear.***Please tell me more about the accommodations you are needing. I may be able to help you appeal their decision at the campus level, or there may be ways that we can work to get your needs met without the instructor’s participation. |

**Self-Talk: Coping with what YOU need in times of uncertainty**

In periods of crisis, college staff and faculty may be trying to support students while facing significant challenges of their own. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many of you have been juggling caregiving responsibilities while trying to work from home. Many of you have had financial stresses and fears about yourself and your loved ones. If there was a straightforward solution for continuing to be productive while coping with these stressors, you would have found it by now. Here are some suggestions for having these conversations **with yourself:**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ***What you think*** | ***How You Can Begin to Address It*** |
| My students are struggling with serious issues like food and housing insecurity, and the loss of a loved one. I don’t know how to help them. | ***It is true that you cannot save your students from going through this difficult time. But in situations of great adversity and uncertainty, your support can have the most impact.  Remember what you can do*:** acknowledge that the student is experiencing a true hardship; express your care and concern for them and their situation; connect students to resources on your campus or in your community that provide support for essential needs. |
| I have too many students, and I can’t respond to all of the questions and concerns I’m getting. | ***This is a difficult and extraordinary situation***. Most college staff are feeling overwhelmed by this situation at times, in their work and in their personal lives. In our experience, ***students can understand that staff and faculty have full plates of their own.***If you feel comfortable doing so, you can let students know, perhaps with an email autoreply or very quick response email, that you may not be able to respond in a timely fashion, but you do want to hear from students, and you are working to get information and pass on students’ concerns. |
| I am feeling overwhelmed. I am afraid I am getting burned out. | ***This is completely understandable.***You are doing important, challenging, and difficult work to support students through this ordeal. ***There is no easy solution for this situation, for the students or for you.***You might consider using these same strategies for yourself: Normalize, for yourself, the experience of finding the current situation difficult and upsetting. Have self-compassion for your own concerns and challenges.  Remember that these are highly unusual times and college leadership, staff, and instructors, and students are learning how to handle it, together. Address your own concerns to the extent that is possible. Remind yourself that the situation is changing quickly, and that solutions are changing as circumstances change. Wait for updated information as plans continue to unfold.***You can’t solve all of your own problems any more than you can solve students’ problems, but you can give yourself permission to feel how you are feeling and do the best you reasonably can, under your own constraints.*** |

**About the CTC**  
The College Transition Collaborative applies social psychology knowledge and methods to contribute to systemic equity in college completion outcomes, particularly for students of color, first-generation college students, and women in male-dominated fields across the US and Canada. CTC's work helps schools understand how their students experience moments of transition or difficulty, and how psychologically attuned practices–messages, policies, behaviors, and programs–can convey to all students they are valued, respected, and can excel.

**About Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS) at CSN**

**CAPS** offers various free and confidential counseling services to help students in their emotional, relational and behavioral growth as they pursue their academic, personal and career goals. Any CSN enrolled student is eligible for counseling services. For more information, contact us at (702) 651-5518 or visit [www.csn.edu/caps](http://www.csn.edu/caps).

**Authors**

*- Krysti Ryan, PhD, Project Director, College Transition Collaborative*

*- Christine Logel, PhD, Associate Professor of Social Development Studies, Renison University College, affiliated with University of Waterloo, and Head of Research Strategy, College Transition Collaborative*

*This communication was inspired by, and in some ways modeled after, 'COVID-ready communication skills: A playbook of VitalTalk Tips' retrieved from*[*https://www.vitaltalk.org/guides/covid-19-communication-skills/*](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.vitaltalk.org/guides/covid-19-communication-skills/&sa=D&source=editors&ust=1642807780588944&usg=AOvVaw2tF9K5QK3q4r61kLeNBqTw)*. March 2020.*

*Updated June, 2021.*