CSU Student Success Network

Strategies for Practitioners

Building on our summer 2020 conversation series, nearly 60 individuals from 17 campuses came together virtually on February 11 to participate in another *Navigating Uncertainty Together* session. The self-moderated session enabled cross-campus groups of individuals in similar roles to share their experiences over the past year, learn from one another, and collectively identify equity-minded approaches to challenges they are facing in their work. Below, we share some of the themes and strategies that emerged from the conversations.

One important theme that surfaced was the need for grace during these challenging times. Participants emphasized the many ways they have learned to ask for, give, and receive empathy, patience, and flexibility over the past year—and that we need to carry forward these practices with students and one another as our communities continue to face long-standing inequities and deep losses.

Participants also noted that often, our institutional and system policies profess empathy and flexibility, but do not enact it. Creating student-, faculty-, and staff-centered policies that cultivate empathy can be a critical positive change emerging from this difficult year.

We hope you find inspiration and insight for your own work from the conversations summarized here.

Learnings from last term

Participants shared things they have learned during and since the fall 2020 term—including insights about ways our campuses can shift and adapt to better support students moving forward.

- In times of crisis, our institutions tend to focus on survival, not strategy, and yet there is great potential even in difficult disruptions. It's time to be forward-thinking rather than reactive.
- Our practices and policies are still frequently inflexible, and we are resistant to change. Students indicate that to them, inflexibility feels like a lack of concern.
- Our current learning and work environment demands careful thinking about strategic time management. We need to think about time management differently and support our students in doing the same. We all need to find boundaries, even while remaining motivated and self-disciplined.
- Creating hybrid strategies that make use of both in-person and virtual experiences may be most effective in the long run. For example, adjusting operating hours to be responsive to student needs can help students with busy lives, and sustaining hybrid courses can leverage the flexibility of asynchronous online courses while providing the structure and relationships found in person.

- It is possible to have a rich virtual community. Picking up the phone instead of sending email, and shifting budgets to enable mailing cards, gift, and swag can build connectedness and excitement.

Challenges and potential strategies

Participants highlighted challenges they face in their practice, and shared ideas and strategies for overcoming these challenges with one another.

Challenge: Students appreciate honest, open, and streamlined communication. Coordinated communication is critical but often missing, particularly when it comes to university reopening plans.

- Develop a university-wide communications working group to coordinate across offices.
- Many students are facing difficult circumstances and tough choices that impact their education (e.g., postponing taking certain classes due to pandemic uncertainty). Rather than penalize students, develop policies that are flexible and center students' experiences and needs during the pandemic.
- Identify a division or departmental coordinator for communications and information-sharing after things like university-wide meetings.
- Use Navigate or other university-wide case management and communication tools—it can be helpful for streamlining communication with students.

Challenge: Students need supports, but mental capacity is short, and overwhelm is real.

- Rather than creating new programming, create space for one-on-one connections or work with existing student groups to create connections.
- Make support engagements succinct and to-the-point, but hold them regularly to build relationships.
- Leverage social media and communications platforms like Discord for faculty development, student engagement, information-sharing, and community-building.
- Facilitate targeted supports, such as peer groups, study buddies, or topical podcasts.
- Use professors to promote support services such as writing centers.
- Be strategic in your outreach modality: Use email for official communication, texts for personal messaging, and social media for networking.
- When you do host online events, include prizes and send them through the mail.
- Host student panels, where students themselves share information or provide strategies and tips for navigating this time.

Challenge: We know next fall will be different, but we haven't been able to prepare. There is an eagerness to get back to regular routines in ways that sustain the positive changes we have made, and create more equitable opportunities, experiences, and outcomes for our students.

- Identify which practices have been successful and explore ways that these practices might be sustained.

- Clarify which pandemic-related challenges will need to be addressed (e.g., impact on financial aid due to short-term grading changes), and build workgroups to address them.

- Start planning to welcome two classes next year! New first-year students will be on campus, but the current first-year class will also be new in many ways, since they will have only been on campus virtually before.

- Some students prefer and thrive online. We should consider ways to maintain online offerings to support them even as face-to-face becomes an option again.

- Continue and build ongoing professional development on equity-minded practices and strategies, such as what it looks like to advise equitably in a remote environment.

- Examine policies and practices that may have equity implications, such as fees that result in academic or registration holds.

Challenge: It's hard to be responsive when your own tank is empty.

- Acknowledge that faculty and staff don't have enough labor to distribute to all the tasks required right now. Make space for things to not get done.

- Schedule breaks and take all those you are allotted. Use the time to recharge and find peace when you can.

- Make time for wellness checks at the beginning of meetings to allow for community and sharing among peers.

The CSU Student Success Network is facilitated by the [Education Insights Center (EdInsights)](#) at [Sacramento State.](#) EdInsights is devoted to student success and the public benefits of education. Our mission is to inform and improve policymaking and practice for K-12 education, community colleges, and public universities.

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