

## TEACHING

# One Way to Show Students You Care — and Why You Might Want to Try It

By Beckie Supiano | AUGUST 29, 2018



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Reesa-Marie Dawkins encourages her students to ask for help if hardship hits. When her husband had a heart attack, they reciprocated with an outpouring of support.

For years, Reesa-Marie Dawkins has included on her course syllabi a note to students titled: “When life happens ... send me an email.” In several paragraphs, Dawkins, an adjunct professor for the University of Alaska system who teaches statistics and logistics online, describes the kinds of personal challenges students might confront during the term, and urges

them to seek her help when they do. “I will help you get through it,” she writes, “(no matter what it is).”

Dawkins’s message is unusually detailed and personal, but it’s part of an emerging pattern in which instructors seek to communicate their care and concern for students from the outset of a course. Professors, of course, are no monolith, and the matter of how involved they ought to get in students’ lives is in flux. Some point to changes in the college-going population — today’s students are less advantaged than those of years past, and more likely to experience depression and anxiety — and see a need to intervene more proactively.

Others hold that such interactions are beyond the purview of their jobs. That’s why such mundane-seeming matters as enforcing attendance policies and requesting that students purchase a stapler can spark impassioned debates among instructors on social media. No one wants to feel that students are taking advantage of their generosity. But those who urge generosity anyhow say that flexible, humane policies reduce the pressure students may feel to lie, and are ultimately more fair for everyone.

In the current version of her note, Dawkins writes: “My students have lost family members, gone through breakups and divorces, and one even called to tell me she was homeless (We got her in a dorm the same day).” Even happy events, like a marriage or the birth of a child, can cause upheaval, she adds.

When such issues crop up, “I can give extended grace periods, tutor you one-on-one by phone, be a good listener, offer a list of campus resources, and help you catch back up, if you have fallen behind,” Dawkins writes.

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When professors write course policies, they draw on past experiences with students, said Jesse Stommel, executive director of the Division of Teaching and Learning Technologies at the University of Mary Washington. And not necessarily the positive ones. So the words they choose often sound defensive, and suggest that the professor has thought of every issue that might arise. The problem with that, Stommel said: “Even though I’ve been teaching for 18 years, I can’t possibly imagine what we’re going to do together this semester.”

Stommel has long encouraged professors to take a compassionate approach with students. Over the years, he said, that idea has gained traction — though a vocal minority of instructors remain strongly opposed to it. Many professors are convinced, though, Stommel said, that “a culture where students feel confident to do the hard work of the class,” is better for learning than “a culture of fear.” Dawkins’s message, Stommel said, feels more like a letter to her students than a policy. He likes the professor’s “life happens” framing, he said, because “it doesn’t suggest these things are unusual or out of the ordinary. It suggests we all have complex lives.”

For many students, a lot of that complexity is financial. Sara Goldrick-Rab, a professor of sociology and higher education at Temple University, has studied food and housing insecurity among students. Last year, she added some language to her own syllabus encouraging students who believe that challenges they face “securing their food or housing” could hurt their course performance to contact the dean of students, and, if they were comfortable doing so, to tell her, too.

Goldrick-Rab blogged about her new syllabus language from a conference she was attending at the time, and it quickly took off. She later added a poll to the blog post so that she could track whether or not other instructors chose to add similar language. Goldrick-Rab has heard from more than 450 professors who say they are using or plan to incorporate similar language, with some adding that it’s being taken up more widely at their institutions.

Goldrick-Rab did not anticipate the level of instructor interest in what her research might mean for the classroom, she said. But based on the response she’s gotten, she has begun studying the use of such syllabus language and plans to write a proposal for its broader adoption. “A lot of faculty have been noticing for years that something was off” with their students, Goldrick-Rab said. In fact, that’s how she got into this vein of research in the first place. A student kept falling asleep in her class, and like most professors would be, Goldrick-Rab was frustrated — until she learned why. The student was coming to class after working the night shift.

Dawkins’s note to students was born of a similar “aha!” moment. One of her first semesters teaching, a student disappeared for a while with no explanation. Once he returned, Dawkins emailed to ask if he was all right, and only then did she learn that his father had died. That made the professor wonder if expressing her willingness to help them up front might make students more likely to tell her about life events that could affect their coursework. Since adding the note, Dawkins said, she’s had significantly more contact with students.

This past spring, Dawkins encountered a life event of her own: Her husband had a heart attack (he’s making a good recovery now, she reports). She updated her syllabus language to include the story, describing how difficult

the situation was for her, how it affected her work that semester, and how her students and department chair supported her.

Professors who share details of their personal lives selectively and strategically can model for students how to bring their “full selves” into the classroom, Stommel said. This is both more important and more difficult to achieve when professors teach online, as Dawkins does, he added. “At least when I show up in a classroom and hand out a list of policies,” Stommel said, “I also have a body.”

Not every professor would be comfortable telling students about their spouse’s medical condition, but to Dawkins, “it just lets them know that I’m human.” Perhaps it will make students even more inclined let her know when life happens to them.

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