



# Bears Care Student Focus Group Study

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Center for Teaching Excellence

**FALL  
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# Background / Methodology



## Background / Why?

The Bears Care Working Group conducted surveys and a calling campaign in the summer of 2020.

When President Houston Davis reported the results to the Board of Trustees, they asked him and the working group to expand the study to gain an update for the fall 2020 semester.

## Focus Group Methodology / How?

The first four sessions, conducted among Honors College students, were facilitated by lead investigator Dr. Amy Hawkins, CTE Director, and fellow researchers Wendy Holbrook, Assistant Vice President, and Steven Shook, Director of Student Leadership.

These sessions were observed by the seven staff members recruited and trained to facilitate the remaining sessions:

- Hannah Hanshaw, AmeriCorps VISTA
- Tajaro Hudson, Assistant Director of Student Life
- Shun Ingram, Assistant Dean/Associate Director of Student Life
- Victoria Mays, Volunteer Coordinator
- Taylor Nardi, Student Life Graduate Assistant

- Maria Negrete Padron, Assistant Director of the Office of Diversity and Community
- Lindsey Shurley, Director of New Student Programs

Each of the 24 total sessions was conducted via Zoom, was recorded, and a transcript was generated by Zoom. Identities were not recorded, and student names were changed to display only preferred first names and pronouns before recording.

Thematic analysis was conducted on each session's transcript before generating themes across colleges and ultimately across all groups overall to generate university-wide themes.



# How are students doing? Academically

## Overall

“Okay.”

### ■ Grades

They believe their grades are equivalent to the expectations of other first-year students or to previous semesters.

### ■ Retention of Learning

They worry about retention. Most areas of study scaffold learning across multiple courses and semesters. Students are understandably concerned they will struggle in future coursework. Especially noted in STEM fields.



## Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

As described in a *June 3, 2020 article by Mays Imad from Insider Higher Ed*, this emphasizes that the brain struggles to form long-term memories when confronted with trauma. Brain fog is common, and students struggle to focus.

### What It Is

Learning (or not) during a pandemic is learning throughout a sustained, chronic experience of trauma.

### Remediation

A looming question is how to remediate these students in the future. Students perceive they are “teaching themselves.”

### Reality

If perception is reality, students believe online learning is more work overall than previous semesters.

# What about Personally?

## Socially/Relationally

Many feel isolated and cut off from faculty and their peers. Many first-year students reported staying in their rooms and streaming Netflix rather than experiencing the anticipated socializing and fun of their first year of college. They are disappointed.

## Physically

Some are using the HPER, but the majority expressed ongoing concerns about other students' irresponsible lack of social distancing and noncompliance with wearing their masks, leading to further isolation in their rooms. Some mentioned the inability to afford events that were being offered. They worry they will infect family members, so they do not visit their families.

## Mentally/Emotionally

The most commonly used term was "struggling," meaning many participants are experiencing deteriorating mental health and grappling with depression and anxiety.

## Overall

When asked what they wish their instructors better understood about their experiences, they expressed a deep longing for greater empathy and connection.

Most students reported mixed experiences related to their instructors, with some being warm and understanding whereas others seem distant and unresponsive.



"I think I speak for multiple people when I say that we still kind of stress out about the work and doing well and excelling, and...it's been a dumpster fire. I'm struggling, and that's me being brutally honest."

**First-Year Student**

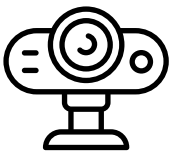


"When I was talking about dropping out earlier, I think that was about halfway through the semester, I'd already had breakdowns for two nights, because I couldn't find any social activities to go to. And if they did, they cost money, and I somehow struggle making friends...and so, I'll just sit in my room and watch Netflix."

**First-Year Student**

# Problems Identified.

...and how to fix them.



## 1. USE OF CAMERAS

During a lecture, the instructor's camera should be on. Students' cameras can be off to remove distractions. However, if it's a discussion, require all cameras to be on.



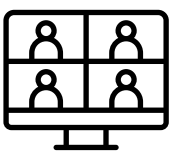
## 2. LECTURES

Record all lectures, allowing access to review course materials. However, some acknowledged they don't attend class as consistently and/or multitask knowing they can review later.



## 3. COMMUNICATION

Pick one form of communication (Blackboard Announcements, email, etc.) and connect more frequently and consistently. Set the expectations on the front-end for how long a student should expect a response from you. 24 hours for an email during the work week is best practice. Create a downloadable course schedule with assignments and due dates.



## 4. CONNECTION

If using group work, give them an easy way to contact their peers (email addresses, Blackboard messaging, etc.). Use breakout sessions with clear expectations for participation (e.g., all cameras on to encourage discussion). Create engagement during lectures using polling tools, instant reactions (thumbs up/thumbs down), and frequent pauses for questions. Provide virtual office hours and one-on-one sessions. Offer frequent communication and weekly checklists/reminders. Set up a peer communication system, such as GroupMe. Overtly express empathy and compassion.

## Above All Else!

Students crave connection, and they can tell which instructors want to connect and which do not. A few students reported not knowing what their instructor looks like! It became clear across 24 sessions that instructors make the difference in learning - **what we do and how we do it matters.**

# How to Support Students

## Learn the Tools

No matter which tool you use (Blackboard, Collaborate, Zoom, etc.), ask for help! CTE has virtual office hours, and IT has the Help Desk and Knowledge Base to assist.



## Limit the Number of Tools Used

Stick with as few tools as possible. Using more tools can confuse your students and create anxiety about missing assignments and deadlines.

## Synchronous Sessions

Convey expectations on the first day and during each session. This includes:

- camera and microphone usage
- camera etiquette (appearance, multitasking, etc.)
- how to ask questions/raise hands/be called on
- how to participate appropriately in breakout sessions

## Asynchronous Sessions

Organize materials in an easily identifiable manner (weekly/unit folders with dates). Create a video walkthrough that shows the students how to navigate the course and find course materials.





# Synchronous / Asynchronous

## Synchronous

First-year students tend to struggle with fully asynchronous classes. Increase the number of synchronous elements for undergraduate courses.

Synchronous classes are needed for high content density courses. They benefit from hearing explanations and being able to ask questions in real-time.



## Asynchronous

Undergraduate students at all levels admit it is easy to procrastinate and fall behind.

Students appreciate recorded lectures, but they expressed frustration with instructor videos that are longer than the class sessions they replaced.

Chunk videos in shorter 5-10 minute segments to hold students' attention and aid learning.



"[The instructor] offers in-person and Zoom classes, and I've actually gone to most of the in-person classes just because [they] make it a lot of fun... The classes are also very structured, so I know exactly what to expect with assignments every week."

**Undergraduate Student**



"[Two of my instructors] are amazing because they understand how crazy this is...and if you're having trouble they will do anything they can to help you understand the content. They'll stay before and after class, schedule meetings with you, email you. It's very, very nice."

**First-Year Student**

# Overall Lessons Learned

**Take students' perspectives and believe their reported lived experiences.**

Imagine yourself at 18 trying to learn a new town, campus, and self-manage a full course load while also working and/or caring for family members.

Students NEED structure - highly organized materials, clear expectations, assistance with time management, and more. Publish a detailed course schedule, establish a weekly rhythm, and stick with it.

Students' financial stress is substantial, and they do report working more hours: "We are NOT just doing schoolwork."

**Students will forgive any number of teaching-related foibles; what they remember is *whether or not we care about them.***