Checking-in to Create Instructor-Student Immediacy in Honors

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Abstract: Weekly, self-evaluative briefs are used to assess students' general wellbeing during the coronavirus crisis. Authors discuss the efficacy of personalized check-ins and remote, interpersonal rapport, suggesting a positive impact on student learning outcomes.

The high school graduating class of 2020 is now called the class of COVID. Students in this class missed out on milestones like prom, graduation, and celebration of college decision day. To create immediacy and connection with these students, course instructors need to reimagine community in both virtual and hybrid environments. A spring 2020 survey revealed that college students in the COVID-era crave connection; among the university's initiatives in response to COVID, students most appreciated frequent, clear communication with their professors (Celik Wiltse et al., 2020). One of the key indicators of success in an online or hybrid environment is teaching presence (Johnson, 2013). Further, use of a student-centered wellbeing evaluation to begin class establishes that faculty care (Costa & Mims, 2020). The positive relationships between teacher immediacy and student learning outcomes are not a new concept in education (Christensen & Menzel, 1998), but perhaps immediacy should be emphasized now more than ever.

This fall, we established immediacy in honors through weekly Google form check-ins during the hybrid first-year Honors Orientation course.

Weekly check-ins prompted students to rate themselves on a five-point scale ranging from 1 ("icky, horrible, bad") to 5 ("happy, wonderful, amazing"). Every student reporting a "1" or "2" received a customized email intervention from a member of the honors staff. Email interventions help instructors appear more approachable by students, which is directly correlated with connection (Dean, 2013). Such interpersonal rapport between students and teachers is associated with student learning outcomes (Murray, 1997) and leads to higher student enjoyment and engagement (Benson, Cohen, & Buskist, 2005). Through personalized check-ins, instructors built interpersonal rapport, encouraging participation in class discussions and helping students develop general enjoyment of the uncertain school year.

The weekly check-ins also helped instructors identify students who were struggling academically and emotionally with the unique academic year's stresses. Traditionally, online and hybrid courses result in students withdrawing 39% more often and earning average grades 10% lower than students in traditional classrooms (Glazier, 2016). After implementing the check-in process during fall 2020 in a hybrid environment, our combined DFW rate (grade of a D, F, or withdrawal rate) was approximately 5%. This was half of what our in-person rate was during the previous academic year, defying the trends in control (non-intervention) groups reported by Glazier in 2016. Glazier (2016) reported that a simple, instructor-driven intervention can significantly improve retention and grades.

Providing students space to reflect and report on emotional wellbeing affects self-concept positively (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2018). For example, in an email correspondence about a low number on a check-in, a student wrote, "I was tired, and I missed my cat." This email opened the door to having a conversation about adequate rest, coping with feelings, and understanding what a "1" on the survey meant. For instructors, a score of "1" meant a counseling intervention with a health provider was warranted; however, for some students, a "1" meant that they were not feeling at the "top of their game." Helping students cope with their emotions and gain perspective created an understanding of their feelings with more realistic self-evaluation. Change in self-concept comes with changes in emotional beliefs and helps students make decisions based on more realistic estimates of how they feel (Bieg, Goetz, & Lipnevich, 2014).

Using weekly email check-ins with students who self-identified as needing support allowed relationships to form in an uncertain environment and de-escalated the student's negative emotions before feelings of hopelessness emerged. Nearly every student indicated appreciation for knowing that

someone cared for them. One student expressed in a course reflection, "I really like doing these check-ins every week because it shows that you all care about us and our well-being." Moreover, in the courses where the intervention was implemented, 80% of customized interventions led to higher self-reported feelings about wellbeing the following week. Most students were experiencing the usual effects of first-semester transition, but others experienced severe hardships resulting from COVID fallout. Students carry their emotions, burdens, and stressors into the classroom with them (Davenport, 2019), and the check-in self-reports acknowledged and welcomed the whole student to the classroom.

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