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MANAGING STUDENT EXPECTATIONS AND WELLBEING POST PANDEMIC



MARTIN, JOANNE
THEATRE DEPARTMENT
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS
CALIFORNIA

Prof. Joanne Martin

Theatre Department

University of California, Davis

California

Managing Student Expectations and Wellbeing Post Pandemic

Synopsis:

Students have changed their expectations from their classes and faculty post pandemic due to changes in online learning and goals. As Faculty we have had to pivot to a new level of service to our students and pay more attention to their well-being and mental health issues. This paper presentation and session will explore how we can meet those student needs and better serve a diverse student body. Presentation followed by a group discussion of teaching issues and possible solutions.

Prof. Joanne Martin
Theatre Department
University of California, Davis
California

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During the Covid 19 pandemic of 2020 we all lived through a collective trauma. We stayed at home and focused on what we could do to keep working and try to stay healthy, both emotionally and physically. The future seemed very uncertain and many students felt isolated at home, most of them moving back in with their parents.

I have been teaching in the Arts specifically costume design for the Theatre for the past thirty years and I have never seen so many students struggle as much as they are post pandemic. I see a lot of depression and mental health issues that have surfaced in student discussions in the classroom. Students have shared things they have tried to do to improve their mental health, their coping skills and even medications they have tried. Most students seek help but some don't always get the help they need. Finding ways to encourage and support my students has become my major focus in the past two years.

Students have also changed their expectations for their classes due to changes in ways of approaching online learning. As Faculty we have had to pivot to a new level of service to our students and pay much more attention to their wellbeing and mental health issues. In the past we would just post our syllabi and expect that students would do all assignments to the best of their ability, we would alter the syllabus from year to year based on what worked well for the class. In the past we only ever had a few students in each class that we were concerned about and needed extra help. I have had more student absences in the past two years and find myself asking students more questions about their performance in the class, having more meetings with students and having to allow for more illnesses and mental health situations. More students are now reaching out for help and counseling.

I find that students are easily overwhelmed post pandemic and allowances for increased project time and constant feedback are essential to student success in the class. With more reliance on online tools and software such as Canvas, the students expect to have clear learning objectives for the course set out in the syllabus. As there are many ways of learning, assignments need to have clear expectations and rubrics that clearly state how to be successful for each project. Each class should have goals and assignments that are manageable within time before the project due date, realizing this is not their only class. If most of the class doesn't complete the assignment on time or you have a lot of emails with questions about the project, then I make notes on my syllabus to change the project next time I teach the class. If I taught the same class each year in exactly the same way that would get very boring for me too!

I like to start my classes out with projects that encourage creativity and encourage critical thinking skills without the pressure of making great art in the initial projects. I like to structure classes with a combination of narrowly focused projects that really teach students specific skills and then give them the tools that they need to succeed and then have some very open-ended projects to explore their own ideas and creativity. The goal is

to get students engaged and excited about the design process without being intimidated by what they don't already know. Open-ended projects that encourage research, creativity and make students feel like they have choices of how they approach the project and how they present the work. I like to make students feel in control of their own work and take ownership for their successes and failures. Letting students know that it is OK to try something new and different and that it is perfectly acceptable to fail and talk about what worked and what didn't work. We are all sometimes too obsessed with perfection and I remind myself and my students that some days are better than others, that's what makes us human we are not robots spitting out the same product over and over again. I encourage the students to be honest and open, they all come from different backgrounds and have different brains. I encourage them to be kind to themselves and each other. I like to create a safe space for all students. I have seen students in my classes slowly becoming less anxious, feeling more comfortable and starting to speak more in class.

I tell students that the way to get a good grade in the class is that you have to show up to each class on time and do all the projects to the best of your ability. Students can get really overwhelmed easily then start to procrastinate then end up skipping classes. I find that if I keep encouraging progress and giving multiple ways to submit projects, by email, uploading online, or a hard copy in person, students can find a way that works for them.

Students often are financially insecure. Not all students have a reliable internet connection where they live, some students are working on a shared computer, some have to share a room and may not have a quiet place to do their homework. Many students suffer from food insecurity and mental health issues that prevent them from being successful. For students, being young and figuring out who they are, is a big part of the first few years in college. Making sure that students have access to the resources they need is essential to their success.

I am often reminded of why I teach when I see students make friends and connections with each other in my classes. I think it's important to create opportunities for students to chat and get to know each other otherwise why take a class in person if you don't get the opportunity to talk to each other. I think it's important to encourage class discussions and open-ended project or lab time where students can look at each others work and get ideas for their own projects.

At the very end of each class, during finals week, I like to celebrate the achievements of all students in the class and have a small party with snacks and drinks after student project presentations. Students often surprise me when they have the opportunity to have some freedom to explore their own ideas and often come up with something extraordinary often surprising themselves. I hand out my own class evaluation forms that students can let me know what worked for them, which projects they liked or didn't like.

I loved being a student and want to give students that same love of learning and enjoying being with each other in a safe nurturing environment. As teachers we can only hope that students will go on to be kind, curious and make the World a better place.