

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

ADVICE

How to Give Our Students the Grace We All Need

Six ways that faculty members can better support students without exhausting ourselves in the effort.

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BRIAN TAYLOR FOR THE CHRONICLE

“Overwhelmed” came up most often. “Worried” and “stressed” were tied for second. “Trying” was the outlier.

Those responses emerged last fall when one of us (Nicole) asked students to describe — in a word — how they felt to be back in class following the [suicides](#) of two undergraduates. The class that day was scheduled to discuss a heavy reading on slavery and science, and Nicole wasn’t sure if her students were up to it. Taking a moment to ask them made two things clear: They were struggling, but they wanted to move forward together.

The same could be said of many students on many campuses in the nearly two years since Covid entered our lives. We are [in the midst](#) of a [mental-health](#) crisis. If you taught in the fall semester, you no doubt saw evidence of it in your interactions with students and in their emails about late assignments or missed class periods. Indeed,

during the pandemic, young adults have experienced [disproportionately elevated rates](#) of stress, depression, and anxiety. Many students [are struggling](#) with sleeplessness, loneliness, hopelessness, and disruptions in their development, as well as trauma, grief, and financial distress, all of which undermine their well-being and their efforts to focus, learn, and perform in class. Some faculty members are experiencing these challenges, too.

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None of us has lived through a global pandemic before. Our first- and second-year undergraduates have yet to experience a “normal” semester of college. Getting “back to normal” may not be a realistic or well-reasoned goal. But as faculty members, we have an [opportunity](#) to help: We can give grace and support to our students and ourselves through this uniquely taxing time.

Giving grace has been a go-to catchphrase since 2020. What it usually means is kindness and compassion. Indeed, many faculty members have already been [giving grace](#) by adapting our courses to be more flexible, incorporating wellness activities into class, and discussing mental health with students. Yet such efforts can be depleting and have not been equitably distributed among faculty members. As is often the case with advising and mentoring, [women and faculty of color](#) have shouldered [disproportionately greater burdens](#) in the pandemic, providing support and care to students. Likewise, untenured and contingent faculty members often teach large courses, for which the logistics of accommodating students' needs can be significant and overwhelming.

So as a new semester gets underway, how can already stressed faculty members give grace without exhausting ourselves in the effort?

Drawing on motivation research in educational psychology, as well as principles from [positive education](#) and [trauma-informed pedagogy](#), we share the following ideas for how to adapt your teaching to promote flexibility, develop a welcoming classroom climate, and foster a more supportive and inclusive culture. Consistent with a [pedagogy of kindness](#), our position is that compassion and kindness are foundational to effective teaching. Some of these ideas are light lifts that could be used at any point, while others involve more effort and could be incorporated as you plan your semester.

Have a ready list of where they can find help. Some students don't know where to start looking. Lean on the resources and expertise that are available to get students through a crisis, learn new coping strategies, and develop resilience. Connect students with the office of the dean of students when there's an emergency or hardship. Share links to mental-health and crisis resources, both on campus and locally, on your syllabus, on the course website, or in lab manuals. Include national resources, too, such as the following:

- The [CDC's suggestions](#) for managing stress.
- The [Crisis Text Line](#), which they can access at any time by texting HOME to 741-741.
- The [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) (1-800-273-TALK), which is confidential and available 24/7.
- For long-term psychotherapy, encourage them to [find a therapist](#).

Let students know you care. Don't assume they know — be explicit and genuine. By helping them feel connected and welcome in your class, you signal that you see yourself as a partner in their learning and development. For example:

- A few words can speak volumes. Tell students — in an email or a note in your learning-management system (LMS) — that you're concerned about their well-being, and that you understand it goes [hand-in-hand](#) with their academic success. Consider how you might state this in your initial communications, such as on [your syllabus](#).
- Touch base with them regularly. Check-ins via a Google form or a polling system (like [Poll Everywhere](#)) are an opportunity for students to ask for support and to tell you what they're thinking about the course and what adjustments might support their learning. Make the check-ins anonymous but give students the option of sharing their identity when they want you to follow up with them.
- At the same time, care for yourself. Set boundaries to support your own well-being and prevent burnout. For example, set regular work hours, place limits on your daily email time, or find other ways to promote a sense of balance. And ask for help when you need it. Taking care of yourself offers students a model of how to manage multiple responsibilities and protect our well-being.

Maximize the flexibility of your course policies. Re-examine [your policies](#) on things like attendance and late work. Being more flexible might well help students learn the content or skills better.

- **Late submissions.** Instead of penalizing or rejecting late submissions, why not give students a grace period and allow them to complete the work, develop the skill, or acquire the knowledge? Some faculty members offer “[oops tokens](#)” or offer staggered due dates or due-date “windows” in order to be flexible without imposing the logistical challenge of working out the details for students individually or requiring them to disclose their reasons.
- **Attendance.** Yes it's important, but is your attendance policy really helping students meet the learning objectives of your course? When students miss class and reach out, resist the temptation to assume bad intentions and be punitive. What can you do to help them learn what they've missed? If you don't feel comfortable sharing notes, slides, or recordings of class, could you arrange their

access to those materials via a classmate? Encouraging students to crowdsource their notes is beneficial, even for those who were in class but missed or misunderstood a discussion point.

- **Participation.** Some students haven't had a traditional classroom experience in nearly two years and may need to be coached to participate in discussions. If students miss class or struggle to speak up, consider offering [other ways for them to demonstrate their participation](#), such as submitting a few written discussion questions or engaging in small-group discussions.

Build a flexible course plan, too. Life doesn't stop for school. Baking flexibility into your course plan will benefit your students [and you](#), leaving you better prepared for the inevitable interruptions or bumps in the road.

- Prioritize your learning objectives. Rather than overwhelm students (and yourself) by trying to cover everything, stay focused on the most important aspects of the course and allow sufficient time to work through them. Maybe [you can't do all the things](#) on your list, but you can do many of them really well.
- Include one or two flex days in the semester. Use them to accommodate unforeseen events or to allow everyone to catch up, review content, practice skills, or just pause. Before a major test or assignment is due, schedule a TBD (to be decided) day. You'll never regret giving yourself and your students this buffer.

Reimagine classroom culture. Particularly after a prolonged period of Covid-related isolation, students need — and want — [connection](#). Plenty of class activities help students build relationships with one another, and also improve learning outcomes. Done thoughtfully, these strategies can also foster a more [inclusive](#) classroom culture:

- Try [flipping](#) a few class periods to encourage student-led discussion or debates.
- Embed collaboration, small-group discussions, and peer-review or other team-based activities to increase engagement and help foster a sense of community in your class.

- Provide prompts that allow students to get to know one another before diving into a task. For example, for small-group work, ask the students to appoint one member as reporter based on some personal characteristic: like the person who has or had the largest pet. (More such prompts can be found [here](#)).

Leverage their values and goals. Help students identify how course content is connected to their own lives and opinions. That not only [promotes interest and sustains motivation](#), but also [fosters an inclusive climate](#) in which students know they belong. For instance:

- Create essay, short-answer, or other assignments in which students apply course material to their own lives or to solving an issue they care about.
- Build in time to ask students about your course, and invite them to suggest ideas about why the subject matters. Sometimes we assume the relevance and importance of what we teach is obvious when it's not at all clear to students.
- Share [why the course matters to you](#), too. This is an opportunity to connect with your students and help them see what you find so exciting and meaningful about your research and discipline.

In giving grace to our students and ourselves, we model for them how to adapt to a challenging circumstance and lead with compassion and kindness.

Certainly the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated many physical- and mental-health challenges and disparities. Perhaps the best way that we as faculty members can counter those challenges and disparities is by revising our own teaching policies and practices to better support our students and ourselves.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

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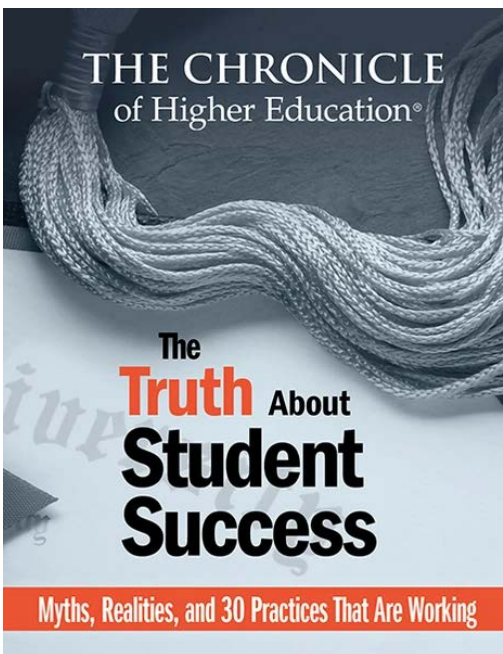
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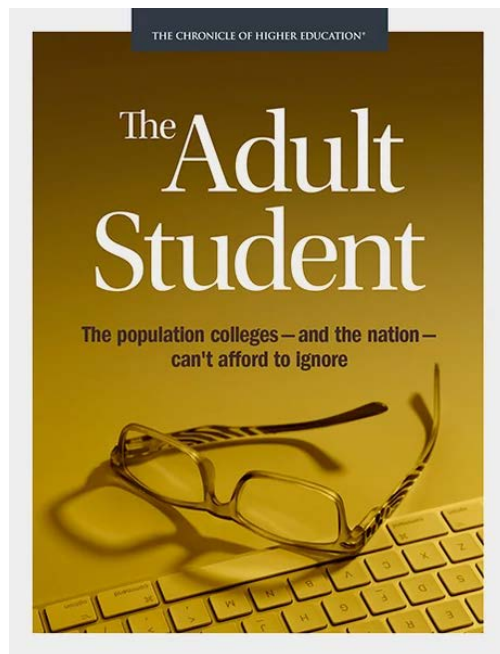
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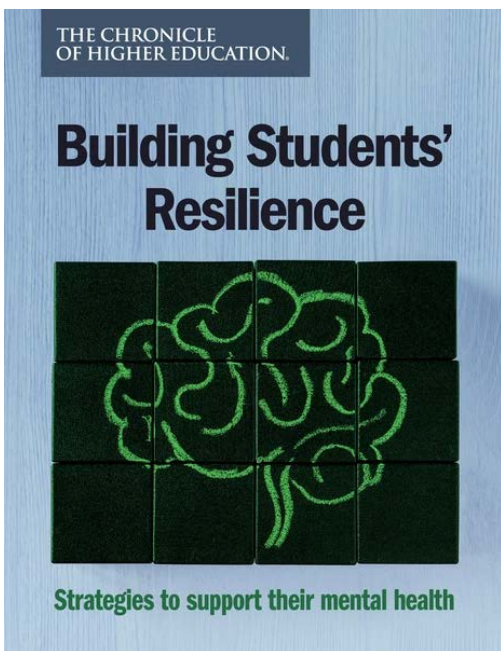
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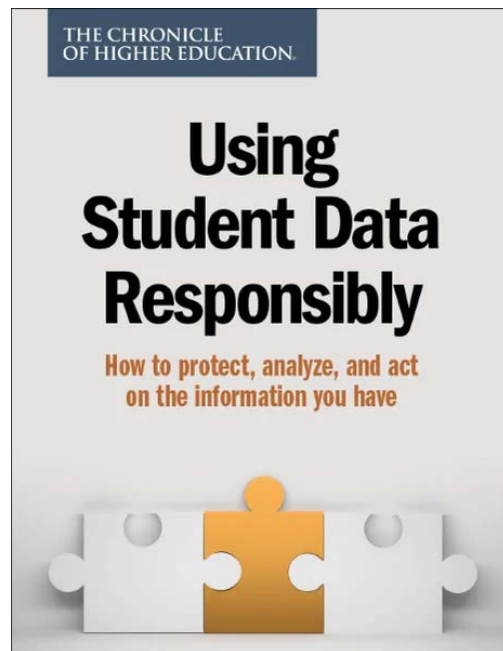
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