ThinkCollege
CHANGING EXPECTATIONS. INCREASING OPPORTUNITIES.

Tips & Takeaways from TC Virtual Support Group
Responding to Families about Virtual Learning
May 1, 2020

1. How can we encourage students to come to a full-time virtual program if that is what we need to do in the Fall?
2. What will it be like if we are on campus with enhanced safety measures?
3. How can we offer meaningful career development activities online?

Question for Discussion:
What would you say to students and parents if they ask - if we still have to be online in the fall, what is my student going to get out of it? What activities might you do this summer to help get ready for this possibility?

We had a meeting for the next cohort, students and families, and just laid it out and said, this is what we know, this is what we don't know. I had a student and a mentor from this last semester on the call that were able to give their experiences. We hoped to communicate that: **that it's the best we can do, this is what we've done, this is how it worked, and we hope you'll be with us**.

Have those who experienced the online classes this semester talk directly about what that was like. I think that might ease people's mind in terms of current students being able to say that they learned something, that it was still fun.

Keep social connections going through the summer, so students are maintaining those friendships, so there is some relationship that's happening and friendships that are going. For our incoming freshmen, it's a clean slate. But for our returning students, I can see that that relationship connection, and how do we build that in in our classes and all of our virtual communities would be really important. That would continue this summer.

In a typical year, you might let folks go home and relax over the summer and be in touch in the fall. But **being more planful and purposeful about still continuing to do virtual connections throughout the summer**. For incoming freshmen,

establish some getting-to-know-you activities virtually so they can begin to establish relationships as well as become familiar with the online platforms. **Bring freshmen on with us virtually to meet their new residential support mentors, so that they've met that group, and then we're planning activities throughout the summer with all 36 students**. So, we're hoping that bringing them in and letting them meet their new peers and **giving them opportunities to engage and have some fun, hopefully, will help us move forward a little more smoothly**. I've spoken with our new incoming cohort and their families, and so far, they're all really excited about coming, for the fall, whether it's virtually or in person. And our spring students really enjoyed having opportunities to meet with us one-on-one, but also with each other in classroom settings. We've set up contests and all kinds of fun things for them to do to keep connected. So hopefully that will help us move, you know, a little bit more seamlessly into an unknown fall.

A **ten-week summer skills orientation**, where we'll have an off week and an on week, where we're **meeting with returning students as well as new students** and working on some skills to facilitate that transition to the fall if we end up being remote. So, things **like Blackboard discussion posts, getting their email set up, getting all the technology pieces there as well as starting to allow students to meet mentors and ed coaches who will be supporting them in the fall and getting to meet their cohort and start building that social connection**. My thought is that if we don't do anything like that and then start in the fall, **it will be really challenging for the new students who don't have any foundation to build off of to get there. And if we don't end up remote in the fall, it will still hopefully be a valuable experience for students to have that introduction to these online skills.**

We can point out to parents and students that this **summer support is being offered at no additional cost**. That might help people to think, okay, yeah, that's a good value.

We are going to work this summer to have fun activities and scavenger hunts and things on Blackboard so that students can get used to that platform. And kind of have some experience with it, connecting students with one another too and social activities.

We are planning on doing some **career assessment activities via Zoom meetings** with students so they get used to that this summer.

A few families think that maybe that should be less expensive to go if it's going to be online. I'm looking at a reduction in our program fee for fall, if we're off campus, because we won't be paying for those residential supports and the students would not be living on campus. And all of our program fee is rolled together at this point. So, I'm thinking at least a $2,000 reduction, because that's about the cost of a mentor living with them split three ways. And then our on-campus orientation would have had a fee connected to it. So, having a virtual orientation then would -- we would forego the fee, and for anything we do over the summer, the same thing.

Question:
What if we do go back to campus? What issues might there be related to social distancing/masks and other enhanced safety measures?

They were saying the university is very much committed to having students on campus, and I'm sure we will start on campus. Not only because it's a huge part of an undergraduate experience, but it is a huge financial piece for the university. But the other thing, some of the things they were talking about is social distancing and the resident halls, so it might look like students have a room to themselves. **We've been talking about: how do we increase social engagement for students, because now you're in a room by yourself versus a roommate**?

So, with our resident life team and us trying to add that additional layer of support, we've also been talking and we'll be working with our students on just getting the experience wearing a mask. **Probably an expectation of a mask**. It's uncomfortable for people. It's sometimes challenging for individuals with fine motor skills to get the mask on over your ears. **And so just kind of work through what that will look like.** Asking parents and students to work on that this summer. I would imagine we will be online. They're talking about a staggered move-in date. Probably grab and go lunches so the dining halls might not have seating. How do we help students connect with ten and less groups, etc.

Do you make decisions about whether they're allowed to come back or not based on health concerns? I think families will certainly be thinking about that. **Some students have other health concerns that make them higher risk, if they were to get sick.** We've got to be clear with what we're going to do with our protocols for residential students who become sick moving forward. I guess aligned with what the university is already doing as well, as much as we can.

Thinking about from this family's perspective, it does seem that for every student that's thinking of coming back to campus, **there should be a lot of communication around the safety measures that are being put into place for all students and just obviously making sure that there are campus-wide security and safety measures in place.**

Question:
What if the reverse happens, and the campus opens, but the student is not comfortable returning? Would they be able to access a class remotely while other people were there physically?

We're planning to allow students to come however they choose. We're even looking at the social distancing aspect where if we have to have a reduction in class size, **we're looking at Tuesday, half the students come to class and half are on virtually. And then on Thursday, they swap**. We're looking at all the options across campus and then trying to make sense of what would work for our students.

I keep going back to **our students, because of their disability, aren't necessarily different than other students in this respect**. There are other students on campus that don't have an intellectual disability also are high risk. And so **what is the university's policy, what is their guidance going to be moving forward**? To me, that would be an accommodation, so thinking in terms of how that looks. **It's an accommodation that he take coursework online, and other students are on campus.**

If you haven't consulted with disability services or checked in with them about what they're saying and doing, they may be establishing some policy or some communication that might be helpful for you all to know about.

We don't necessarily have to re-create the wheel here because our universities have policies about all this. They have practices and best practices. I don't want to go thinking I'm going to recreate a policy and have that on my head because I didn't want to put any student at risk, obviously. Continuing to participate online could qualify as an accommodation in terms of the university. In the age of Zoom and all that we figured out with technology, what is to say that a student can't virtually participate if they need to be home and still be actively engaged in the class?

This COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that we are able to really step it up and think creatively about how to keep our students engaged and active and, you know, belonging to campus, whether they're physically there or not.

Question:
What about all the employment related things we do? How do we do those virtually in the Fall?

Ask career development staff to develop activities on our course management system. The students were given assignments having to do with their professional career goals. They got to meet with staff or a graduate student every week to continue that discussion. They also came together in a Zoom class.

Share stories about growth and unanticipated outcomes or things that happened the second part of this semester. Maybe they didn't go to a job. But **maybe they acquired some really great workplace skills.**