

Report from Lisa Kinzer, Faculty Representative, March 22, 2024

It would be simplistic to attribute current student dispositions solely to the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the world swiftly transitioned online in its response. As we emerge, faculty are noticing new challenges in the classroom (see “Students Crossing Boundaries; Rudeness, disruptions, unrealistic demands. Where to draw the line?” in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/students-crossing-boundaries>). This report delineates our faculty’s observations of both concerning and positive student behaviors, along with strategies and activities to address these challenges.

Across disciplines, faculty, program directors, and department chairs share common observations. Foremost among these is the perception that students exhibit apathy towards their education, evidenced by failure to attend class, arrive on time, meet deadlines, and submit assignments. During the pandemic, many K-12 teachers were forced to accept late work and refrain from assigning failing grades. Unfortunately, students often assume these lenient standards apply in college. With the academic bar lowered in some high schools, students lack the skills to engage in college-level reading, writing, and assignment interpretation. Meg Thompson, Associate Professor of Kinesiology, shared, “I use very explicit wording and emphasize transparency when discussing assignment expectations. While on its face this may be seen as effective communication and student-centered pedagogy, the underpinning is faculty acquiescence to students’ perceptions and expectations of learning in higher education.”

Many faculty reported spending increased class time reviewing expectations already outlined on the course syllabus and looking at Canvas to be sure assignments and their deadlines are clear to students. According to Chris Bjornsen, Professor of Psychology, “I have had policies regarding [meeting deadlines] on my syllabi including grade deductions after a certain limit is reached for the last several years, *because* students have demonstrated less self-control and an increased sense of entitlement. I also include *on my syllabi* the FPPM text stating that ‘students are expected to attend all classes.’” Addressing students’ reliance on online platforms, Katrina Marks, Lecturer in Communication Studies, offered, “Canvas is a highly useful tool that opens up many opportunities for pedagogy and it’s only natural that it became a stronger force in online and hybrid classes over the pandemic, but I think we should reflect on its impact for in-person instruction and think about how we might balance its influence with other methods of project management.” She continues, “I’ve made adjustments to how I give instructions and even the timeline for the peer review [assignment], but unless I get each step to show up on that to-do list, confusion remains. This is a small logistical issue, but it does concern me when I think about the implications for their time management and project management outside of class.”

Perhaps the virtual world to which students grew accustomed has degraded their sense of decorum in the classroom setting. Faculty recognize that students are uncomfortable speaking in large groups and less able to engage in collaborative or communicative work. More than ever, students are tethered to their laptops, cell phones, and smart watches. Meg Thompson continued, “student behavior is more often disrespectful, to the point of sometimes being disruptive. Incidences of talking while I am doing direct instruction as well as use of cellphones during instruction and during class activities are at an all-time high.” Charles Kinzer, Professor of Music, says he reminds students *at the beginning of every single class meeting* to put away their electronic devices in order to spend the next 50 minutes together, interacting with each other.

Most alarming, perhaps, are the reports of increased student mental health issues faculty must attempt to navigate. We read in Cam Patterson’s December report that our Accessibility Resources

office is busy; emotional/mental health diagnoses rose about 3% over the last year, and the Testing Center has seen an increase of 100% for administering tests. Eric Hodges, Associate Professor of Political Science, observed, "Overall, I'd say their [students'] attitude is more defiant and they expect more accommodations." Hodges shared an account of a student who had consistently missed class, and consequently regular reading quizzes. With no valid (or truthful, as it turned out) excuses for her absences, the student petitioned Hodges for the opportunity to make up the tests. In an effort to work with her, Hodges met with the student in his office, during which time the student "exploded" on him, alarming a professor from a nearby classroom. Admittedly, this is an extreme case, but frankly not surprising to hear.

Sarah Tanner-Anderson, Assistant Dean of the College of Graduate and Professional Studies, contributed, "Much of what I have experienced as a faculty member and program director has been an overwhelming sense of stress, depression, and anxiety among my educational leadership candidates. I believe a large part of their experience hinges on the fact that they are full-time, working professionals in the trenches of our PK-12 education system, who, in striking juxtaposition, are dealing with students displaying behaviors such as those you referenced" (see *Chronicle* article above). Lee Bidwell, Professor of Sociology, put it bluntly: "Depression is the new epidemic." She has worked to adapt her classroom with the assistance of trauma-informed practice training. "I try to remind myself not to ask 'what's wrong with the student' but 'what has happened to the student.' I have given more grace to students, but balance that with accountability. It's really a delicate balance."

David Magill, Chair of English and Modern Languages, observed, "Students are less resilient." Renee Gutierrez says that over the past 3 years she has become adept at recognizing panic attacks and assisting students who have them. With the guidance of with professionals such as Erica Brown-Meredith, director of CLASP (Collaborating with Lancers for Academic Success), she has learned to "recognize much more quickly the students who will fall through the cracks in the system, and I push them hard towards resources here on campus."

It is clear that Longwood faculty are recognizing and responding to our students' needs. Virginia Beard, Chair of Sociology, Anthropology and Criminology, strongly encourages students to meet with her during office hours and visit the Writing Center. She outlines course expectations early on, and encourages students to find other classes if they are not willing to engage and/or collaborate.

Sarah Tanner-Anderson has found embedding "pulse checks" at the beginning of each class session helps to focus students on content, while acknowledging the difficulty of the work as it relates to day-to-day and ongoing leadership.

Despite these challenges, there are bright spots. Faculty note students displaying genuine enthusiasm for college and learning in general. Jennifer Beach, Associate Dean of the Library, mentioned that there is a 49% increase in foot traffic in the library (37k visitors in F20 to 55k in F23). In addition to continuing Zoom research appointments, staff in Greenwood have offered free food, de-stress coloring sheets, and puzzles for passers-by.

Dave Magill acknowledged a strong cohort of students in his department this year and continued, "I see several students who are on top of their game, producing amazing work and pursuing challenges such as senior theses, research apprenticeships, and public performances of their creative work. And I would argue that Longwood's continued approach to 'high-touch' education and close interactions in small classes is an important difference in how our school has fared relative to others."

In conclusion, my colleagues remain dedicated to meeting students' needs. While spending increasing class time addressing mental wellness and time management issues, often at the expense of teaching content, can be frustrating, we whole-heartedly appreciate the influx of curious and engaged students we are beginning to see, and recognize their positive contribution to overall morale.