



For College, Community, and Justice

HOPE4COLLEGE.COM

BEYOND THE FOOD PANTRY: When It Comes to Caring About Your Students, a Little Can Go a Long Way

Sara Goldrick-Rab
October 7, 2020

Background:

At the [Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice](#), we believe that supporting #RealCollege students means focusing on their humanity. One way we do this is by advocating for stronger access to robust support systems that will help students meet their basic needs, including food, housing, employment, child care, and more. After all, we know that students who show up to class after a good night's sleep and a nutritious meal, are likely to perform better than those who crashed on a friend's couch with an empty stomach.

Basic needs security is a key factor in determining a student's [likelihood of finishing college](#), but there is more to our humanity than food and shelter: relationships, especially those developed in college, can meaningfully influence a student's success as well. This is particularly true when it comes to student-faculty relationships. Unfortunately, little research exists exploring how faculty can more effectively play a role in their students' lives. But a [new study](#), "My Professor Cares: Experimental Evidence on the Role of Faculty Engagement," sheds some light on the effect even a minimal increase in faculty engagement can have on a student's academic future, especially for minority students just starting college.

Beginning with focus groups comprising Black and Latino male students at a large, broad-access, four-year institution, researchers [Michal Kurlaender](#) and [Scott Carrell](#) found that participants did not believe most college instructors were "accessible, clear about their expectations of students, or supportive of students' learning." As a result, Kurlaender and Carrell wanted to test the effect of individualized professorial feedback—what they call "light-touch feedback"—on student success. Participating instructors sent out specifically timed, personalized emails to students, acknowledging the student's performance in the course thus far, highlighting best practices to succeed moving forward, and reminding them of the professor's availability.

While additional research is needed, these initial results are promising. In certain settings, targeted feedback from professors led to "meaningful gains in student achievement." This is particularly true for students in their first year of college and students from minority backgrounds. There was also evidence of a "positive spillover"; students in one course where they received personalized outreach as a result of this study were more likely to increase their success in courses where they did not receive individualized outreach. Researchers also found that a "light-touch intervention that demonstrates professor engagement significantly improves all students' perceptions of the professor and course."

This study shows that individualized, direct feedback can be a “powerful motivator” for college students. Also, such feedback need not be extravagant or time-consuming to yield results. Emailing students to acknowledge their presence and assure them that there are ways to improve—instead of just giving up on them—takes mere minutes, and can be done regardless of class size. It’s easy to show students that you care, and the results can change a life.

How to powerfully motivate your students:

Instructors should reach out to students three different times during the semester, by sending:

- A welcome email shortly after the semester begins. This email should provide useful information that will help every student succeed in your course.
- A second email halfway through the semester. This email should provide feedback on individual student performances, based on homework assignments, quizzes, and/or midterm grades. It should include targeted feedback and address how the student can raise/maintain their grade moving forward.
- A final email shortly before the final exam/end of the semester. This email should provide best practices on how to study for the final, as well as any other details on how the student can pass the class or raise/maintain their grade.

Examples:

Introductory Email:

Hi [student name],

Welcome to [course name]. I would like to provide you with some useful information that will help you succeed in my course. First, it is important to attend class on a regular basis so that you don’t fall behind. [You can also include any other assignments they should stay on top of: watching online lectures, completing weekly quizzes, participating in class, etc.]

Second, I highly encourage you to contact me with your questions regarding the course material. My office hours are [insert days and times]. Taking these steps will help you succeed/better understand the material/prepare for the midterm and final.

I look forward to a great semester with you!

Sincerely,
Professor [your name]

Second Email (Various examples depending on student's current standing):

If a student is performing below a C grade level:

Dear *[insert student name]*,

We have passed the midpoint for the semester, and I am concerned that based on your performance so far, especially on *[insert the specific or types of graded assignments]*, you may be struggling in this course. However, do not be discouraged. There is plenty of time to recover and many possible points remaining. To do well on upcoming tests, be sure to *[insert specific practices that a student should be doing, such as reading each assigned chapter from the text, doing the exercises at the end of each chapter, etc.]* I encourage you to attend class regularly, ask questions, and contact me if you need extra assistance. I am here to help you.

Sincerely,
Professor *[insert name]*

If a student is performing at a B/C grade level:

Dear *[insert student name]*,

We have passed the midpoint for the semester, and I notice that you have done well overall on *[specifically mention which assignments]*. To strengthen your grade in the course, be sure to *[insert specific practices that a student should be doing, such as reading each assigned chapter from the text, doing the exercises at the end of each chapter, etc.]* I encourage you to attend class regularly, ask questions, and contact me if you need extra assistance. I am here to help you.

Sincerely,
Professor *[insert name]*

If a student is performing at a B+ or higher grade level:

Dear *[insert student name]*,

We have passed the midpoint for the semester, and I notice that you have done very well on *[specify which assignments]*. To keep up your great work in the course, be sure to *[insert specific practices that a student should be doing, such as reading each assigned chapter from the text, doing the exercises at the end of each chapter, etc.]*. I encourage you to attend class regularly, ask questions, and contact me if you need extra assistance. I am here to help you.

Sincerely,
Professor *[insert name]*

Third Email (Various examples depending on student's current standing):

If a student is performing below a C grade level:

Dear [student name],

With all of our lectures completed and only the final exam remaining, I wanted to touch base one last time. Unfortunately, given your performance this semester, you are not currently passing the course. You can still turn it around though! I have run the numbers, and with a good grade on the final exam and [provide other actions the student can take such as extra credit assignments], you can pass.

I've said it before and I will say it again: the best way to prepare for the final is to [detail your recommendations on how to study for the final, such as going back over the homework assignments and quizzes].

Finals week is almost here. Best of luck in your studies, and I will see you [insert day of final exam]!

Sincerely,
Professor [insert name]

If a student is performing at a B/C grade level:

Dear [student name],

With all of our lectures completed and only the final exam remaining, I wanted to touch base one last time. You are currently sitting on a passing grade, but I would like to offer a little encouragement. I have run the numbers, and with [give concrete examples, such as a good grade on the final exam and submitting an extra credit assignment], it is possible to raise your semester score [a half a grade/full grade, to a A/B/etc.]!

I've said it before and I will say it again: the best way to prepare for the final is to [detail your recommendations on how to study for the final, such as going back over the homework assignments and quizzes].

Finals week is almost here. Best of luck in your studies, and I will see you [insert day of final exam]!

Sincerely,
Professor [insert name]

If a student is performing at a B+ or higher grade level:

Dear [student name],

With all of our lectures completed and only the final exam remaining, I wanted to touch base one last time. You have done great this semester and are sitting on a solid grade at this point. Good job! Keep up the strong work and finish with the same dedication you've shown all semester!

I've said it before and I will say it again: the best way to prepare for the final is to [detail your recommendations on how to study for the final, such as going back over the homework assignments and quizzes].

Finals week is almost here. Best of luck in your studies, and I will see you [insert day of final exam]!

Sincerely,
Professor [insert name]



This brief carries a Creative Commons Attributions 4.0 International License, which permits re-use of Hope Center materials providing that re-use abides by the conditions below.

You are free to:

Share. Copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format

Under the following terms:

Attribution. You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

NonCommercial. You may not use the material for commercial purposes.

NoDerivatives. If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you may not distribute the modified material.

For the full legal code of this Creative Commons license, please visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>

