

What to take forward from pandemic times: Insights and recommendations from Student Consultants in the SaLT Program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges Spring 2021

This list draws on recommendations made by the following SaLT Student Consultants: Chloe Berger, Mary Cott, Ebony Graham, Bilikisu Hanidu, Madison Kearns, Lauren Lattimore, Elena Marcovici, Max Mondress, Sara Phillips, Kirtee Ramo, Noa Schisterman, Hemleta Sharma, Amelia Stieglitz, Samuel Tan, and Hurum Tohfa. Contact Alison Cook-Sather, director of SaLT, at acooksat@brynmawr.edu, with questions.

These points were recorded in four different conversations, each with three or four of the student consultants. Many of the same points were raised across these conversations, and we have kept that reiteration since the repetition reveals what matters to multiple students.

Bottom line: “Normal” is not humane. We found out this year how much more we can do to make learning accessible, engaging, meaningful, and even joyful for all students. A May-2021 article in *The Chronicle* notes that, “[As Colleges Strive for a Return to Normal, Students With Disabilities Say, ‘No Thanks.’](#)” We learned over the last year that the answer is not to make sure everyone gets the same thing but rather to make choices that provide each person with what they need—the definition of equity. Is there a way to transfer the understanding that came from the sameness of the struggle (through the pandemic) to the recognition that there is always a diversity of struggles and they should be treated in equitable ways—not in the same ways, but in ways that respond to what different people need to ensure meaningful learning? See this article on [What Students Want Teachers To Know About Responsive Teaching](#) (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 2021) and SaLT student consultant recommendations below.

Prioritize the human

- **Start with checking in.** Professors checking in with students and students checking in with professors.
- **Keep increased awareness.** That happened with the pandemic and we should keep it.
- **Students have benefited from being cared for.** It’s too bad it had to be a terrible, horrible global pandemic that got some different conversations to happen and some things to change, but a lot of students felt the benefit of being cared for. I’m worried that it won’t last. I’m worried that it will go back to how things were.
- **The trauma isn’t over.**
 - I’m worried that everything that has made school somewhat more manageable will be left behind because they assume we’re no longer suffering or feeling the impacts of the pandemic, but that’s not necessarily true. Just because we’re in person doesn’t mean that people don’t have the lingering effects of covid, we just can’t see it.
 - Remember that just because the pandemic isn’t hitting as hard anymore doesn’t mean that students don’t still need compassion—both students and professors need to take

with them the understanding and flexibility. Everyone has had a really rough time, and that's not just magically going to get better just because we're vaccinated. People have been really struggling for a while, and people still need that understanding that it's still a difficult time, and people are going through a lot. And even if we weren't going through a lot, having compassion is never a bad thing. I'm not used to the understanding and flexibility that's been given to us because of the pandemic, and I don't think that's something that should go away.

- People are really struggling. People are having a difficult time. Well, yes. But there are people who are always struggling. There are always people who are always having a difficult time for a variety of reasons and in many different ways. I think because it was a shared difficulty, it was something people were willing to understand. That becomes harder when it isn't shared, when it's not talked about. I've spent my whole life trying to come up with excuses so I don't have to say, "Oh, I'm just in a depressive episode right now," because that's not something people usually understand.
- **See students and faculty as people.** It's very important to be intentional about students' welfare—seeing a student as a whole person. I can't stress that enough. This pandemic has been a way for us to see people—I see my professor and his kids in the background—it breaks down barriers between the fact that the professor is also a human. We forget that. And it's really, really important that they see us in the same way—that we're people instead of just something that turns in homework and exams. Seeing the student as a person.
- **Regularly check in on students.**
 - I've been thinking about how student care has been working in online classes and remote teaching and learning. I've noticed the way several of my professors check in with students in a different way than they used to. And I've had professors recognize that there is a lot going on outside the classroom that affects student learning in a way I've never seen before. And I think that's very true in this moment, but it's always been true. So recognizing that students have a lot of factors going on in their lives that could make learning difficult for them and explicitly mentioning that is something that I would hope to see carried past this moment in time.
 - Faculty have been checking in, like, "Is everything going OK for you? Is the workload fine?" Like one of my professors, she is super strict and would never check in before, but in the last week, she was saying, "I think you guys are overwhelmed," and I don't think she would have done that before. It would be nice if going forward faculty cared about our learning and that we are not too stressed.

Continue to work for equity

- **How are we conceptualizing the purpose of education?** Because there were so many constraints and because we were all in tandem prioritizing students as humans, and professors as humans, too, we were thinking about how do we create the most meaningful learning experience, not necessarily, how do we meet at the course goals or how do you complete the assignment exactly the way it is. What does it mean to give a student what they need to succeed and move forward, regardless of what we've done in the past and what we typically expect? That's a super powerful mindframe, because a lot

of it feels like hazing—your putting all these barriers. But is that contributing to student learning? Is that going to make them better scholars? Better people? We didn't do that as much during the pandemic. So how are we asking the right questions when we're developing courses? When we're in situations with students where they are struggling to make sure that they get the best education they can and that they get the education that they specifically need rather than the one we prescribe.

- **This fight for equity is not limited to this year.** [The strikes] happened last semester and seemed to carry into this semester, but the work needs to continue, and just because you are not getting flak for it now doesn't mean that what you are doing is OK.
- **Offer variability in assignments.** Don't be afraid to give creative projects even if it is not an explicitly creative discipline. I had a great conversation with a professor about how to do creative lab reports, and she loved the idea! One of the things the pandemic has done is given some professors an excuse to have more fun with their coursework.
- **Record all classes.** Before students were obligated to go to an in-person class, regardless of your health or mental health. Not everybody can learn when they are sitting with so many other people. And it's good when you are doing your work, you can think, "Oh, maybe I missed something in that lecture, and I can listen to it again." Maybe I was really tired that day.
- **Make textbooks available to all.** Before the pandemic, we had to just buy texts, no matter what they cost, and then, during the pandemic, all those resources were available, suddenly everything was really accessible. Maybe that could continue.
- **Differentiation makes for better learning.** Faculty are not just making choices for different students for the sake of making choices for different students. It produces better learning because students feel like they can succeed. When you feel like you've got a shot, you invest more, and you're happier doing it. It creates better education. You build better connections, and connections are the foundation of learning.
- **Be forgiving and flexible as we continue to strive for equity.** I've heard some faculty and students say that the strikes only worked because people were so unhappy from covid. Whether or not it was a catalyst in the border student body, I think the forgiveness that was extended to people because of covid should be carefully separated from our developing institutional understandings of how the structures of anti-Black racism continue to function in campuses and to continue to extend the same understanding and flexibility to those who are facing these adverse structures. When covid ends, the campus will still be engineered to help certain people succeed, but we can, as we've seen in the past year, be forgiving and be flexible. We don't have to be so rigorous and urgent about everything we do.

Build trusting communities and relationships

- **Develop a mindset of wanting to connect with people.** Creating a warm space. Approaching the work as building social connections and making people feel comfortable. Working to build trust.
- **Name realities people live in and with.** There was a lot of talk about professors feeling low energy and students feeling low energy, and while yes, that was related to the

pandemic in many ways, but that can happen in many semester. So I think that naming those realities and figuring our ways to deal with them are useful to carry forward.

- **Trust students.** Professors haven't been questioning students when they say they are having to deal with something. I think something I've heard in previous semesters that has lessened during the pandemic is when students say, "Oh, my health isn't that good I am dealing with something," in previous semesters, professors would say, "Well, what's going on?" There was a lack of trust. But I think during the pandemic, there was more understanding, like, "Oh, you've got a jillion things going on." But that doesn't change and that shouldn't go away just because there isn't pandemic.

Retain thoughtful flexibility

- **The flexibility doesn't have to disappear because we're no longer over Zoom.** I think the pandemic has shown people how much flexibility there can be in academia, and I don't think that's something we should lose.
- **Will we have sick days?** And if so, will there be online resources available as there have been this year?
- **Do we need to establish private spaces of restoration and rest?** We've seen work become so flexibilized, and now everyone can Zoom in, the classroom is your bedroom, and if you're sick, you can still go. It can prevent you from taking care of yourself because work has infiltrated the space of restoration and rest. I would caution against professor using remote modalities to work students who can't be there in that moment, to still respect that there is a space outside fo the classroom.

Consider what is important in class

- **What is the purpose of teaching and learning?** It's important for professors to ask themselves what they are teaching, and why, and how—just working back and reinventing the curricula and syllabi that we have. Do we really need to still learn the work of racist, white, old dudes? Or the way things are taught: Are they appropriate in today's context?
- **Rethink "rigor."** I've heard that a lot this year. I've heard professors say, "Oh, I don't want to take away from the rigor, but it's an exceptional time." But it should always be OK to not be so strict. (See Craig Nelson's "[Dysfunctional Illusions of Rigor](#).") The rigor seems to correlate to quantity over quality (see [Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture](#))—like assigning an obscene amount of reading. But what is really important here? What are students going to be able to actually analyze and understand? It's better to give one meaningful reading than a bunch of last minute readings. If faculty could put themselves in the shoes of students. We want to take the time to do a good job and not rush.
- **Be more selective in assigning work.** If there is not time to go over a reading in class, why assign it? Or at least make clear what the purpose of assigning it is. I've always been really frustrated in courses where there is a significant amount of reading that students are expected to do on their own but it is never talked about.
- **Make space for things that are important in the moment.** A lot of times this year there were moments when we lost opportunities to talk about things that were happening in the world. What if students have family in places of violence and they are worried about

those people? Or what if it's just a lot to handle and students don't have other people to talk to? Just making space to have the ability to vocalize what students are thinking or feeling. We don't just exist in this bubble.

- **Make space for people to feel what they need to feel.** That's been really great this semester. We've said, "We're going to acknowledge it, and we're not going to make people leave it outside."
- **Recreate the benefits of breakout rooms.** Zoom breakout rooms is a real loss. The way they allow you to quickly create random groups of students is great. There have been very low-stake conversations that people have been having in breakout rooms that have been insightful and valuable. Consider how to create random groups in classrooms. In a flipped classroom I had, the professor randomized the groups for each meeting. I got to know everybody in the class.

Keep channels of communication open

- **Communicate about learning.** Communication with students is always a good thing to do. I feel like a lot of problems come from misinterpretation of intention of what students or what faculty members want. Faculty might come up with pedagogical approaches that work for them, but it's good to check with students, what is working for them, what could help reduce stress. Times have changed. Classrooms are not a one-way thing; it's two way. It's always good to work with students to create a classroom that's conducive to learning, that is inclusive. That process of communication is rewarding, because students will feel incentivized to participate more actively, and faculty members will feel more satisfied.
- **Communicate about struggles and confusion.** Have open and direct communication, especially about people's struggles or confusions or intentions in adopting a certain practice, because I feel like some of the misunderstandings or tensions between students and faculty could be somewhat reduced with those more open conversations, and we shouldn't only have them when it's an emergency situation.
- **Find alternatives to the private chat in Zoom.** I think the loss of the private chat (via Zoom) is a really considerable thing. Although it can't be replicated, just having the ethos of students who need to ask for help having a way to do that without exposing themselves to the class. Maybe hanging around after class or letting people go a little early so anyone with questions can stick around and ask them in front of not everybody.

Keep some remote options

- **Could we decide, as a bi-co community, what stays on line and what goes back in person?** There are certain things we do that we might do better and enjoy more if they stayed on line (like being a Writing Center tutor). Classes should be in person, yes, but administrative things, like midsemester surveys—those are better on line.
- **Support services.** Before the pandemic, office hours, The Writing Center, the Q Center—they were all in person. And now they are remote, and more people have been showing up because it's so much easier to get help instead of having to walk all the way across campus or take the Blue Bus. If we could keep that option, it would be great.

- **Retain options for labs.** Because we were remote, there were options for students. For instance, some labs were filmed, and students could do the experiments virtually. Students still had to do the report and the analyses. It would be great, going forward, if there could be recorded labs, for when students are remote or sick or are going through something and just can't make it that week, it would be great to have that option.