



ARTICLE

“Checking In” to Build More Connection With and Between Students

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Published: May 2022

As the COVID-19 pandemic pushed our students behind their screens, finding ways to connect with them became increasingly important not only for their learning of legal writing and research skills, but to help them feel support and care during extremely stressful and lonely times. Many students were left feeling disconnected from their professors and classmates as they focused on basic needs.¹ Additionally, Generation Z or “Gen Z” (born between the mid-1990s and 2012) generally reports “a strong sense of disconnection, loneliness,

¹ The Law School Survey of Student Engagement (LSSSE) recently reported:

More than one-quarter (29%) of law students had increased concerns about eviction and housing loss. Almost two-thirds (63%) were more worried this past year about their ability to pay their bills, including even higher percentages of women and students of color. Perhaps most troubling, food insecurity affected over 40% of our students and a deeply disturbing one-half (50%) of our students of color. Law students also reported elevated levels of loneliness, depression, and anxiety. Given the need to focus their attention on basic survival, it is no surprise that students engaged in fewer meaningful interactions with professors and classmates. Almost every student surveyed (95%) reported that COVID-19 interfered with their ability to succeed as a student.

Meera E. Deo et al., *LSSSE 2021 Annual Report: The Covid Crisis in Legal Education* (2021).

and isolation and high levels of anxiety and insecurity.”² However, social connection can reduce rates of anxiety and depression, increase levels of self-esteem and empathy, and improve emotional regulation skills.³

In thinking about the circumstances under which students were coming to my class, and in recognizing that the benefits of social connection have important implications for learning, I found myself thinking about how to connect students in ways that I previously hadn’t.⁴ This intentional approach to building connection created stronger relationships—between me and students, as well as among students. In an email to me, one student shared, “I wanted to take a second to thank you. You have made me, and my classmates, feel safe and excited to learn. You have made the process of becoming a better writer exciting for me, which is something I didn’t think was possible.”

In my efforts to build more connection with and between students, two practices oriented around “checking in” stand out as both highly effective and easy to incorporate whether we are behind screens or in a physical classroom: 1) send individual check-in emails to each student a couple times a semester and 2) devote class time to allowing students to check in with each other.

1. Send Individual Check-In Emails to Each Student a Few Times a Semester

Prior to the pandemic, I would send an email to the whole class a couple times a semester to ask my students how they were doing, if they had any questions at that point in the term, and anything else about which I may have wanted a temperature check. Although some students responded to the email, not many of them did, and the responses were mostly generic (e.g. “I’m doing well. I don’t have any questions right now.”). I wasn’t checking in with each of them personally, and they responded accordingly.

² E. K. Camfield et al., *Sifting Through Gen Z Stereotypes: Using Critical Empathy to Assess Writers’ Invisible Learning*, 20(6) J. HIGHER EDUC. THEORY & PRAC. 121, 124 (2020).

³ Emma Seppala, *Connectedness & Health: The Science of Social Connection*, CTR. FOR COMPASSION & ALTRUISM RSCH. & EDUC. (May 8, 2014), <http://ccare.stanford.edu/uncategorized/connectedness-health-the-science-of-social-connection-infographic/>.

⁴ “In educational contexts, social connection is especially critical. While it was once thought to have been incidental to learning and cognition, it is increasingly evident from neuroscientific research that a sense of belonging has a profound effect on the knowledge and skills that students can learn, retain, and apply.” Claire Chuter, *The Importance of Social Connection in Schools*, EDUC. HUB (Jan. 20, 2020), https://theeducationhub.org.nz/social-connection/#_edn1.

So, as I thought about how to better check in with my students in the midst of the pandemic, I decided to try emailing each of them individually rather than sending one email to the whole class.⁵ However, I did not write thirty-something (and I know many people have even more students!) individually-composed emails, both for the sake of saving time and because I wanted to say pretty much the same thing to each student. I just added each student's name to the same body of text for each email.

Even though each student receives the same email, they get the experience of a personal check-in because their name is in the email and the email has arrived to the student individually. Additionally, I often include a line such as "I'm just emailing each person to check in about how you're doing at this point in the term" to further highlight not only that the email has been sent to *each* of them, but that it's been sent to *all* of them so that no one has fears of being singled out, and they can see that these emails are part of the supportive and caring tone that I'm setting for the class as a whole.

Then comes the fourth step of the process: Getting responses. From the first time that I engaged in this process and continuing with every time, I hear back from many more students than I did when I sent out one email to the whole class; they understand my "checking in" as genuine care for them and thus take to heart the invitation to respond to my questions. They tell me about things they are dealing with in their lives, they ask questions about the class, they tell me about how they are handling the law school environment, and they repeatedly thank me for taking the time to reach out to them individually.

The responses not only allow me to connect more with each student individually, but also provide me with valuable insight into how my students are doing. From that point, I can make informed decisions about anything I may be able to do to better support students individually as well as about anything I may be able to do to further enhance the learning environment of my classes. Students have also expressed the value of receiving an email that causes them to pause and think about their learning processes. After responding with a summary of how different aspects of the class went for them (which was very helpful to me to read about what they found to be effective), one student wrote, "I want to thank you for these check-in emails. It's nice to have a second to reflect on how things are going and also to be given the opportunity to be heard!"

⁵ I usually send the individual check-in emails twice a semester: in the first week or two of the semester and again sometime between the middle and end of the semester. These points seem to work well since the first point allows for a check-in as they are adjusting to the new semester and getting a feel for what the class is going to be like, and the second point allows for a check-in when they may be feeling overwhelmed working on a final paper and approaching final exams.

2. Devote Class Time to Inviting Students to Check In with Each Other

Throughout teaching during the pandemic, whether each class has been online or in a physical classroom, I hear from my students about how they want to be more connected with each other. In hearing these comments—and how many of my students have felt like they are having something taken from them by not getting to know each other more—I thought about what I could do to better facilitate them getting to know each other. No matter how much I and other faculty and staff members provide support and care, our students also need to experience support and care from each other to not only develop friendships but to develop a professional network.

What I could do to help them came with an idea so simple as to require me saying only one sentence and giving them a few minutes of class time: I started inviting students to check in with each other, and I now intend to continue this practice for as long as I'm teaching. For these check-ins, my process is:

- 1) At the beginning of class, I invite my students to check in with the people sitting around them (if in a physical classroom) or in small groups in breakout rooms (if on Zoom or other online platform). I suggest to the students that they say “hi,” ask how each other are doing, etc. Sometimes I give them a particular topic to discuss based on what we're doing in class, current events, recent articles in bar publications, and/or social justice issues.⁶ One student noted, “I value the class discussions you have prompted about Breonna Taylor and RBG. I think that it's important to encourage difficult discussions with our classmates.”
- 2) I then give them two to five minutes to just talk to each other.

At first, many students seem unsure about this practice as they are not usually encouraged to check in with each other in this way during class time. But as the semester progresses, more and more talking fills the room as they feel more comfortable, and I get to smile to myself as I see connections form and friendships develop.

⁶ Gen Z students largely hold progressive values about social justice issues and are motivated by helping others, and thus they desire a legal education that addresses current social justice issues and prepares them to engage. Tiffany Atkins, *#Fortheculture: Generation Z and the Future of Legal Education*, 26 MICH. J. RACE & L. 115 (2020).

This comfort extends past the few minutes of check-in time. They are overall more comfortable in class (which I can see and which they tell me) since they get to know each other and show care for each other—which leads to more participation in class discussions and a greater willingness to discuss difficult topics. Additionally, when I start teaching, I am not opening to a cold room, but a room of students who are already talking and engaged. A member of an ABA Site Team observed, "I'm really impressed with how engaged your students are, and how comfortable they seem with you and each other." The two to five minutes does not do much to alter how much material we can cover in a class period, but the time goes so far in setting the tone for an engaging and dynamic class period with a lot of student participation.

These two practices of checking in have helped to build a space from which my students can be more engaged and feel the support they need to move through law school and whatever other pressures they may be feeling—whether during pandemic times or not. My students have referred to my class as their shelter from the storm, as their place where they can breathe easier, as their foundation for navigating becoming lawyers. Whether we are behind screens or in physical classrooms, I encourage making use of check-ins so that students may approach law school, and beyond, with the support of this sense of connection:

Some of us from your class were talking today and debriefing this year. As we were talking, we discussed how close we are. Everyone was asking how we became so close, and it all came back to one thing—your class. We are so grateful for all the time you allowed us to speak freely and interact with each other, and how you promoted a sense of companionship among us. Your class made such an impact on us, and we are so thankful. Because of it, we are respectful colleagues and, even better, friends. Thank you! We feel so lucky.

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