Compassion and Excellence in Education

These are difficult times, and they emphasize the importance of empathy for our students. Here are some ways that you can provide this empathy and support while maintaining (and indeed improving!) a high quality learning environment.   
(Compiled and suggested by Christine Alvarado, but based on collaboration with many excellent colleagues over many years. If you have ideas to add, please email [cjalvarado@eng.ucsd.edu](mailto:cjalvarado@eng.ucsd.edu)).

* **Know what’s critical learning, and what can be sacrificed.** By starting with and focusing on the essential learning, students will be able to focus more and learn more deeply. When things get stressful, you’ll be able to easily cut back on what’s not critical. Students will be grateful.   
  *Implementation ideas:*
  + Start with your assignments. Ask yourself if everything is critical. Strip them down as much as you can to get at the essence of what you want students to learn.
  + Then move to your exams. Are there questions that seem to test relatively unimportant concepts? Get rid of them.
  + Finally, move to your lectures/classes. Are you introducing extra things that aren’t directly related to your assessments? If you were forced to lose a lecture day, what would you drop?
* **Give students the ability to fail, and then try again.** The goal is for students to learn as much as they can by the end of the course. Students should have multiple chances to demonstrate that learning, with minimal (or no) penalties if they learn it more slowly. *Implementation ideas:*
  + Allowing portions of the final exam to replace a lower midterm score. Conversely, allowing midterm scores to be a “safety net” against a low final exam score. (You can do both).
  + Allowing students to resubmit homework they didn’t do well on (perhaps including an explanation of what they did wrong the first time) for most of the credit if they get it the second time.
  + Allowing students to drop a low quiz or homework score. (Although note that while this allows them to fail, it doesn’t have the “try again” aspect).
* **Give students their own flexibility and choice.** By letting students choose, you are communicating that they have agency in their education and that you understand that they are a set of unique individuals who have different needs, desires, constraints, etc.   
  *Implementation ideas:*
  + Allow students to choose between doing outside class work and coming to class by having points that can be earned either in class or by doing work such as reading responses or quizzes.
  + On assignments, give students some ability to choose an extension or provide them with 4 problems and let them choose 3 to do for a grade.
  + Allow students to drop an assignment grade, thus allowing them to choose when to prioritize another area of their life over your class for a short period.
* **Communicate expectations clearly.**  By making it clear what you expect, students get peace of mind by not having to guess what you’re asking them to do and can focus instead on learning.  
  *Implementation ideas:*
  + Include your grading rubric in your assignment instructions.
  + Include detail about assignments, grading, etc in your syllabus.
  + Include specifics about policies for things like academic integrity violations in your syllabus
* **Make exceptions for individuals, as much as you can.** Even when you build in flexibility into your classes, things are going to come up for students on an individual basis. Most students are not trying to game the system and they get extremely stressed out about the prospect that something in their life (an illness, an injury, etc) might derail their whole course experience. It’s not going to set any broader precedent and it’s not unfair to others to make exceptions on a case-by-case basis.  
  *Implementation ideas:*
  + Forgive participation points for an extended period, beyond your policy
  + Use the final exam grade or quiz grades to replace missed midterms.
  + Drop an extra assignment, or give extensions to the end of the quarter.
* **Look at the world from the student’s perspective, no matter how inappropriately they might be phrasing their concerns.**  When students (people) encounter something that is frustrating, they often get angry. Often this anger is expressed in a non-constructive way, and if we are on the receiving end of this anger (e.g. “Prof. X is an idiot. Their exams are stupid and have nothing to do with the material taught”), it’s easy to get defensive and dismissive. But usually there’s a real concern behind the anger, and usually it is something that we can deal with as instructors, even if it’s just to say, “I hear you, but I can’t change anything, and here’s why.”  
  *Implementation ideas:*
  + Collect mid-quarter feedback and then respond to it. A simple form such as [this one](https://drive.google.com/file/d/0BwSyqdXO0dbZa2JKSDRqdkkzSk0/view?usp=sharing) works great.
  + When reading angry emails, Piazza posts, etc, remind yourself of the power dynamic between you and the student. Try to step into their shoes. Give them appropriate feedback about how to communicate their message more effectively, and then offer to talk to them one-on-one.
  + Disable fully anonymous posting on Piazza. While there is value in letting students be anonymous to their peers, it is good to have them be accountable to someone for their statements. It also gives you a better sense of who is feeling what so you can address it.
* **Demonstrate struggle/show students you are human.** Students often see their professors as people who succeed at everything they do. As such they can’t always see a path from where they are now to what they aspire to be. By sharing stories of struggle and failure, we can show them that we relate to what they are going through and that they can succeed just like we did.   
  *Implementation ideas:*
  + Start the quarter by sharing times when you struggled. How did you feel? How did you get through it?
  + Ask students (anonymously) who is struggling and show results (again, anonymously). Students will feel better when they see that they are not the only one.
  + Talk to students about the Impostor Syndrome. Talk about how you have struggled with it. Show videos of people talking about it, as in this [Impostor Syndrome Gallery from CS professionals](https://www.coursera.org/lecture/cs-tech-interview/imposter-syndrome-gallery-T8dy6).
* **Remind students that grades do not define or reflect their self-worth.** I once had a student tell me that he thought I thought less of him because he failed my class. I was shocked. Now I make it a point to repeatedly tell students that their grades do not define what I think of them or the kind of person they are.  
  *Implementation ideas:*
  + Before every major assessment grade is released, remind students what grades mean and what they are good for: They are an approximate measure of how well you have learned the material at this point, and that’s all. They show you what you’ve learned and areas where you might need to focus more).
* **Talk to students about what’s really important (in life, in learning, etc).** Life is so much longer and bigger than a class, but when you are young, it can be hard to have that perspective.   
  *Implementation ideas:*
  + Ask students about their lives. Talk to them about what else is going on with them, positive and negative.
  + Allow five minutes for students to talk to each other about their lives outside of class.
  + Tell students about your own life outside of class.

Finally, above all, keep reminding students that you care. They are individuals. You want them to succeed in your class, as in life. It really makes a difference.