



Conversations around student wellness are becoming more prevalent as of late, and who better to lead these conversations than students themselves? Featured in the March 7, 2022 edition of the Center's weekly newsletter, two EMU undergraduate students co-authored this blog entry to draw attention to the issues raised in a larger discussion among EMU students. This blog speaks directly to faculty on the needs of students, and the role faculty can play in fulfilling those needs

What Your Students Wish You Knew

**JESSI KWEK AND
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Student participants pictured with Dr. Mays Imad



Participants named left to right: Luis Romero, Dr. Mays Imad, Anna Bowling, Sonya Liggins, Jessi Kwek, Cedrick Charles, Eamon Conner, Jeffrey Hoang, Hannah LaFleur

Generation Z knows how easy it is to forget that behind every online interaction is a whole human being – we've been dealing with the complexities of online identities since we could remember. In these last two years, Zoom and asynchronous online courses have proven this once again. This time, though, the anonymity is not taking place on social media or in a game. Instead, it's taking place in a setting we never expected it might, one that used to be quite intimate: the classroom.

We recognize that we are not alone in our struggles – faculty have also been presented with countless challenges in the last two years – as we try to traverse this uncharted territory without adjusting our expectations for productivity or the way we measure it.

There's been no shortage of acknowledgement about COVID-19's impact on mental health, feelings of isolation, and disconnection from our peers and colleagues. Dr. Mays Imad, the keynote speaker for the FDC's CONNECT Conference, has been one person leading the charge on this issue. One way that she's been doing this is conversing with students around the country, and our conversation with Dr. Imad and six other Eastern students about our experiences over the past two years made clear that this widespread acknowledgement by teachers, administrators, and peers has in many cases not translated into tangible action to recreate those connections and curb those feelings of isolation.

In the experiences of this group of students, synchronous Zoom or in-person classes, and to a greater extent asynchronous classes, have felt like our person matters less than our EID. For many, asynchronous classes have meant we are handed a list of deadlines and left to our own devices (literally) to teach ourselves the material and stay on pace with little to no guidance from our professors.

Even in the most “normal” scenario – fully in-person classes – interaction with teachers and classmates outside of direct class time is more limited and more formalized. In every one of these scenarios, there is less of an opportunity to see students as whole human beings, which is what we have been missing the most. It feels as though the student voice has been reduced to a whisper, we feel less connection to the university, our teachers, and those who could help guide us through these times.

This is not to say that the burden should fall entirely upon teachers – far from it. Faculty are, in many cases, facing similar challenges with pandemic teaching as students are with pandemic learning: disconnection, distractions at home, and interactions that have lost their depth. Students understand that. The problem is that students are feeling overlooked in almost every aspect of their lives.

While mental health has become a priority in our broader community, students in this conversation reported facing CAPS waiting times of up to four to six weeks. While essential workers were hailed early in the pandemic, that sentiment has worn off, but many EMU students still have no choice but to work these low wage jobs where they cannot work from home, and they have no choice but to prioritize their employment over their safety. While the university previously implemented policies to ease the struggles of students, such as waiving online class fees and expanding pass/fail options, these have expired and we are once again subject to these less flexible conditions despite the fact that obstacles that warranted this response have not gone away. Students' options for advocating for themselves have thinned – one student in our discussion even shared an experience where she was turned away by the secretary for the dean of her college when she reached out for help.

Faculty enter this conversation because they have more opportunities to see students as whole people, and to understand that the problems we are facing outside of the classroom are not separate from those we face in the classroom. Some teachers already make an effort to do this, and please trust us when we say that that effort does not go unnoticed, no matter how it presents itself. We've had teachers who set aside the first ten minutes of class for students to talk about current events. We've had teachers who know that sharing questions or comments is harder over Zoom, so they offer anonymous feedback options at the end of each class. We've had teachers who leave the Zoom meeting open after class ends, so students have the chance to stick around and chat after class if they'd like to. We've even had teachers who do something as small as asking us how we're doing each class, and meaning it, and maybe even extending an invitation to talk if we feel the need to. Meeting students with humility and grace is powerful, and may look different for each individual.

We notice each one of these gestures and deeply appreciate them. These simple efforts send the message that a classroom is a safe space to acknowledge and balance issues from all parts of our lives, rather than being expected to leave whole parts of ourselves at the door to clear space for a single class. Allowing students to take up space and to bring our whole selves into the classroom has an incredible effect on our ability to learn in a more meaningful way, much as Dr. Imad suggested. Many of us are struggling to feel like a valued part of this institution, and struggling to balance the role of 'student' with many other roles. Each of these efforts to show students that we are seen as whole, valuable human beings on our own goes a long way. Knowing that we have a voice somewhere among the often overwhelming feelings of powerlessness makes all the difference. We want to thank the teachers who go out of their way to connect with us beyond course material, and encourage those who may not have realized how much we need this to do so, in whatever way you can. We promise you, it will be worth it.

ABOUT THE STUDENT AUTHORS



Jessi Kwek is a third year undergraduate student studying Political Science and Sociology. After earning her degrees, Jessi is interested in working in urban planning and community organizing. She is involved with student government and Model United Nations at EMU.



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