

Effective President-Student Communications

Vital interaction for today's campus leaders



- Meet regularly
- Empathize and show solidarity
- Circulate and be accessible
- Don't duck thorny issues
- Have some fun!

The pandemic and recent racial and political tensions have been a horror show. Yet, in higher education, one silver lining is that college presidents and their students have come to understand each other better.

In planning for remote, hybrid, and on-campus operations, and in responding to societal and political flashpoints, presidents have developed a more comprehensive sense of the academic, societal, and personal challenges facing students. For their part, students have awakened to some key logistical and financial complexities of running a college that they might

previously have ignored or taken for granted. On the whole, the crises have, on both sides, increased empathy, transparency, and candor as leaders and students have had to navigate their way together through a gantlet of public-health and other systemic problems.

Learning what students are thinking about requires frequent interaction — formal and informal, scheduled and unscheduled, in person and online. Just as important is an open, caring attitude toward students and respect for them. That can't be faked, but it can be amplified. Here are some lessons drawn from the principles and practices of 15 college presidents.



Ascendium Education Group is excited to support The Chronicle of Higher Education's initiative to prioritize student success. Over the next year, this partnership will produce special virtual events, focused reports and a new online resource center, where colleges can search and find creative solutions and useful content from The Chronicle's extensive archives of best practices.

Our support of this project promises a comprehensive look at new and innovative approaches to helping students achieve success. By collecting voices and perspectives from across higher education, The Chronicle's expert journalists can guide colleges to make actionable changes that will help close achievement gaps and fulfill the promise of socioeconomic mobility for all students.

Ascendium supports initiatives that seek to create large-scale change so more learners from low-income backgrounds can achieve their educational and career goals. We share with The Chronicle a passion and purpose to inform and empower higher education trustees, leaders, administrators and faculty members about the pressing issues facing students today. That includes shining a light on students of color and transfer students, as well as those who are the first in their family to attend college.

We believe in the power of education and training beyond high school to transform the lives of learners from low-income backgrounds. The COVID-19 health crisis has exacerbated well-documented opportunity gaps that put these learners at a disadvantage relative to their peers. This makes the solutions raised by this initiative all the more vital.

Thank you for your interest in this initiative. To learn more about Ascendium, please [subscribe to our monthly newsletter](#).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Amy Kerwin". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Amy Kerwin

Vice President – Education Philanthropy
Ascendium Education Group



Meet regularly

The weekly, collegewide online meetings of early 2020 have shifted to every four to eight weeks at many colleges, but they're here to stay, presidents say. The meetings sometimes follow written statements about public-health or other policies, or written responses to important national or regional events.

The statements explain how a college has arrived at those positions. Then the meetings provide a chance for leaders to recap key points and answer questions. Virtual sessions are convenient because students can watch the recordings later. The format also gives students who feel uncomfortable speaking up in person a chance to submit questions or comments anonymously. As Covid-19 circumstances allow, some of these meetings can be held as hybrid live events that are also accessible online.

Presidents are inviting deans of academic or student affairs, specialists in public health, or other guest speakers to answer more-detailed queries. Hearing from the same experts that college leaders consult reassures students that decisions aren't arbitrary and that they are being made with the best current information available.

Meet even when nothing substantial is changing, presidents suggest, to hear students' concerns, to establish a rhythm, momentum, and normalcy to communication, and to let students know that the administration is monitoring events and that students remain in the loop.

Tone matters. Susan Poser, president of Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y., strives for a "reliable, consistent, straightforward voice." She says that "it's very important to be direct and treat the students like the adults that they are."

Students appreciate that kind of voice. At the College of the Holy Cross, in Worcester, Mass., Ethan Bachand, a senior

majoring in political science and editor in chief of the student newspaper, *The Spire*, meets monthly with President Vincent D. Rougeau. Bachand says consistent, open communication from the president is critical. "If the college plans to do something unpopular but the president tells the truth from the start, students are willing to accept that as reality," says Bachand, citing as an example continuing mask and other Covid protocols in the fall of 2021.

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Regular meetings with student-government leaders, student journalists, and representatives of teams, clubs, and affinity groups like students of color or LGBTQ students should be on presidents' schedules. Real or virtual open doors and office hours are important, but they're not enough.

Empathize and show solidarity

Students are excited to be on campus after Covid lockdowns. They are, however, concerned about academics, finances, and career preparation. In many cases they are balancing college life with one or more jobs. They worry about their families too.

Sometimes that means parents, grandparents, and siblings, but in one case out of five, it means students' own child or children.

Freeman A. Hrabowski III, the longtime president of the University of Maryland-Baltimore County, strolls the campus and asks students about their coursework and major, but also about their families, graduate-school and career plans, and other concerns.

Some of the acute early-pandemic problems have faded, but students remain unnerved by the swinging back and forth between traditional and remote coursework through successive waves of the coronavirus.

David Harris, president of Union College in Schenectady, N.Y., has heart-to-hearts with first-generation and low-income students about academic, cultural, and financial hurdles. A Pell Grant recipient when he attended Northwestern University as a Black, first-generation undergraduate, Harris exchanges thoughts with Union's students about how to handle cultural assumptions and differences in background and privilege.

Like a number of college leaders, Michael V. Martin, president of Florida Gulf Coast University in Fort Myers, is struck by the breadth and depth of mental-health challenges exacerbated by the pandemic. He knows students can't wholeheartedly tackle their coursework until they get help in dealing with their emotional challenges. Some of

the acute early-pandemic problems have faded, but students tell Martin they remain unnerved by the swinging back and forth between traditional and remote coursework through successive waves of the coronavirus.

Loneliness and isolation plagued students who had to leave campuses for home early in 2020. However, students living off campus with friends have also sometimes felt isolated, as have even some students on campus as the Delta variant, then Omicron, have curtailed socializing.

Linda M. LeMura, president of Le Moyne College, in Syracuse, N.Y., moved for four months during a fall 2020 lockdown to an off-campus neighborhood where a lot of students were living. She wanted to show solidarity with students isolated from their families by living near them, even though that meant a painful distance from her own family. She did her best to keep students' spirits up, checking in on them and distributing Le Moyne swag and healthy snacks. She also wanted to demonstrate college oversight to reassure local residents who were concerned that students might violate public-health guidelines and spread the virus.

Circulate and be accessible

Effective presidents don't hide behind their desks. A calm, informal presence around campus signals an approachability that's crucial to monitoring an institution's emotional pulse.

Students at Florida Gulf Coast know that from 7:30 to 8:15 a.m., they can expect President Martin to be in the Cohen Student Union drinking his coffee. Students stroll up and tell him what's on their minds. About a third of the time, he chuckles, what's on their minds are complaints about parking, but more-serious issues inevitably bubble up too.

Harris, of Union College, followed

resident advisers on their Friday and Saturday late-night rounds. He suited up as a guest goalie with the ice-hockey team and, at an anticancer fund-raising event, jumped off the diving team's high board. Students also can join him on one of his extended bicycle treks.

Bryon L. Grigsby, president of Moravian University, in Bethlehem, Pa., says, "I just try to be at everything." He played soccer and basketball as a student at Moravian, so he knows firsthand that students notice when a president is or isn't at a game, concert, or other event.

James M. MacLaren, president of Lebanon Valley College, in Annville, Pa., says he learns a lot by practicing what he jokingly calls "intrusive dining" — a play on proactive "intrusive advising" strategies — by plunking himself down next to students in the dining hall.

Students appreciate that kind of accessibility. Bachand, the student-newspaper editor at Holy Cross, says that when presidents participate in community events or engage in casual conversation, "the intimidation factor fades away."

Information must flow both ways. Student voices help L. Song Richardson, president of Colorado College, and her administration with Covid response, Title IX issues, antiracism measures, and more, she says. Students come away from conversations with a better understanding of academic freedom, faculty governance, and why she, as president, cannot simply mandate actions.

If presidents should meet students where they're at, figuratively and literally, the reverse also holds true: Students should be invited into their presidents' worlds.

Moravian's Grigsby frequently hosts students for dinner at his house. One year the invitations will cycle through

athletic teams, and the next they will cover the university's clubs. The idea is that if students are even somewhat engaged in campus life, at some point during their college years they will have dinner at the president's home.

Don't duck thorny issues

Students who are members of the board of trustees, college-newspaper editors, and student-government representatives are good conduits to and from the student body

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as a whole. They see presidents in action and come to understand that these leaders are not usually wily dictators and that they have their own stakeholders to answer to — on campus, on their boards, and in the wider community.

Presidents and student leaders can learn a great deal by swapping roles. Kathleen A. Getz, the new president of Mercyhurst University, in Erie, Pa., plans to trade places with student-government leaders. The student president will sit in on a cabinet meeting, while Getz will lead a student Senate meeting. Getz also goes to classes. Once a student alerted her to some classrooms with poor lines of sight to the whiteboard and to desks that were too small for larger students, Getz saw for herself and followed up.

Moravian's Grigsby says students' requests usually involve trade-offs, and part of his job is to point those out. Students have sought longer dining-hall hours. Sure, that's doable, Grigsby tells them, if you want your room-and-board fees to increase by 10 percent. Hmm, maybe not, students generally reply.

Modeling civil discourse often means keeping your cool and letting the data do the talking.

At Mercyhurst, water-polo players asked Getz if they could get a pool on campus. She explained to them how such a project would have to be pursued through budgeting in a master facilities plan.

Modeling civil discourse often means keeping your cool and letting the data do the talking. Lebanon Valley College does not mandate Covid vaccination, and some students and parents have been staunchly against it. President MacLaren, a physicist, urges vaccination matter-of-factly, citing comparative statistics on critical-care hospitalization.

As a scientist, he tries to get students to think critically about the research data and the odds. He asks them: "Do you really want to run that risk of being in that 2 to 3 percent that get seriously ill?"

Have some fun!

Like most college leaders, Jonathan G.S. Koppell, president of Montclair State University, in New Jersey, has an intimidating CV. He was formerly a dean and vice provost at Arizona State University, and helped establish a joint college in China and, at Arizona State, a first-of-its-kind public-service academy.

More approachable is the "Doctor of Funkology" who took a turn DJing during "Dr. K's Vinyl Fantasy Funhouse" for the university's radio station. Koppell's university-logo face mask complemented his paisley shirt, bell-bottom pants, and fedora.

Like appearing in goofy superhero costumes on TikTok or joining students to pick up trash in a park, informal ventures humanize a seemingly distant, formal figure. Don't cheat students of your enthusiasm, Koppell says, and don't cheat yourself out of a primary benefit of the presidency.

"One of the best parts of the job," he says, "is you're on a college campus — and a college campus is fun."

"Effective President-Student Communications" was produced by Chronicle Intelligence. Please contact CI@chronicle.com with questions or comments.