



What We Are Learning About Learning, S1 E1

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Kim: Fall 2020 was a semester like no other. At Georgetown, students and faculty faced this new normal together.

Gwyneth: For me, I really, really love my classes.

Isabel: There is currently a violin being played across the hall. There's someone to take care of. There's babysitting to do. Someone needs me to make them lunch. Someone's playing a game and loses and yells, and I'm like in a discussion group.

Margaret: I want to throw my laptop into a lake.

Gwyneth: And so the fact that some of my professors set up specific times just to get to know them for every single one of their students, like that's been amazing.

Kim: Through ongoing discussions with student groups, the Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship at Georgetown University learned that students were keenly aware of the challenges facing faculty and deeply appreciative of their dedication to make student learning continue, evolve, and even deepen.

As educators, we wanted to see what we could learn from what is happening and answer the question, how can we improve the teaching and learning experience for ourselves and our students?

At CNDLS, our raison d'etre is to support faculty in order to improve student learning. We've held constant office hours, institutes, workshops, and focus groups to train, support, and develop pedagogy that works for everyone in this new virtual learning environment. I'm Kim Huisman Lubreski.

Joe: And I'm Joe King. And this is our new podcast series from CNDLS, What We Are Learning About Learning. One of the most important lessons learned during the early months of the pandemic, when students and faculty were thrust into virtual learning without any time to prepare, is that there was a disconnect between students and faculty about what was and was not working in the virtual learning environment.

In the interest of deepening our understanding about student learning and engagement, the Office of Assessment and Decision Support collaborated with CNDLS and the Office of the Provost to survey



students four times throughout the fall 2020 semester to learn more about their experiences with virtual learning and engagement. The aggregate results, which can be found on the CNDLS Instructional Continuity website, have been widely shared, and faculty have been encouraged to adapt their courses to better meet the needs of students.

In a nutshell, the student survey results have revealed a trend towards greater student disengagement over the course of the semester. This is unsurprising, given the massive disruption to all elements of life that has come with the pandemic. The anxiety reported by students has also been reported by faculty. Isabel: I will say that I love my professors, but they're definitely-- it's still very hard to feel like it's a real college environment.

Maya: I feel generally pretty disengaged this semester. I definitely see the effort that most of my professors are putting in to make it engaging. I don't think it's necessarily bad teaching as much as it is Zoom fatigue.

Gwyneth: And, you know, I stress about COVID all the time.

Kim: When asked what factors negatively affect their academic engagement, popular responses included general Zoom fatigue and anxiety about the state of the world. On the contrary, when asked what factors have affected their academic engagement positively, popular answers included interesting course content as well as flexibility, clear communication, and timely feedback from their professors. So even though broader factors like COVID-19 and other anxiety-inducing events are much bigger than CNDLS or any given class, these results suggest there are small ways we can respond in our sphere to make a significant difference in students' lives.

As we plan for another semester of virtual learning in spring 2021, we invited students to talk with CNDLS about what is working and not working for them. Our hope is to expand our understanding about student learning and engagement. Our goal is to complement the aggregate survey data by taking a deeper dive into what engagement means to students. In our conversations, we explored various modes of engagement and asked students about what they want more of in 2021.

The focus of this episode is on what we are learning about learning from our students. It is our hope that as you begin to prepare for your spring courses, you can take a break from Zoom and listen to what some of our students would like you to hear about what you can do to help learning be as good as it can be under these circumstances that are outside of our control.

In this podcast, you will hear from 12 students. Although they are not a representative sample, they come from a diverse array of backgrounds, majors, year, and geographic locations. Three freshmen, one sophomore, three juniors, four seniors, and one graduate student. Most are in DC or nearby, but five are living at various locations in Texas, Oregon, California, and Arizona. Their majors and minors run the gamut from government to philosophy, to woman and gender studies, to computer science, just to name a few.



And though we have to be careful about generalizing their experiences to all Georgetown students, we believe that a lot can be learned from listening to their stories and experiences. All of you have heard about Zoom fatigue and engagement. In this episode, we're going to start with the most pressing expressions of need from students. You will then hear from students about four areas of engagement-- student to faculty, student to student, student to content, and student to local community. Throughout this episode, you will hear about what is working and not working for students and what some of their professors have done to successfully reach students who are feeling isolated and unmotivated.

Our conversations with students began with a general check-in question-- how is it going?

Matthew: The good weeks are the weeks where the professors are clearly engaged and clearly have worked their butts off for their given lecture. But the bad weeks are when the recorded lectures are unusually long.

Gaby :I'm taking some interesting classes. But I just-- I don't feel connected to this semester at all. It can feel really disheartening when they feel equally disengaged. They feel frustrated. And you can kind of tell when a professor is, like, done, like they're not really there to work with their students.

Gwyneth: I've seen probably like 25% more work than I think would have been the work they'd give us. And I think extracurriculars that I'm in, think that we have lots of free time as well, because we're just sitting at home. So everything has kind of increased in work all at once. So that's what's made it so difficult.

Joe: Though the challenges faced are different depending on the student's year, location, on campus or off, and many other factors, common struggles include competing priorities, a lack of motivation, and a sense of isolation.

Gwyneth : I'll say my motivation is very low, mainly because we're all pretty isolated. Even living on campus, a lot of my friends are constantly having to quarantine because there's an outbreak on campus. And so you're pretty much alone all the time. I sit and do work on my bed, so I fall asleep. It's just hard to get to know people.

Aiai: As a freshman, I feel like this is all I really know in terms of college.

Nie: It's definitely not the senior year that I thought I was going to have, which is fine. Like I'm grateful for life and being able to go to school, but it gets very depressing. And even on those days where you feel the most down, you almost still feel like there's not an excuse to not go to classes. It's like, oh, it's just on my computer. Like it shouldn't be that hard, but it is, and it's really hard to justify that feeling.

Joe: Throughout our conversations with students, we repeatedly heard how much they love and appreciate their professors. So let's dig into what's making student-to-faculty engagement work.



I think now more than ever, I'm especially appreciating professors who are approaching material as, "I hope you learn as much as you can," instead of this, I feel like more traditional Georgetown competitive, you know, "do the best you can."

Students specifically talked at length about how much they appreciated professors who showed empathy and compassion, were genuinely attentive to their needs and well-being, were flexible, and created ample opportunities for students to get to know them and each other.

Gwyneth: I think we all want to get to know each other, and we're all going through really difficult things. And so the more empathetic professors can be towards that, the more they actually actively attempt to get to know you in a really personal level is so important.

Margaret: Compassion and flexibility. Like those are the things that make me feel the most connected.

Joe: One student's comments further illustrate how flexibility can relieve stress and even help shield students from feeling embarrassed if they fall behind.

Gwyneth: So that kind of super flexible schedule of having things due rather than like every other day, where if a student has an issue, now they have to kind of embarrass themselves and ask for an extension, and it becomes a whole thing. The kind of flexibility that acknowledges COVID with the longer-term deadlines has been really helpful.

Isabel: I'm sure that I could ask for extensions on some of it, but I don't feel like that, if that makes sense. And I think that's part of being a Georgetown student, is like you don't want to admit that you need help. You don't want to admit that you couldn't do something.

Joe: This need for flexibility applies to class time, too, where students expressed how shorter class times and multiple breaks helped them.

Varsha: One of my professors gives us a 10-minute break. So there are a few, like, 10-minute cardio workouts on YouTube that I'll do to get up and stretch a little bit. And it's really helpful because this happens on the day that I have 7 and 1/2 hours of Zoom, so I have not moved at all very much that day.

Margaret: Breaks aren't only helpful in Zoom classes. Like when I was on campus and I had professors who gave breaks, those were great then too. 2 and 1/2 hours is too long to just go, go, go, especially if you're doing heavy content or intense discussion.

Maya: I think additionally, also what has definitely helped me, like I have three classes right now where my professors are not only checked in but very up-to-date on giving us assignments in on time and checking in with us periodically throughout the semester. Making sure, you know, do you have enough time to do X,Y, and Z? And I think those are the classes in which I personally feel like my professor is paying attention to me, and therefore I feel more willing to show up and do the work, and I feel like I'm on track.



Joe: Students really seem to value one-on-one opportunities to meet with their professors, but also realize this is not always feasible in large classes.

Gwyneth: And then the other things some of my professors did-- like my Islam professor, for example. He set up a 20-minute meeting with every single one of his students, and not to talk about the course but just to talk. And so the fact that some of my professors set up specific times just to get to know them for every single one of their students, like that's been amazing. Because then I feel like when I actually go to class, I feel like I know them in a way that I didn't feel like I knew them from just a class over Zoom.

Becky: I really do think that my professors are really doing the best that they can under this pressure.

Justin: One thing that has really been helpful to me has been office hours and recitations. I feel like professors are really making themselves available, not just during office hours, but if I don't understand material, I often reach out to professors or TAs. And they want to meet with me and they make the time to meet with me, even if it's not necessarily convenient.

Joe: Freshmen, who have not gone through the normal rite of passage from high school to college, may not know what to expect and how to connect with their professors.

Isabel: I will say that I have loved my professors, but there definitely-- it's still very hard to feel like it's a real college environment. And so I wish there was more one-on-one outreach because, I don't know, I just-- I feel like it would be really valuable. And then not having a college experience before, like I don't really know what it looks like on campus to try to connect with professors. So without that basis of like, this is how often you should be going to office hours, this is what you can bring to office hours with your professors. I definitely wish there was more structure to that, yeah.

Joe: Many students also noticed the amount of time and effort their professors were putting into their classes, such as learning new technologies and going above and beyond in being available for students. Some expressed awareness that this effort by their professors often exceeds what they normally do in a regular semester and noted that this helped them feel more engaged and motivated.

Matthew: I would say I am extremely motivated in the classes where I can tell the professor has a command of the technology. And I recognize for some it's just overwhelming if they're not used to it.

Aiyanna: You know, they'll be there five minutes before the class starts and are willing to stay 15 to 20 minutes after it ends, even if it goes the full 2 and 1/2 hours, for students who have quick questions.

Joe: The reality is that not all students will have the time to take advantage of one-on-one opportunities or office hours with their professors. And not all professors, especially those teaching large lecture classes, will have the time to meet with every student one-on-one.



Isabel :Just the thought that, like, it's all the way into almost November and I don't really know some of my professors very well, it's kind of hard. Because I've-- like I try to go to office hours, but I'm also working two jobs this semester, and there's homework to think about. And it can take so much more effort to schedule a Zoom meeting than just to pop by after class.

Joe: One solution could be for professors to reserve some class time to meet with and survey students about their needs.

Gwyneth: For me, like they're doing little things. Like I've had some professors send out a survey to ask us what can they do to better accommodate us and how are we feeling during this semester. And a lot of that happened like right at the beginning of the class. So I think maybe doing that again midway through the semester would be really helpful to check in.

And I also think just individual outreach in the sense that if you are meeting with a student individually, it'd be really nice if you started off by asking how they're doing instead of jumping right into the content that you have to discuss. Because I think there's a lot of power in that one question of asking and really meaning it when you ask, like, of how that person is doing.

And that would be really nice, and it would give students a chance to be honest with their professors and say, oh, you know what? Like my dad just got COVID, so it's actually been really hard. And then that allows the student and the professor to move forward in a better direction, I think, as opposed to just being two kind of figures on a video camera.

Joe: While many faculty went above and beyond, and their investment was apparent, a few students expressed frustration that some professors did not seem to put much effort into their teaching, learning new technologies, and didn't make themselves available. In those cases, engaging with all the components of the course became much more difficult.

Maya: Professors in the beginning were a lot more cognizant, or at least acknowledged the-- you're finding work, you're getting settled in. I too have been adjusting to living at home for the first time in three years and was navigating financial aid and losing my living situation and all of that within the first month. And professors initially were pretty attuned to that, but I think that for a lot of students, especially those who aren't on campus, those day-to-day mini crises continue. And I think that the awareness has sort of died down. Because a lot of students are around campus or on campus.

Joe: In sum, one of the biggest takeaways is that students we talked with really appreciated when their professors make the effort to get to know them through one-on-one sessions, surveys, and office hours. But they also really value opportunities to get to know their professors.

She does, like essentially every other week, tea time. It's almost a happy hour, but it's tea time. And she really just does that to talk informally about anything you want. So in a way, it's also getting to know her outside of the classroom. That really helps.



Varsha: Something else that he's done that I very much-- that same professor has done that I very much appreciate is that he puts on, like, elevator music during our breaks, or he'll play his playlist. So after the break, we'll always ask him, like, can you send us your playlist? Like he'll put K-pop next to rap, and it's a way for our class and our little GroupMe to talk about it and talk to each other. But we're also able to talk with him. So I don't think he did that intentionally, but it's just really nice because it's kind of like a light thing that we get to know our professor's personality a little bit more.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Kim: In addition to students wanting to have a reciprocal relationship with their professors, where their professors got to know them and they got to know their professors, it was also very important for the students we talked to to have opportunities to engage with their peers and feel as though they were part of a community. Especially given all of the isolation they are experiencing.

While students seem to value the use of communication tools such as Zoom chat, polls, and breakout rooms, they did have a lot to say about what they liked and didn't like about how faculty use these tools. Students really appreciated professors who allowed them to chat with other students during class, as they found it helped create community.

Matthew: I had one professor who disabled the chat function because they claimed it led to extraneous and irrelevant conversation. But really, in my opinion, I thought it was helping to foster community. And then art class, I don't have any motivation. I feel uncomfortable in that class. Whereas others, the chat function enhances the conversation and allows people to ask questions they don't feel comfortable saying in a group.

Isabel: And professors who have made Zoom chat available, I have some who disabled it, like we can't DM each other in the class. Which to a certain extent, like I understand you want us to be focused, but also especially in freshman classes, it's a really great tool to be able to DM people. And say like, hey, I really connected with that. Or just tell them their hair looks nice and try to make a friend.

Kim: On the other hand, some students found it stressful when professors used the chat feature to have students respond to questions about content.

Isabel: Like if you put an answer in the chat to a question and it's wrong, like everyone can see it, and it sits on the screen. Like it's not like you can quietly say something. Or discretely raise your hand but you're in the back, so only the professor sees. Like, no; your mistake is in front of everyone, which can be really nerve-racking.

Kim: Some students felt similarly about polls.

Gwyneth: I don't like the polls that have to do with content. But the polls I do appreciate are my IR professor has taken time, like pretty much like every few times, to do a poll that's just about us. So like, you know, like what's your favorite animal? Or like something nice like that, where you just get a chance



to get to know people in your class a bit. And it's just a break from the actual class content. So I do like the use of polls when it's clearly the professor trying to get to know you. I don't like the use of polls when it's actual class content, because it is very stressful.

Kim: Students largely appreciated when their professors put them in breakout rooms or other small groups so that they could interact with and get to know their peers.

Gwyneth: We do discussions as a whole group. Like that's the class activity, is just doing discussions as an entire group. And I find that very intimidating over Zoom. If we were in person, I would not have issues with doing discussions as our activity in front of everyone. But I think there's a lot of pressure when you know how many people are listening to you through their computer. It almost sounds like you're recording something-- like it's very stressful, as opposed to when they do use the breakout room feature.

Aiyanna: So I have one class in particular that it's a little strange for me because I am the only person from my program in this class. And that's never happened to me before. So I didn't know anyone. And we have a semester-long group project that is also our final project, and we're required to be in those groups. We started having assignments for that project like three weeks ago, I think, and I feel like I've gotten to know those students really well.

And so even if I'm not feeling like I know the other students quite yet, group projects and breakout rooms have really, really helped in terms of at least knowing people's names and where they are, which can be helpful for sort of understanding what might be going on for them in terms of the semester. So I would say that this semester-longer project has really helped even just build friendships in that class that hopefully will last beyond this semester. But I guess we'll find out.

Varsha: I think there is something to be said that when you bump into someone as you're trying to sit down in an ICC classroom, that you just get to know them better. And that's just not happening right now. And even like we keep all our mics muted during class, and so you don't even hear like the little scuffling people make. So it's just like very much in a vacuum. So those little moments where it's like I'm forced to do a presentation, I'm forced to be in a breakout room and talk to people, it feels less silent and more lively, even if it's only for a few minutes.

Kim: While students valued breakout rooms in general, several felt that meeting in small groups with the same students over the course of the semester was most beneficial for building relationships and community.

Gwyneth: Personally, I prefer meeting with the same people every time. I've had a few professors set up their Zoom breakout rooms so it is the same people every time, and that makes you feel more comfortable. It allows you-- you guys usually, like, exchange phone numbers so now you have a contact in the class that you can reach out to if you need to. So that setup is just much better.

I understand wanting to have the dynamics of shifting around and getting to know new people. But the reality is, meeting with someone in a breakout room for a few minutes, you're not going to get to know



them. And so the idea that that's a way for you to get to know the entire class or to have better dynamics and a shifting structure doesn't really work. So yeah, I would say it's much better when they preplan it.

Isabel: There is such a breath of fresh air when you get put into a breakout room and you see someone that you know or someone that you actually have connected with in that class. It's like, oh my goodness, like this is not going to be as hard as I thought it would be. So I do think that for bigger causes, a structured group helps.

Gaby: And then keeping those groups repetitive when you do breakout rooms to kind of keep the community there I think has been really, really helpful.

Matthew: I think Gabby's point about the breakout rooms, it does work if they are consistent or very particular. One professor in a class of about 45 does random group breakout rooms every day. And I constantly am texting a friend, saying, I hope my group talks. I hope my group doesn't sit in silence. And I think part of that is I don't necessarily know what the dynamic is, and I don't want to dominate. But I also don't want to be the rude person who's really forcing everybody to talk. So I think in some regards, just having that recurrent group or that recurrent bubble you're going to always talk to, you may not like each other, but at least you know what's going to happen. And you know what the dynamic is.

Kim: Students also described creative ways that their professors were building in opportunities for them to meet with students in small groups, both in and outside of class.

Maya: I have a professor who-- our class is about, I want to say, 40 students, and has cut up our class into two sections. And so we have, instead of an hour and 15 twice a week, we have a short half hour with far less people. So maybe it's less than 40, but I feel like that smaller section is no more than 10 or 11. I think I probably did my math pretty wrong there. But it's a small group.

Point being, it is a small group, and it encourages a little bit more casual conversation. And you feel like you start to get to know-- we're working on theses, so you get to do different projects, and I think it encourages speaking up as well. I feel like when you're in those big, big Zoom classes, it's harder to interject and ask a question. And so I've really appreciated that, and it simultaneously helps with focus.

Matthew: For me, kind of similar to Maya, I have two classes. Well, one is 50 people. The other one is 25-ish. The first class she divided up into two and then said, come only once a week. And so we cover double the material on one day, but it still works out. I don't know how. It just does. So it's not overwhelming in content-wise, but I think in that way, she says, OK, this is group A, group B, so there is that sense of community.

Gwyneth: I think-- there are some of my classes where my professors have set up study groups for us outside of class. Like they've assigned a group of four other students to meet with us outside of class, and that's been really helpful. Because, like Isabelle said, it sets up a bit of a community, and so you have more motivation. But for the classes that don't have that, it's really been tough.



Kim: We also heard from students who appreciated when faculty took other considerations, such as time zones and students' individual needs, into account when putting them together in groups. One student appreciated when her professor put her with a student who was also behind in the class due to personal circumstances.

Gaby: Me and this other student kind of laughed because we thought we got partnered up because we both hadn't turned in an assignment. And we were both kind of dealing with a lot of heavy stuff. And she was like, I think the professor did this on purpose. So then we were able to talk to each other, be like, OK, I get what you're going through, you get what I'm going through. Here's what we're going to do to still meet this deadline, and then we'll just email the professor because she probably did this on purpose.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Joe: So we've talked about student-to-professor and student-to-student engagement. Now let's think about how students engage with the content of their courses. Students were quick to identify techniques and activities that help them engage in course material, as well as learn the material and succeed on assessments. We asked them to share some examples of assignments or moments in class that have successfully improved their learning in terms of content and skills. Many comments were about structure.

Justin: One of my favorite assignments that a professor has given has been group leader assignment. So if we're taking on a reading, they'll have ones-- like we have four groups in a class of, I think, like 36 people-- and this is my Problem of God class-- and the professor has a group discussion leader who's assigned to a reading. And you get to sign up, so it's like everybody just has to do once per semester. And it's like on Friday, you go into a breakout room, and it's the same people that you're engaging with. So like-- you know, it was a point that was made earlier-- I think that's really great when you have that community of people you're more familiar with so you know the dynamic going into it. And the discussion leader has some questions that they bring up. And it's not really-- like, it's very low pressure. I feel like it really helps you kind of engage with your thoughts on the implications of what you're learning. And I really-- I think that's great, having students leading a discussion with other students because, yeah, it gets-- it's like it gives a professor a break. And it lets students have some authority and empowers them to ask questions that they're interested in.

Aiyanna: My best class by far is the one where sessions are structured very particularly with different activities and different platforms. So using Jamboards but also PowerPoint presentations and breakout rooms. And almost every week, it's a very similar structure but we're breaking up activities.

Matthew: Instead of doing an hour and 15 minutes together on Zoom, doing a recorded lecture and breaking it down to 15 minutes, 30 minutes, makes a world of a difference. And I have learned significantly more in those 15-, 30-minute videos than I did in the hour and 15 minutes.

Justin: All of the lectures are prerecorded. And then we go to class and when we're in class, he does some code writing. But then he gives us the opportunity to actually, like, go into breakout rooms with one

or two other people and go on a website and actually implement what we're learning and many work problems. And that's been, I think, really helpful.

Joe: Many students highlighted the power of professors' efforts to establish rapport and build personal connections. In other words, those extra steps that professors are taking to connect with their students pay dividends in students' learning and engagement with the content as well.

Maya: I've had one class this year, which is a finance class and which is super unfamiliar to me. And I started, was very overwhelmed by all the material. And my professor has consistently reached out, checked in, had us all send him our anxieties about this class and what we want to get out of it. He has been-- like he called me on the phone for 30 minutes the other day because I asked about classes in the future and like what else should I take. And he was like, well, what are you interested in? What do you want to do?

Maya: Those professors who have recognized that this is a very different time-- and even when you have exams, being like, we're going to have three sessions to talk about this beforehand, and ask me every single question you're worried about. Maybe study this-- not making it about being competitive and challenging. Really creating an environment where if you show up and put in the effort, then that effort will be reciprocated.

And I have really appreciated my professors who have done that. And I've had a few. Like I don't-- I think it's easy to criticize, but I've had some professors who have been really willing to go out of their way to make sure that we're all engaged and have adopted their curriculum to do so.

Gaby: But I have some classes who do polls at the beginning that are very generalized. If you didn't do a reading, you don't feel like you can't do it, to check in on what you felt, or asking what was most important to you. What do you really want to talk about? And kind of just making it about, what didn't you understand, and what do you want to learn more about? Rather than feeling like you have to do something every week, or there's going to be at least three things due before every class.

Matthew: One professor has said, yes, my syllabus has deadlines for-- like you need to write, put a one-page response, five of those by the end of the semester. Please don't submit them the last day of class. I just don't want to grade them all then. But turn them in whenever. And recognizing, yeah, you have lives. Go live, please.

Margaret: I think if it's anything for me that is, like I said, unconventional, so anything that's physical is going to be deeper engagement, in my opinion. Like anything that's like-- if there was something about-- if you're in an anthropology course, you could have to go out and sit in a public space and observe pandemic public-space interactions of people. And you have to take the notes by hand, and then snap pictures of them. Like that sort of thing, for me, is the most helpful.



Pretending that what's happening in the world isn't happening is not ever going to be helpful. So I think professors who acknowledge that and allow the content to acknowledge that, and allow us to acknowledge that within the context of it, it's like, well, this thing isn't really related to the pandemic, but that's all I'm thinking about, so this is going to be a discussion post about the pandemic is helpful. Like it's present. And at least for me, I don't need school to be an escape from it.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Kim: Clearly students are invested in their courses or want to be. And many faculty found inventive ways to engage students during a truly difficult time. We just heard from one student on engaging with the physical world outside of Georgetown. Engaging with the world around the students can be an innovative way to enhance engagement, give students a break from screens, and build more connections between the world and your course. We asked students about faculty who created assignments that ask them to engage with their local communities.

Maya: We have one project where we're looking at localized environmental or food justice issues. And so I was-- I'm in LA right now, and the fires along the West Coast were certainly causing terrible air quality for a couple of days. And so essentially, my whole project has shifted to, like, bad air quality and things in the localized California region.

But also, in addition to that, for those who are in the DC DMV area, that we've been doing research with urban farmers and talking to community members in the DMV. So even though that's not local to me, it feels very much like grounding myself in a community, even if I'm virtual. So I've really appreciated that.

Aiyanna: We were talking about feminist research methods and intersectionality. And we did a photo narrative reflection where we had to go out wherever we are and take pictures based on prompt words. So the prompts were like, take a picture of something that represents power to you, or something that represents marginalization. There were a couple other things. One of them was a question, so it's much longer. I'm not going to remember it right now.

But so, you know, I'm in downtown DC, and so I was able to take pictures of street art and monuments and things like that. But then we have students in the class that are on the West Coast, and so they're taking pictures of a bunch of different things. We didn't ever share them, which I think would have been nice, but it still allowed me to, like, go outside and think about class in a different way than right here at my desk. So that was really cool.

Varsha: I would say what's been really helpful for me, like engaging in assignments for me, were things that are applicable to the real world. So I'm taking this class called Impact Analysis. Essentially the basis of the class is how do we decide if a development policy, like a vaccine campaign, is actually meaningful, if it actually has significant impact. So it's kind of like a math-y kind of class.



And something that my professor does is he calls them service learning opportunities. And he has connected with-- and he does this outside of the virtual learning environment, but he connects with people he knows-- he used to work at the World Bank, so people he knows at different NGOs and things like that. And he asks us to think of solutions to real problems that they're facing. And it is kind of like a homework, but I think it feels really meaningful because it's like these are real things that are being questioned and figured out right now.

Joe: Just as that student notes, adapting to teaching and learning in a pandemic is ongoing, and it's a collective process as students and faculty learn to operate together in this new space. One key element we've learned about learning this semester is that students learn when connected-- connected to their professors, connected to other students, connected to the content, and connected to their local community. Such connections have been a big part of the successes achieved this fall. Especially as we look toward the spring semester, designing for this connection is critical. We'll leave you with a few suggestions on what to keep in mind as you design and plan for your upcoming courses.

Kim: First, as one student notes, it's important to remember that a critical part of flexibility is soliciting and listening to student feedback.

Varsha: I want to recognize that there are some professors that have been really, really helpful with that-- just with assignments, being willing to change their syllabus based off of student feedback. One of my professors cut our readings in half because people were saying they were a little overwhelmed. And she did that happily. And I think accepting that learning won't be the exact same, but there's ways to still have productive learning as long as you're being very willing to be flexible and respond to student feedback and how they're doing. Because there are classes where I am learning a lot still.

Kim: In fact, as one student suggests, there are times when faculty can go beyond soliciting feedback and actively partner with students in the design of the course.

Aiyanna: As we sort of move forward thinking about the fact that this modality that we're in probably isn't going to change much, that there should be more intention of designing courses in the spring that are, for lack of a better word, more intentional. So I think I would have loved to have been able to weigh in a little bit more. And potentially seeing professors have students weigh in earlier in the semester and saying, OK, this is what I have in my syllabus. Do you think this is going to work? Or after two weeks, you know, were these discussion posts awful? Feel free to let me know, and we'll revise how we're doing this. So that's one thing that I think they could benefit. Instead of having to sort of take in all these pieces of advice ahead of time and just putting them all in the syllabus, they might be able to say, here's what I have; what do you think about it based on your experience as a student? And that might be good.

Joe: Next, take risks and experiment, and be transparent with your students as you do so.



Margaret: They should be willing to think outside the box and try new things. Like we are all trying new things. We're all taking a risk by kind of saying, let's do the university on completely on Zoom. Like that's all new, and there's no reason to then still limit ourselves to what we used to do on campus.

I don't mean technology. I don't mean like trying new tech. I mean, that's great. Do it. Go for it. But just be willing to reimagine and restructure and take risks, because it might pay off. Or you might say, well, that week did not work. Let's try something else. But students will be more engaged if we're going to try exciting new things.

And I think professors will also have a better time if it's like, I've never done this before, but I've always thought about it. So let's see how it goes. You know, that sort of thing, like take the risk now.

Joe: Finally, one student urges faculty to remember the incredible diversity in student experience and living environments.

Isabel: I think knowing that there's a really broad range of student experiences right now. Just because, like, I know I'm at home with family. There are people who are in DC and they're in apartments. There are people who are in even louder houses than mine. And so I think just understanding that range is really important.

Kim: In subsequent episodes, we'll drill down on ways to address these issues, as well as specific techniques that students report as successful. Again, I'm Kim Huisman Lubreski.

Joe: And I'm Joe King. And this has been the inaugural episode of CNDLS' new podcast series, What We Are Learning About Learning. This episode was made possible by many people at CNDLS, including Molly Chehak, James Olsen, Eleri Syverson, Meghan Modafferi, Lee Skallerup Bessette, and Andrew Zubiri. Special thanks to the 12 students who shared their experiences with us-- Gwyneth, Becky, Isabelle, II, Ni, Varsha, Margaret, Justin, Maya, Gabby, Matthew, and Ayana. For more resources on calibrating your teaching to support student learning, please visit InstructionalContinuity.Georgetown.edu.