

Supporting Students During the 2020 Election

This is a collaborative document composed by the University Ombuds Office and the Center for Faculty Excellence at The University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill with inspiration from colleagues in the Office of the Ombud at The University of Washington.

We are approaching the end of a contentious and emotional election in a uniquely difficult context. Isolation, difficult work transitions, economic insecurity, health concerns, and the ongoing struggle for racial justice in response to anti-Black violence have taken a heavy toll on our campus community.

In addition to these challenges, it is possible we will not know the outcome of the election on November 3. When a winner is declared, our students will experience a range of emotions: disappointment, relief, joy, or fear. In this time of uncertainty and anxiety, what can we do to help?

Practice self-care. In order to best support your students, you will need to be kind to yourself first. Be sure to take the time to step away from election coverage, talk with friends, go outside, or anything else that will help you prepare for supporting student needs.

Acknowledge the election. It is important to acknowledge current events and other issues of student concern. Letting students know you recognize this may be a difficult time and you are thinking about their wellbeing can have a positive impact. This is especially important in the context of a pandemic when people are isolated from friends, family, and other support structures. An email or statement at the beginning of class will go a long way. For example:

I want to take a moment to acknowledge how stressful it is to go through a contentious election on top of all the other difficulties we are facing right now. It is tough for me, too. Please know that I am here for you. I encourage you to reach out through email or office hours if I can do anything to support your learning and wellbeing.

Model vulnerability in your own response. To the extent that you feel comfortable doing so, be transparent with your students about how you feel affected by the outcome of the election. This may help them to express and take care of their own needs in this moment.

Create time and space. Consider the need for schedule changes during the week of November 3. How will you respond if students request an absence from class? Are you willing to cancel a class session? Will you need to change plans to create time for discussing the election in class?

Don't make it harder. Each student will have their own reaction to uncertainty surrounding the election and outcome. In some cases, the result may have immediate negative consequences for individuals and their families. Be respectful of this and do not use humor or other means to defuse or downplay the moment. If a student is having an intense reaction to the result, it will not be helpful to tell them to "calm down" or that it is "not a big deal." Instead, reassure the student of your support, ask questions, and listen compassionately to their concerns.

Reach out to vulnerable students. Be alert to students who are missing assignments or class sessions. Have a strategy for checking in to make sure they are okay and have a plan for continuing their learning.

Reach out to your colleagues. Draw on the expertise of fellow UNC instructors from across disciplines, like history and journalism, to connect your students with the larger context of this election.

Explore resources. Acknowledging the 2020 Election and the difficulty of the current moment is an important first step. You may want to engage further by facilitating a class conversation concerning the election or exploring resources for thinking more deeply about how we can be supportive to students.

To help you with this work, please visit:

- electioncarolina.unc.edu
- Guide for Facilitating Difficult Discussions Around the 2020 Election

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