

Help One More Student Stay.

Summer 2018 Focus Group Results

Of the 19 instructors that implemented strategies, five participated in the focus groups.

Faculty were asked about their experience implementing strategies, how their courses were impacted, how their relationships were impacted, if they would continue and recommend the project to their peers, and questions about the structure of the process.

Instructors Chose Strategies that Made Sense for Their Classroom

Instructors chose the strategies that fit best, or chose a strategy that they have not yet tried. **Flexible due dates** were a popular choice for many instructors who did not have accreditation related skills tests that are time restrictive. Another common strategy was **meeting with students**. Some instructors met with students after the first exam, others planned to meet earlier in the semester but met midway through the semester. Meetings with students took place either in the faculty member's office, in the classroom, or a neutral place on campus (such as Starbucks).



Flexible due dates were a common strategy for instructors to use, even before they were involved in the project.

“I met with students after exams; physically meeting with them. I tried it the first week of the semester and couldn't get all of them, but after the exam, I met with every student and had them work to do a reflection.”

Finally, other strategies such as changing **communication** style, doing **group activities**, and making efforts to **build rapport** were discussed in focus groups. Instructors who increased their level of communication did so by reaching out first, checking in on students who were missing class or assignments, and reminding the class of important information.

Impact in the Classroom

Instructors were asked how their strategies implemented impacted their class, and how the class differed from their other classes. Overall, instructors felt their students were more **communicative** and **willing to seek help**. Instructors felt they communicated with students more as well. One instructor described how flexible due dates and meeting with students “helped communicate with students” and that “the initial meeting makes [students] more likely to approach [the instructor] when they do have an issue.”

Instructors felt the strategies also impacted course retention. While some were unsure if they truly helped one more student stay that would have otherwise left, they felt many components led to students persisting. One instructor, who used group activities and discussions, said “having those discussions in the beginning and creating [group] cohesiveness produced a **community that was in it together.**” Another instructor described their class working together to answer questions during office hours, teaching each other the concepts.

Some instructors felt they had more passing grades when implementing **flexible due dates**. “Some students just really need help. In some ways, you need to help the bottom ones who need help just figuring out how to do homework,” the instructor explained.

“I chose my office so they saw it as an inviting space and I think [one-on-one meetings there] made a difference because more came to office hours.”

Seeing Students as People First

Through focus group dialogues, instructors brought up how seeing their students as people changed how they felt about their class and how they approached teaching. “Flexible due dates aren’t like they were drunk at some party, it’s that [students] have serious things going on in their lives,” one explained, “seeing them as people and not students and they have a lot on their plate and **being a little bit more human makes them come back.**”



Getting to know their students personally helped instructors refocus on the human aspect of teaching and community college. “Realizing your students are people is really eye opening.”

“Worth the Effort” and Instructor Growth

Instructors described feeling changed by the experience. “It’s been on my mind this semester,” one said, “like how can I help these students stay because they all come [to college] for a reason.” Instructors chatted about how they felt more **empathetic** and appreciative of their students after getting to build relationships and know their students as people.



Instructors felt they grew as teachers and learned a lot from the experience.

Instructors were asked about the workload they had using the strategies. Overall, instructors felt the strategies required varying levels of extra time, but it was time well spent. Workload also depended on which strategy was used. For example, setting up reminders in blackboard was front-end work that one instructor set up to make communication easier late in the semester. Another explained that scheduling meetings with students earlier in the semester didn’t take time away as their office hours were not typically used during that time anyway.

“I always got a lot to do,” one instructor laughed, “but it was **time well invested.**”

Another agreed, saying, “I think student conferences [were] a lot of time up front, and I think it, maybe, increased the students in office hours later, but it also made less work because students were on top of what they didn’t understand; where in the past, students come in after they dug a hole for themselves.”

Overall, instructors **plan to continue their strategies.** Many discussed how they would change their implementation and had a *few lessons* learned moments throughout their pilot. For example, not putting the flexible due date policy in their syllabus, but telling students to tell them if they struggle to make a deadline.



Instructors would recommend the strategies so others can make the same realizations.

Getting Other Instructors to Buy-In

All instructors felt their peers should implement a strategy as well, but were unsure of how the initiative would be received if rolled out to the College at scale. “Yeah, I would recommend all of them,” one instructor explained to the facilitator. “It’s looking at respecting students and treating them like a person. [...] I would recommend anyone to think about student retention.”

Instructors discussed why being the first one to reach out to students was important. “We are looking at students who are younger, and timid by their professors, and us showing the initiative and **being the first** to show communication, it **breaks down those barriers** of the professor being someone high and mighty and [that] students are just in the classroom,” one explained. Others agreed; noting that some students are afraid to be the first to reach out, perhaps out of fear of being disrespectful.

Getting buy-in from other instructors was discussed again at the end of one focus group. Redefining academic freedom, as it relates to the strategies, was one suggestion. Another comment was that **union support** was needed before changing strategies of instruction would stick. Instructors agreed that the strategies might have to be a **top-down decision**, and some were not comfortable going to their departments with ideas without their dean’s backing. Finally, **professional development courses** were suggested for new or engaged faculty and adjuncts that taught the strategies.

“It’s intuitive for some people but not for others, but I think it’s extremely important and I wish more faculty would open their eyes to it and it’s so beneficial for students.”

Project Structure and Process

Instructors were asked two questions about the Help One More Student Stay project structure and process. Instructors felt the expectations for their involvement was clearly communicated. Overall, instructors also felt the level of communication was appropriate. There was some interest in having more opportunities to talk to other instructors who are using strategies, to exchange ideas. Instructors enjoyed the dinner, where they were able to talk with others outside of their field.

¹ Pictures in report were taken from *Unsplash*, a free photography website