COVID-19 Student-Faculty Facilitation Network (SFF Network)
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Background:

The circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic have produced extraordinary and rapid change to undergraduate life across the nation, and UNM is no exception. With the campus closed to live instruction, faculty have worked quickly over the last two weeks to move their courses online, adapting course delivery and assignments in an effort to preserve instructional continuity. In its March 24 Resolution on “COVID-19 Emergency Measures for Student Success,” the Faculty Senate committed the faculty to offering flexibility, communication, and support for students during these challenging times, and authorized faculty to facilitate the CR/NC grading option for the remainder of the semester. The Senate Resolution, while offering some relief to students seeking to complete their courses successfully, has also increased confusion about the timing and options for grading student work, questions that will be addressed by the Office of Academic Affairs and the Registrar but may continue to arise as students proceed in their courses, particularly after April 5th. Further, despite these efforts to address the extraordinary challenges to instruction in the current semester, and in a context of mounting health, employment, and family challenges, many students are experiencing unprecedented levels of stress, wondering how they will meet the requirements of their newly-online courses in less than optimal conditions.

Thus far, our existing health, academic, and student support offices have done their best to address the concerns that reach them directly (through student emails or the student needs survey) as well as indirectly through faculty, advisers, Chairs/Deans, and student resource centers. It has become evident, however, that we need a plan that will supplement these existing systems and provide rapid, high-level, and focused response that facilitates communication between faculty and students, who may face unprecedented barriers toward their academic success during these extraordinary times.

Proposal:

The Division for Equity & Inclusion, in coordination with the Offices of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs, will set up a streamlined network for rapid response to student academic concerns relating to the transition to remote web-enhanced during COVID-19, providing individualized accompaniment as well as systematic support to students as needed. Through a central “Student-Faculty Facilitation Coordinator” who will receive, triage, and track student requests, and at least two senior faculty designated as “Student-Faculty Facilitation Liaisons,” this network will allow the university to address problems that arise from new online instruction modalities in real time. The network is intended to serve primarily undergraduate students, but may also include graduate and professional students whose coursework or lab research has been impacted by COVID-19. Student concerns arising primarily from ADA, Title IX, and other protected status would be addressed in cooperation with the appropriate university offices.

This “Student-Faculty Facilitation Network” will support the implementation of the Faculty Senate Resolution on “COVID-19 Emergency Measures for Student Success” by enhancing communication and coordination among staff and faculty already engaged in students’ academic support and respecting existing policy requirements that protect academic freedom and students’ grievance rights. The SFF
Network will also facilitate communication among stakeholders, from the Senate to academic advisement and individual faculty, about the interpretation of the Faculty Senate Resolution, including the commitment to suspension of graded assignments between March 23 and April 5 and general expectations for students who choose to opt-in to Credit/No Credit grades. Given the extraordinary and novel challenges facing the university and our entire community, this network must remain flexible, with the capacity to evolve in ways that address emergent barriers to student academic support as they manifest in real time, including the option to expand the staff and faculty FTE devoted to the FSS Network as needed. We anticipate that the SFF Network is a temporary process, one that ends once the pandemic and its effects on regular instruction have abated.

Positions:

The Student-Faculty Facilitation Coordinator (SFF Coordinator): A position already designated to Rodney Bowe, Student Success Specialist for the Division for Equity & Inclusion, the SFF Coordinator will be charged with receiving, recording, and triaging student concerns related to their academic success during the pandemic. Sources for this information include the student resource centers, faculty instructors and staff advisors, graduate/staff/faculty Ombuds, the “student needs assessment survey,” and individual students who may contact the SFF Coordinator directly. The SFF Coordinator will record this information in the Academic Affairs Student Feedback system and – after consultation with the Network Team -- forward those concerns that require academic intervention with specific instructors, departments, or colleges to the appropriate SFF Liaison. Where appropriate and with the student’s consent, the SFF Coordinator should maintain email, phone, and/or Zoom contact with the affected student, the referring agent (advisor, advocate, etc.), and the SFF Liaison, to provide additional support and continuity in addressing the student’s concern.

The Student-Faculty Facilitation Liaison (SFF Liaison): For these two positions, the DEI, in coordination with Academic Affairs, will identify two senior faculty with experience in governance and/or administration, people skills, and strong institutional relationships who are willing to take on this overload in the coming weeks and months. The SFF Liaison will be charged with receiving referrals from the SFF Coordinator and working swiftly and creatively to identify possible solutions to students’ individual or collective concerns about their academic success in newly-online courses. Solutions may involve reviewing course materials; inquiring about course modalities and delivery with faculty and chairs; and in some cases, making arrangements for students to meet remotely with instructors. This process should include, and always with the student’s consent, individual consultation and accompaniment in addressing the problem, such that the student receives informed, personal, and effective support for resolving the issue.

The work of the SFF Liaisons shall respect and conform to existing policies that govern the rights and responsibilities of both students and instructors at the university, including but not limited to Faculty Handbook policies on student grievance (D175/D176), academic freedom (Section B), and respectful campus (C09). The authority and jurisdiction of this position will be established through the joint efforts of the Administration (which through DEI and Academic Affairs will select the SFF Liaisons and provide a SAC) and the Faculty Senate President (who will be asked to authorize the appointment). The number of SFF Liaisons, and the FTE assigned to each, may be adjusted according to the continuing needs identified in this effort.
Work Flow:

- Student discloses concern to any university employee, via the survey, or directly to the SFF Coordinator. Recipient of this disclosure should try to determine whether the student has attempted communication directly with their instructor about the concern, and if so what response they have received, and -- if the student consents -- bring the student’s concern to the attention of the SFF Coordinator via email or the Student Feedback System maintained by Academic Affairs;
- Advisors, resource center staff and directors, chairs, and associate deans and deans have the training to directly address student concerns and will, in many cases, resolve a student concern related to Covid-19 issues directly and expeditiously. In some cases, however, a student Covid-19 related concern may exceed the capacity of the regular staff and administrators who normally address student concerns or the student concern may be directly presented to the SFF coordinator.
- Working where relevant (and when regular staff and administrators have not been contacted or cannot address a concern) with the staff/faculty to whom the student has already disclosed this information, the SFF Coordinator invites the student to speak directly with him, with the virtual presence of that staff/faculty member if the student so wishes;
- SFF Coordinator records the nature of the student concern in the Student Feedback System and determines whether the student consents to move the concern to the next level in the SFF Network;
- If a student directly contacts a member of upper administration (such as the Associate Provost for Student Success, the Dean of Students, or a College/Graduate Studies Associate Dean), and that administrator acts to address the concern, the SFF Coordinator, can record the incident and follow up to check on the student's well-being;
- If the SFF Coordinator identifies an academic concern relating to the transition to remote web-enhanced during COVID-19, and it will be necessary to involve the instructor or chair/dean to address it, the SFF Coordinator will consult with Zerai/Cheek/Gutierrez and the SFF Liaisons to determine which SFF Liaison (per discipline or nature of concern) should be invited to participate in addressing the student concern.
- SFF Liaison arranges (with support from SFF Coordinator and any other person brought by student) to speak remotely with the student, in order to establish a rapport and explain the SFF Liaison’s role.
- After listening to the student's account of their experience and reviewing classroom and instructor communications, the SFF Liaison proposes to the student (copying or including their other support person) a plan for remediation, which may include an informal conversation with the instructor, communication with a department chair and, should these not prove satisfactory, recourse to filing a formal grievance. In providing this information, the SFF Liaison must balance advocacy for the student in trying times with awareness of how misunderstandings between students and faculty may be fostered by stressful situations such as the COVID-19 epidemic, and with appropriate adherence to university policy and procedures, including respect for faculty academic judgment and administrative authority in the informal resolution of student complaints.
- Once the student has chosen a pathway for remediation, the SFF Liaison should contact the faculty instructor and/or chair, providing information about this extraordinary support system and requesting their cooperation.
- With the consent of the student and instructor, the SFF Liaison should arrange for and participate in email/phone/Zoom communications to facilitate and make a note of - the solution that emerges from the conversation. Formal grievances should be handled by the appropriate associate dean of the student's college or school. An associate dean may designate an SFF Liaison to address and manage a formal grievance, when necessary.
• In cases where multiple students express similar concerns about a particular instructor or course, the SFF Liaison will elevate the conversation to the level of Chair, Dean, and/or Provost as necessary.

• The results of the SFF Liaison’s intervention should be communicated to the SFF Coordinator as soon as possible. All of the above steps should be accomplished with the greatest possible speed, clarity, and care for all parties involved.