



“My loneliness is killing me”: Faculty contribution to international students’ ability to cope with COVID-19 isolation.

By Christina van Essen

“It’ll get worse before it gets better,” my advisor told me the day after I returned from Spring Break. COVID-19 just started closing down campuses across the country and until that moment I saw this disease as just a bad flu. It was only a few days after that interaction that my campus closed operations too. It was impossible to see my fellow graduate students, the students I taught, or the faculty one last time in the context in which we worked over the last year. No goodbyes before graduating, no celebrations of our graduation or doctoral admissions, no more hallway conversations with the people you used to see daily. I was stunned. Having lived all over the world for the past 7.5 years, I knew what loneliness was, I knew how to deal with myself and my own thoughts, but I could rely on in-person relationships to deal with it. Now that everything closed down, I felt an overwhelming sense of loneliness, anxiety, and helplessness and had no one to share it with.

“Please keep in contact with me about how you’re doing,” which were the words the last meeting with my advisor ended with. She understood that COVID-19 would disrupt tremendously. A week into quarantining myself I had a major mental

breakdown. I couldn't stop crying about the lack of ability to focus on my work, the change in expectations of my final semester in grad school, and the uncertainty about the consequences and duration of the stay-at-home order. My family and friends were far away, and I did not want to make them more worried about my loneliness than they should be. They would already call me every time they heard the news about the progressively bad situation in the U.S. and adding to their worries for me would not do them any good. Now was the time to reach out to her. I sent my advisor a text message, a cry for help. Within minutes I received a call from my advisor and was provided a listening ear. I was reassured that my productivity can take a backseat and my own well-being was most important. This small gesture of receiving an immediate call made me feel like I wasn't alone, and people here cared about me.

On a day-to-day basis, we might not always realize how much educators mean to foreign students. However, as an international student who has no family around, the involvement of faculty in our lives can make just the difference between feeling as though you are all lost in a foreign country or whether you feel empowered, supported, and connected in this foreign place. Especially in a moment of emotional distress, this support can make the difference between barely surviving or thriving.

Though we cannot support people in the same way we are used to, there are a number of ways in which faculty can encourage international students, celebrate successes, and lift spirits when needed. As an international student, I found much support in the few daily text messages from my professors asking how my day was going, my advisor including me in a virtual Jackbox game night, and the chair's recorded

message encouraging all students to reach for help if needed. A little effort goes a long way toward making international students feel remembered. Though celebrations such as graduation or a thesis defense were unable to be enjoyed in a usual manner, Zoom lunch meetings, congratulatory videos, and small alternative acts of kindness helped in the ability to grieve the lack of celebration of these major milestones.

As internationals, however, we cannot expect that these gestures happen to us automatically. In a situation of global crisis, it's unreasonable to expect that our faculty should keep us in mind at all times. They too are going through great levels of distress worrying about family and friends, even if quarantined in the place they grew up in. It is therefore important to foster the relationships we have with faculty members too. By asking them about the health and safety of their family, initiating Zoom conversations, and asking nearby faculty members for social distancing walks (bonus points if they are international instructors too), they will feel appreciated for their effort too.

The support by faculty shown through small, simple messages of encouragement made me, as an international student, encouraged to keep up hope for better times to come. The promise of celebrating achievements later helped in dealing with the pain of missing out on the real celebration. Being alone in a foreign place isn't easy, being alone in a foreign place without the ability to connect with people at all seems almost impossible. Though it takes effort to remain on faculties horizon in time of this global pandemic, it can make the difference between barely holding on from loneliness or feeling as though you belong as an international student living in a foreign environment.

