Until the COVID-19 pandemic, elementary and secondary students met almost exclusively face-to-face with school counselors for support with academic challenges, social/emotional concerns, career choices, and college preparation. It was inside office spaces and in hallways that school counselors built relationships with students; learned about their needs, interests, skill sets, and homelife; and encouraged them to make choices that set them up for academic and personal success. It was there that counselors intervened when students were in crisis. Within these school buildings, counselors have acted as conduits of collaboration, bringing together teachers, caregivers, and school administrators to address student needs.

When COVID-19 hit, the country’s 285,000 counselors scrambled to replace up close and personal support with virtual meetings. Classroom-based instruction stopped, sending an estimated 55.1 million prekindergarten through 12th-grade students online. Appointments were carried out through videoconferencing, and crises were managed through virtual “calming rooms.” Self-care was encouraged through web-guided meditation and mindfulness activities with titles such as “Mindful Moments: 3-Minute Exercises.” Tips about how to manage homework and student anxiety were sent to parents in emails. Students who logged in for attendance and to access the day’s assignments were asked to rate their stress level, and when they rated it too high, counselors intervened. Counselors helped facilitate “grab and go” events where students and their families picked up free and reduced-priced breakfasts and lunches, care packages, and paper assignments.

While absenteeism was a problem before COVID-19, the pandemic has amplified its magnitude. In one national survey conducted by Educators for Excellence (E4E), teachers of primarily high-income students estimated that 16% were not signing in, attending virtual classes, or doing assignments. Even more concerning, teachers of primarily low-income students reported that 46% were not participating. Schools and school districts also reported that high percentages of students had not responded to text messages or phone calls. A school district in South Carolina reported being unable to contact 800 to 1,100 of the 22,000 students enrolled. A Texas school district reported between 7% and 10% of the district’s 67,259 students had been unaccounted for. To make matters worse, the reported rates were likely underestimated.
It was particularly challenging to connect with the almost 20% of students who had no access to computers or the Internet at home. Some schools secured grant money to distribute laptops and equip school buses with Wi-Fi hot spots. Schools also partnered with restaurants and businesses to use their Wi-Fi signals so students could do coursework outside or from parked cars. Despite these best efforts, schools lost contact with a significant percentage of students.

As school counselors, we became engulfed in efforts to connect with students and learn why they were not participating in distance learning. Our job was multifaceted and included empathetically encouraging students to establish a routine in the midst of the pandemic while also encouraging teachers to extend deadlines. Our goal was to make sure that all students were engaged at some level while being sensitive to the stresses they were under. Our task was complicated because many of these students knew they could “pass” their courses with minimal effort.

Some students who typically thrived academically and socially struggled to complete even minimal tasks. The uncertainty brought on by the COVID-19 crisis caused paralysis in some students who had previously flourished. The unfortunate reality is that these students lost the motivation and support structure necessary for them to engage.

Many school systems elected to move away from the traditional grading approach of teachers giving assignments, students completing the work, and teachers assigning grades based on performance. Instead, a pass-fail system became commonplace. School administrators chose to adopt this system because they were keenly aware of the many ways the pandemic was disrupting lives. For example, a student we will call Adrian picked up 40-plus work hours a week to supplement his family’s income. At the same time, he was also caring for a sick family member at home. Under these strains, he did not log in to access school assignments.

The switch to the pass-fail system, while sensitive to the needs of someone like Adrian, also incentivized other students to put off doing schoolwork: “Why should I put any effort into this?” Some teachers held similar sentiments: “Why put so much effort into planning and preparation when so many students are only doing enough to pass?”

Then there were students, such as one we will call Zoey, who experienced anxiety and depression. Although Zoey had coped with clinical depression for two years before COVID-19, she was skating through her senior year. Many of Zoey’s teachers were not even aware of her diagnosis. The isolating impact of the stay-at-home order coupled with the loss of senior year rites of passage sent Zoey in a downward spiral to the point where she was not doing any schoolwork. It was very difficult for her to get out of bed and function, especially early in the pandemic.

In response to these issues, we established a system that enabled teachers to alert counselors to the students who were not engaging. It was through this system that we learned about a student we will call Ava who was not doing her schoolwork. Before COVID-19, Ava was engaged in school,
thrive in the classroom, and avidly participated in after-school activities. Why was she not tuned in? When we finally connected with her, we learned that Ava was responsible for guiding a younger elementary-aged sibling. Ava made sure her sibling was present at the biweekly videoconferencing sessions with classmates and helped her access online resources. Because their mother worked longer hours, Ava took on the responsibilities of preparing meals and caring for a grandparent who also lived in the home. When she was able to finally focus on her own work, she felt defeated because she had missed so many assignments.

After conversations with Adrian’s, Zoey’s, and Ava’s teachers, we set up flexible schedules that allowed these students to manage their work more easily. All three students were able to be successful as evidenced by completing the necessary assignments. The stories of Adrian, Zoey, and Ava are concrete examples of how connecting with students changed the course of their quarter.

Still, school counselors often felt overwhelmed and exhausted working to track down students who had seemingly disappeared. And our relationships with students did not end when school concluded for summer break. The widely publicized murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Rayshard Brooks added another set of concerns and challenges to what students were facing. Protests and unrest brewed across the country as people seeking racial equity and justice converged. With the heightened awareness of and attention to the Black Lives Matter movement, the school opened supportive, safe spaces to convene an affinity group for Black-appearing students so they could share their mental and emotional states.

One student we supported during this crisis is a person we will call Lily, whose mother appears white and father appears Black. By the roll of the genetic dice, her brother appears Black while she appears white. During an affinity group meeting, Lily expressed a need to grieve and protest but felt that her white appearance stood in the way of her full participation. In the session, the group was sensitive to her situation and, in an effort to normalize her feelings, encouraged her to realize that using her voice to speak to white-identifying people is significant. In some situations, people may hear her differently than they would hear those with darker skin.

The stresses of the pandemic are extremely high and working to address them is draining. But in the end, the rewards of connecting with students outweigh the stresses. The thing that keeps school counselors and other educators motivated is our knowledge and belief that when an issue presents itself, such as disengagement, it is the tip of the iceberg. There is almost always a good reason for the behavior. It is our job to try to identify and remedy, if possible, the reason for disengagement just as we did for Adrian, Zoey, and Ava.

To be clear, we know that we are not able to effectively reach every student that disengages during the pandemic. However, we are driven by the idea that there is a reason for the disengagement, and as school counselors, we are compelled to follow the guidelines for serving our students. The
call to action is to keep searching for disconnected students and find out why they are not showing up.

If you are a college student reading this, you may be thinking this call applies only to school counselors and not to you. But the challenges of staying connected extend into the college arena, too. Just as counselors look out for their students, college students can take notice of peers who are not connecting and reach out with understanding. Remember that there is always a good reason for their behavior. Think of the things you would say to them face-to-face in class (“How’s the paper going?” and “Want to study together for the test?”), and ask these same questions virtually. Your gesture may be the one action that reengages that student. It may take some effort for you, but it is worth the benefits of staying connected when we have to be apart.

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