



The Connection Challenge: Fostering 1:1 Student/Faculty Connection

The Connection Challenge is an easy-to-implement strategy to increase faculty outreach to students and foster additional student/faculty connection in a very short period of time.

The Challenge: In my role as Coordinator of the Center for Teaching Innovation, I shared via email a takeaway from my reading of the *Connections are Everything* book as well as a personal story of connection with my own teacher. I made a personal commitment to reach out to five of my own students 1:1 in the coming week and challenged my faculty colleagues to do the same.

The email call:

Dear Faculty Colleagues:

I have a really quick offer and a mini challenge for you, but first, I need to tell you a little story. . . Last weekend I finished reading the book featured at our faculty retreat, *Connections are Everything: A College Student's Guide to Relationship Rich Education* authored by Peter Felten, Leo Lambert (our retreat speaker), Isis Artze-Vega, and Oscar Miranda Tapia. I was struck by many things, (more on that later) but one theme that kept returning over and over was the message that small moments of connection--brief moments in time between students and an important other--have the power to alter the course of students' lives. Reading these moments took me back to 1987, when a high school teacher whom I greatly respected told me after class, "You know, Mary, you would make a really great professor." Up until that moment, I had never considered being a professor. I was good at school and liked science, and so the path I envisioned to that point was to go to medical school. But that brief one-on-one moment after class with Mr. Ahlberg changed my life. His seeing that "professor potential" in me, and telling me so, changed how I viewed myself and my future.

This book, and this memory, inspire this email to you now. By the end of the day Friday, March 1, a little over a week away, I vow to reach out and connect with five of my own students whom I wouldn't have otherwise connected to 1:1 in the coming week. Whether it's a direct email, a personal video recording, a phone call, or a stolen moment before or after class or in the hallway, I hope you'll join me in making this commitment to connect with five of your own students.

You could reach out for all sorts of reasons--maybe you noticed them making a good point in class but not speaking up further? Maybe you've seen them make a great point in their writing and you want to tell them to feel empowered to share more during class discussions? Maybe you've noticed their attendance habits changing and you want to see if they are okay, or maybe you notice a pattern in their work that you think might benefit from a warm handoff to one or more of our awesome Oakton colleagues? The point is to connect, to let your students know you really SEE them as an individual and see something worthwhile in them. Can you find 25 minutes in the course of the next week to join me in this pursuit? Imagine our collective

impact if large numbers of us can say yes. How might things be different for a large cohort of our students one week from today?

If you can say yes, please complete this very brief form simply asking for your name and Oakton email. I'll reach out again to you next week with a reminder and then just a quick email on Friday March 1 to make sure you were able to complete the challenge. I'll share the names in Oakton Weekly on Wednesday, March 6 of all those who completed the challenge so that we may celebrate our collective impact. I hope you'll join me!

Let's do this!
Mary

Results and impact:

36 individual faculty members accepted the challenge via a Google form, and they received a reminder the following Monday. At the end of the challenge week I sent a follow-up survey asking the faculty to report: whether they completed the challenge, how many students they contacted, how they implemented the practice, and any student or personal reactions. 30 faculty members reported they were able to complete the challenge, with half of those (15 faculty members) exceeding the challenge requirements by connecting with **more** than five students. Over 255 students received 1:1 faculty outreach during the week that they otherwise would not have received.

Both students and faculty responded very positively to the challenge, with multiple requests to repeat it again. Based on this response, and the relative ease of implementation, we will make the challenge a regular event at Oakton, igniting the challenge each semester.

I think there were a number of keys to our success:

1. The "ask" is relatively easy and straightforward: in the coming week reach out to five students whom you wouldn't have otherwise.
2. The challenge is timebound with a little over a week to implement (though some said more time would be preferred.) In future iterations we will try for a full two weeks.
3. My own story of connection with a teacher and how it changed my path made the implications real.
4. Faculty were encouraged to reach out via whatever means they preferred.

Faculty connected to both current and former students--those who were doing well and those who showed signs of struggle. Whatever their strategy, both faculty members and students expressed strong positive reactions to the challenge.

Sample faculty responses:

"I think this is a great practice that is very doable even with the heavy workloads that we face. It's amazing how a simple outreach can be so meaningful."

"This was such a motivating challenge. It really pushed me to connect with students I might not have otherwise connected with."

"This was a great initiative and gave me a new motivation to really make an effort to connect with individual students in a different way. Usually just keeping your head above water is the biggest challenge as a professor at Oakton with all the demands we face, but this helped encourage me to dig deeper and make that extra effort to connect with students."

"I think this is a great idea and would like to see you prompt us to do it every semester. Little reminders help."

"Let's do this each semester!"

Sample student responses (as reported by instructor):

"All the reactions were super positive. I am hoping that these conversations make a difference and help these students increase their chances for success this semester. If nothing else, it reminded them that someone at Oakton really cares about them."

"They were grateful and somewhat amazed that a professor cared enough to reach out to them individually, encourage a meeting, and actually have the meeting. I had great conversations!"

"It was lovely! There were a few students who had previously confided some challenges they were having this semester and this was a good time to reconnect with them and see how they were doing through these challenges. One of the students that I reached out to previously told me they were having some food insecurity and housing issues that had escalated; this was a great opportunity to connect them to college and outside resources. I think the reach out email ended up being an open invitation to ensure them that they weren't 'bothering me.'"

As Coordinator for our Center for Teaching Innovation, it was fun and rewarding to see how individual instructors took the idea and ran with it to make it their own. A biology faculty member, Kristi Zenchak, sent [the following letter](#) to her students and shared it with her colleagues, inviting them to do the same. (Access a copy of her letter at: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ifiwhzNDjDOdRJ0z501zGh2kJQScYz4W3VSlEHRuN2k/copy>)

English professor Stacy Cameron wanted to be sure students had something tangible to take with them following the 1:1 session and so gave students small, encouraging cards like those available here: https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B0C55BWH7G/ref=ppx_yo_dt_b_search_asin_image?ie=UTF8&th=1 This idea inspired me, through our Center for Teaching Innovation, to purchase more of these cards and make them available throughout faculty offices on campus for others to use and share with their own students.

In short, it felt as though this easy intervention sent ripples of connection across our campus in a very intentional and positive way. I encourage you to give it a try and would love to hear how you implement it on your campus.

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