Correspondence Logistics Strategies

The Rising Scholars team recommends the following for colleges transitioning to packet delivery during COVID-19:

CORRESPONDENCE PACKET PREPARATION AND ORGANIZATION

1. Develop a campus workflow process. Be clear about what is the instructor's responsibility, what is program staff responsibility, what is the student's responsibility, and where you must rely on CDCR.

2. Determine who will copy and organize course materials, and where it will happen. If instructors will do their own copying and organizing, consider setting up a space on campus for them to do so. If program staff will do it, consider a share drive with folders organized by course and instructor so that instructors can upload their assignments and content for program staff. Clearly communicate deadlines to instructors well before anything is due. Find space on campus where you can spread out to organize and stuff packets. Some colleges have arrangements with the campus print shop or a contract with an outside vendor so that faculty can upload materials and program staff can pick up completed packets.

3. Use something to organize and contain the materials. This could be a 9x13 envelope, clear plastic sleeve, or similar. If you use envelopes, consider peeling the sticky part off the envelopes. They do not need to be sealed when they go back and forth and sealing/unsealing takes time and can be frustrating.

4. Each packet must have its own cover sheet. Work with your PSCE to ensure that the information they need to distribute the packet is on the cover sheet. Information you and the PSCE will need for packet tracking and distribution will likely include student name; institution, yard, housing unit; CDCR number; student ID; course name and ID number; and instructor.

5. Everything that goes back and forth should be in a labeled envelope or packet. Do not send loose pieces of paper to your PSCE.

6. Date everything, both inside and outside the packet. Date tracking should include the date on which the student hands off or receives the materials, the date on which the college receives or delivers the materials, and the date on which the instructor receives and returns the materials.

7. Secure the cover sheet to the packet so that it remains on the packet when the packet travels back and forth and while it is with the student. Ask your PSCE or security staff what they will allow; many will not allow staples but can suggest other options.

8. Create a system to quickly determine which packet goes with which course so that you can easily return the appropriate packets to the appropriate instructor. This might be a series of colored dots, colored paper, a symbol, or an entry on the cover sheet.

9. Most colleges organize each packet by student and by course, so that a student in multiple courses will be receiving multiple packets. Some colleges opt to use one packet per student, with each packet containing multiple courses. This may require additional sorting when the packets return to campus so that the materials can be distributed to the correct instructor. Some colleges use packets for each course, plus an individualized student packet with enrollment information, question forms, and other information.
10. Number each packet in the series so the student knows how many packets to expect (1 of 5, 2 of 5, etc.)
11. Consider including 3 – 5 weeks of work at a time, if instructors are able.
12. Ensure that the packet clearly delineates what needs to be returned and when.
13. From the very beginning, be extremely clear about any materials that the student must return at the end of the term. Consider utilizing materials that students can keep.
14. Use the same envelopes each time, and/or provide the students with pre-marked and organized envelopes for them to use to return materials and questions.
15. Build extra weeks into your schedule to accommodate delays or other obstacles. Consider planning to complete a 15-week course in 13 weeks, for example, giving yourself two weeks to fix problems or respond to delays.

PARTNERSHIP WITH CDCR
1. Limit your reliance on the PSCE. In your campus workflow process, be clear about what you are expecting from the PSCE.
2. Share these expectations with your PSCE and confirm that they are able to do what you need them to do.
3. Be organized about communicating with your PSCE; limit the number of people sending emails to the PSCE and avoid sending too many emails and requests. Consider a regular scheduled check-in rather than streams of emails back and forth. During the check-in ask what is working, if any processes are becoming too time consuming, and if they are receiving feedback or grievances from students.
4. Begin coordinating with the PSCE for enrollment and other onboarding processes much earlier than you otherwise would have.
5. Ensure that the PSCE has updated contact information for appropriate college staff, and that the PSCE has current information about the college schedule, vacations and closures, and COVID-19 reopening status.

STUDENT COMMUNICATION

1. Create a clear process for receiving and responding to student questions.

2. Students generally have three types of questions: (a) questions to the instructor about course content, (b) questions to program staff about logistics such as enrollment, transcripts, financial aid, and prior semesters, (c) student requests for counseling or advising. Develop a workflow process for each type of question, including timelines and who is responsible.

3. Ask your CDCR institution if you can conduct counseling appointments or other communication by video. If not, be prepared to manage all questions through written forms. You may wish to combine certain questions into one form or keep them separate.

4. Be clear with students about what types of questions require which form, to whom the questions should be directed, and what kind of turnaround the student should expect. Include examples.

5. Work with your faculty to determine who is responsible for answering questions about grades and missing work. Ensure that students know to whom they should address these questions.

6. Let students know that questions posed to the PSCE may not reach the college, and that the college cannot always confirm the accuracy of the PSCE's responses.

7. Generally, forms should include space for student name, course and instructor, student location, student question, response, the date the student asks the question, the date the question is received, and the date the response is returned to the institution.

8. Create space for multiple questions and responses on one form, and use both sides of the paper so students can see prior questions and answers.

9. Make sure that all forms are included in packets or otherwise labeled and organized so that the PSCE can easily distribute and collect them.

10. Instructions to students should be clear and concise. Use bullet points or a numbered checklist rather than a narrative paragraph. Repeat any information that is critical. Have someone unrelated to the program read the instructions and see where they get confused.

11. Send regular, dated communications on college letterhead to the prison and/or to students with the same college updates and newsletters that are provided to students in the community.

12. Send every student something with every packet exchange, even if there is no new course content. Consider a letter that goes to the student with an update about what's happening at the college and a note saying that they have nothing course-related in their packet this time. If students see others receiving work and they do not receive any, they may think they are missing something and they will reach out

to you. Using the course roster to ensure that each student receives something every time there is a packet exchange will avoid confusion and save you time later.

13. Let students know the campus schedule and if there will be no exchanges in a particular week. This will also prevent students from sending questions and expecting responses when the campus is on break.

14. Identify students nearing graduation and communicate with them about when and why they will need official transcripts. Let them know how to obtain an official transcript, with options to do so while inside and if they are home. Let them know that the process can be slow and challenging. Include an unofficial transcript and other graduation information in the packets for those who are nearing degree completion.

FACULTY

1. Consider setting a weekly or monthly optional phone meeting for instructors to connect and discuss logistical or other issues. If possible, find a faculty member to lead the meeting.

2. Work with the Academic Senate and faculty to encourage instructors to utilize the Vision Resource Center, join ASCCC and other listservs and Facebook groups, work with faculty mentors and others, and otherwise be proactive about finding creative ways in which to engage students and assess learning outcomes by correspondence. They might consider shared folders or resources that can be accessed by all instructors including adjuncts, and/or an optional discipline-specific buddy system to partner adjuncts or new faculty with more experienced faculty.

3. Notify instructors that, if possible, they should prepare multiple weeks of material in advance to accommodate delays and changes on campus or in the prison or jail.

4. Work with the Academic Senate and faculty to establish guidelines for instructor/student contact, including a guideline about how quickly instructors should respond to student questions. Distance education guidelines recommend frequent weekly contact with substantive feedback. Although this may not be feasible during COVID, this goal can be taken into consideration.

5. Quality and substance of interaction between incarcerated students and instructors using packet-delivery modality should be equivalent to interaction between non-incarcerated students and instructors, as much as feasible. Convey the guidelines to your CIO for cataloging for Accreditation Audit purposes.

6. Let instructors know that every assignment should have extremely clear directions. Do not combine multiple instructions in one sentence. Instructions should be conveyed step by step, not in long narrative paragraphs, and, if possible, the student should have a checklist.

7. Assignment instructions should be extremely clear about what needs to be returned and when, what needs to be included, what each assignment entails, and instructor expectations. Use a checklist.

8. Work with faculty to determine who will catalog missing work and who has the responsibility to notify the student and follow up.

9. Ensure faculty understand that work coming back from a yard may be delayed by a week or two, depending on the COVID-19 status of the yard and the institution's staffing structure. Faculty should be ready to be flexible with dates of returned work, as often the issues delaying the student work are out of the student's control.

EXAMS AND GRADING

1. Encourage instructors to utilize assessments that do not rely on CDCR staff to proctor. This could be a final paper, students writing their own exams, projects, peer reviews, or other non-proctored final assessments that are based on essential Student Learning Outcomes.

2. Ask instructors if they will require a proctored exam before the semester begins. As soon as possible, tell your PSCE how many students will need a proctored exam and ask the PSCE to confirm that they can do so. If they cannot, you may need to notify instructors that the course must be canceled unless they have an alternate assessment.

3. Establish a means by which to communicate final grades to students as soon as possible after grades are final.

4. Avoid issuing "I" and "IP" grades. If you do use those grades, be prepared to put in time and effort to track down missing students and missing work.

5. Student questions or concerns about missing grades or missing work should be communicated to the college, not to the PSCE. Consider a "grade grievance" form that goes in every packet so the student knows exactly what document to use and to whom it should go when he/she has a question or believes there has been a discrepancy.

6. If work or exams are missing at the end of the semester, considering sending the student a notice, asking them to explain the situation, and asking if they would like an EW, if they will return the work by a certain date, or if they will accept an Incomplete. Be sure to explain what will happen if they take an "I" and they cannot be reached or the work is not received.

7. At the end of the semester, ask your college IR or equivalent department to generate a report listing every incarcerated student who received an "I," "IP," or other concerning grade. Track the students down to ensure that they do not receive Fs. Give them what they need in order to complete the course. Continue regularly generating the reports until all students have been fully served.