



Reaching Formerly Incarcerated Students During Covid-19

Strategies provided by students, faculty and staff in the Rising Scholars network

STRENGTHENING CONNECTIONS ON A VIRTUAL CAMPUS

1. **Consider safe socially distanced contact.** Rising Scholars students are missing the personal connections and support from campus programs. For many, their college community was a key source of social interaction and structure, and without personal interaction they are struggling to continue with their education. If your college is not allowing in-person events or you are not comfortable, consider asking your students if this is something they would be interested in doing on their own, off campus. Provide masks and information about appropriate social distancing and staying outdoors.
2. **Communicate consistently and regularly with students, and offer multiple ways for students to reach you including email, phone, and text.** Many Rising Scholars students are balancing family, jobs, and food and housing insecurity, leaving less time for education. Program staff and students should work together to watch for students who drop out of contact. Use multiple means to reach students who are not responding and recognize that it may take multiple tries before you get a return call, text, or email. Many Rising Scholars programs use Google Voice.
3. **Continue program zoom meetings at a set time.** Work with your current students to best understand what kind of structure and meeting schedule will support them throughout the semester, then stay with the schedule all semester so that students can plan ahead. An open unstructured meeting may not work for your students. Consider asking guest speakers to join your meetings, sharing opportunities for students from local community-based organizations, hosting events such as expungement or Prop 47 clinics, or having a Q & A session with a campus Dean or other department staff.
4. **Foster student-to-student connections.** In addition to regular zoom or other check-ins with program staff, work with students in your program to find ways for students to connect directly with each other. Use a student-centered process to identify options. These might include a socially distanced outdoor gathering (if safe), a zoom event just for students, or class- or department-specific study groups that meet regularly throughout the semester. Canvas may provide a means by which to create a student discussion board just for Rising Scholars students.
5. **Involve and compensate current students.** If you have work-study or other paid peer student support, have those students reach out to existing and potential students for check-ins and fall enrollment support. Consider hiring established

students to be mentors for a “caseload” of newer students. Consider a student-run virtual “front desk” to be the first point of contact for new students.

6. **Provide additional, easily accessible support during enrollment and in the first few weeks of the semester.** Rising Scholars students can face additional challenges with online enrollment that may require real-time support. Have a designated phone number and set days and time for phone support for students and potential students during the enrollment period. Create a one-stop shop pdf that clearly walks students through every step of the enrollment process, with screen shots, pictures and clear language about what to do at each step. Have the pdf available both physically and as a one-click handout online. Do not require students and potential students to go through multiple clicks in order to reach it.
7. **Provide mental health support.** Many Rising Scholars programs have a mental health partner to support their students. These services can be provided in a remote format during COVID, either individually or through program-sponsored virtual support groups. You can be a placement for an MSW graduate student, partner with a community organization that provides free mental health services or utilize campus mental health staff. See if one of your campus mental health professionals can designate a certain number of hours each month for confidential Rising Scholars student support. Encourage your college to apply for the Community Colleges Mental Health Services Grant Program or other grants.
8. **Provide academic support.** Tutoring can be critical, even if it must be remote. If your college has academic coaches, match your Rising Scholars students with the coaches. Consider asking an academic coach or counselor to be available at a set date and time all semester for your Rising Scholars students. If you have funding, hire a Rising Scholars tutor who is themselves formerly incarcerated. If students are interested, help them organize student-led zoom study groups for specific courses, departments, or majors. Encourage students to meet with their class instructor and attend office hours (if needed); walk them through the process and make the connection directly, if needed.
9. **Connect your students with campus and community resources;** Ensure that your students are directly connected to and receive services such as food pantry, laptop distribution, career center, and housing support. Do not rely on students to access these services based on a referral; take the time to connect your students directly.
10. **Create safe spaces for Rising Scholars students.** In non-COVID times, students highly value a physical safe space on campus. During COVID, that safe space can be represented by safe campus contacts. Consider creative ways for your Rising Scholars students to know where they are welcome. Perhaps faculty and staff who go through training can use consistent branding or a symbol. Faculty can identify on their syllabi that they are a safe space for formerly incarcerated students.

11. **Encourage Rising Scholars students to participate in PTK or other honors organizations.** Membership in Phi Theta Kappa or other honors organizations dispels stereotypes and offers your students an opportunity to be paired with a peer mentor. Find funding to cover your students' fees. Encourage your PTK students to reach out to others about PTK; this can be particularly effective if your students are in group living situations.

REACHING NEW STUDENTS

1. **Feature your program and your current students in established campus channels.** If your college is doing virtual tabling or having students distribute information about their clubs or activities, include your Rising Scholars program and students. Include your Rising Scholars program in campus lists of clubs, groups, or support programs. Include a point of contact with an email and a phone number for texting. If your college has a newsletter or other communications platform, submit a success from one of your Rising Scholars students if the student gives permission. If your college has a centralized resource center, ask them to distribute or publicize your program name, email address and phone number so that students utilizing these services are aware of your program.
2. **Reach out to community programs.** Many students and potential students are accessing community food, housing, technology and reentry services. Ask these organizations to publicize or distribute contact information for your Rising Scholars program on their website or in their outreach.
3. **Work with faculty to make sure students know about your program.** Many faculty set aside a few minutes of class time for announcements at the beginning of the semester, even when classes are online. Ask faculty members if you or someone in your program can make an announcement during their online class time. Consider asking faculty members to include information about your Rising Scholars program on their syllabus.
4. **If safe and permissible, schedule a socially distanced face-to-face meeting with new or prospective students.** Meeting in person can be what connects new students to your college and your program. If an outdoor socially distanced meeting is permissible and safe, it can be the most effective way to link new students to your program even if you do it only once. Let the students know that you will bring masks for them.
5. **Use Parole and Probation to reach new students.** Ask if you can host a PACT meeting by zoom. Reach out to your local DRC (Day Reporting Center) and see if you can partner to disseminate information about your program and fall 2020 enrollment. Call your local Probation Department and find out if they have a point person for community programs or education referrals.