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Colleges and universities encourage faculty members to hold in-person office hours in an effort to forge working relationships with students and to be accessible for questions. If we are being honest, it has also served in the past as a way to ensure that faculty continue to come to campuses at times other than when teaching.

Required office hours vary per department, whether they are held virtually, in person or a hybrid of each format. I have taught at two undergraduate institutions, and in my experience, 10 weekly hours was the norm. But what do office hours look like now, given so many of us recently had to shift to remote learning -- and may still continue to have to do so in the fall -- in response to a national and global pandemic? And what will the office hour requirement look like once COVID-19 is no longer infiltrating our institutions?

After my university converted to remote learning this past spring, I sent an online survey to my students. I wanted to know their concerns and how they preferred to receive instruction through remote learning. I also wanted to know how they wanted me to make their preferred office hours available to them. They had a choice between set virtual office hours on a specific day through platforms like Zoom or WebEx or through online appointments scheduled via email.

I thought the first suggestion would be the desired response, as it was a specific opportunity for students to meet and I would be available without them having to schedule a specific time. Based on the survey results, my initial thought was wrong. Overwhelmingly, students wanted to reach out to me at their convenience via email and to schedule a time to meet online if necessary.

That made me wonder, are traditional office hours becoming extinct? Should they be?

I have found that, in general, my students underutilize scheduled, traditional office hours. More often than not, I have sat alone in my office during those times, working on curriculum or writing assignments. Some faculty colleagues require students to come to office hours so many times a semester for credit. I have not implemented such a policy, as I want students to come to office hours on their own volition and not out of a sense of credit fulfillment.

But that policy could work well via virtual outreach. As we worked from home during the spring semester, office hours relied on virtual connections. In fact, they have been moving that way, it seems to me, since before the pandemic. Although students do not have access to my cellphone number except in limited circumstances, they have my email address. Over the past few years, I have responded to students at all hours of the day and night. It works for me, and it works for them.

I know some professors who do not give this much access to students for response and prefer to have outlined times for email correspondence. Each faculty member should do what they feel is best for their students and in compliance with their departmental mandates. I prefer to be accessible via email with the expectation I have up to 48 hours to respond, if necessary.

Before the pandemic, I was at my office every day and sometimes on weekends. I found it easier to work from the office than from home. I encouraged students to come in with questions or concerns if my office door was open. If students have that type of access, should I still have set office hours? If my level of access is both virtual and, at some point again, in the office on a daily basis, what is the point of set office hours?

The ways and extent to which students expect faculty members to be accessible has been undergoing a recognizable shift in recent years. Faculty members can be easily available now in the virtual landscape. Email is a convenient format for both students and faculty members and, used wisely, it can be an effective way to foster relationships. In some instances, faculty members may even communicate with students via text messaging. For

example, I took students on an overnight trip to observe an appellate court and provided my cellphone number for any assistance they might need throughout the trip. Whatever ways students are allowed to contact faculty should be outlined in a clear and understandable fashion.

Colleges and departments should determine if a traditional office hour requirement is necessary in 2020 and beyond. No one has any real sense of when “normalcy” will return to colleges and universities. I anticipate institutions will continue to use some remote learning within course programs that had been traditionally using face-to-face formats. I also predict that departments will, or should, modify office hour requirements or at least discuss and reconsider the practice.

The pandemic has clearly demonstrated that using virtual conduits for office hours can often be as effective as in-person meetings. In some instances, however, that may not be ideal. Students often want to meet prior to or following a course about the course content. They may also sometimes need a shoulder to cry on. These are examples of spontaneous meetings with students, perhaps inside or outside scheduled office hours, where the virtual format would not provide the same type of assistance the student really seeks: face-to-face help and emotional support.

As campuses look to reopen, we should use the time to evaluate practices and procedures that are no longer safe or effective in our changed institutions. If we keep in mind the purpose of office hours -- to build trust with students and to engage thoughtfully in the course material -- we may be able to achieve that aim primarily through the use of online platforms. Whether or not that is the case, we should have conversations at each of our institutions to discuss the best way to interact effectively with our specific students outside the classroom, whether it occurs via traditional office hours, virtual office hours or a hybrid of both formats.

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