

# Hello? Use phone calls to connect with students

In addition to a well-designed, interactive course, for students to engage in their learning, they need to connect with the material, their peers, and with you (1). For many instructors, especially those teaching online, one-to-one connections with students develop through feedback — students submit their work, you review it, give advice and encouragement and [hope they read it](#). In most classes, the only other opportunity for one-to-one connection with an instructor is our often underutilized office hours. And yet, student engagement and success rises when they have social interaction: “When faculty stay in touch with students through formal and informal communication, students report that it helps them get through the rough times and keep on working” (2). Calling your students on the telephone once or twice a semester is a surprisingly efficient and effective way of making this happen.



We often reserve phone calls for interventions with students, those who aren't doing well or have disengaged completely; the phone is a last resort support mechanism. Alternatively, we regularly check in face-to-face or over the phone with grad students we're mentoring, those with whom we work most closely. For all the students in between, a phone call need be no different — an opportunity to ask how the student is doing, where they are challenged, how you can help, an opportunity to share your passion and mentor.

For starters, send an invitation to students. Tell them you'd like to talk to them on the phone and let them know why — to get their perspective on the course, to answer any questions, to get to know each other, etc. If scheduling 20 or more phone calls sounds like a logistical nightmare, use [Google Calendar's appointment slots](#) and have students sign up. Make sure that you have some evening and weekend

times available for those who are busy during the workday. [Check out this article for a good example of the emailed invitation.](#)

Prepare a couple of questions in advance, but let the conversation lead where it will. It's this type of meandering, unbounded interaction that online students, in particular, may be missing by not having synchronous class time with you and with peers. Two instructors who began using this strategy years ago report that: “Although we do receive questions about the assignments, the majority of the conversation focuses on the big-picture goals of the course and how those goals fit into the student's personal and professional agendas — a very individualized discussion. In addition, we talk about work and families” (2).

While it may be tempting to avoid the scheduling and social anxiety of a phone call by having email exchanges with students, email is both less personal and less efficient than the phone. UAF eLearning academic advisor Brighton Brooks, who strategically uses the phone to build rapport with students, reports that “I have found that I can get at the heart of a matter more quickly and offer more personalized assistance with a phone call. Email is almost synonymous with ‘junk’ now so to be more salient in a distance student's life I have to find other ways of connecting with them.”

Additionally, the phone is often the lowest common denominator when it comes to technology. There is no logging in, no downloads or set-up to get started. Students merely need to accept a call to connect directly with you.

## REFERENCES

1. Bryant, J. & Bates, A. (2015). [Creating a Constructivist Online Instructional Environment](#). *TechTrends*, 59(2), 17-22.
2. Lowenthal & Dunlap, J. & Lowenthal, P. (2010). [Defeating the Kobayashi Maru: Supporting Student Retention by Balancing the Needs of the Many and the One](#). *Educause Review*.

## RESOURCE

Ohrablo, S. (2016). [Advising Online Students: Replicating Best Practices of Face-to-Face Advising](#). Retrieved from the NACADA Clearinghouse of Academic Advising Resources Web site.