



UNC

Center for Urban Education

Leadership Council Chronicle

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Professor David Craven with recent CUE graduate, Grace Lee

Know Someone Who Would Be a Great Teacher?

The UNC Center for Urban Education (CUE) is enrolling new students for the fall 2021 semester through July.

Contact Dr. Rosanne Fulton, Director, at 303-637-4334 or [email](#) her for more information.

Watch our [short video](#) to learn more about the CUE teacher-preparation program.

[Watch Video](#)

Use These Techniques to Keep Online Students Engaged

David Craven has worked as a mentor or professor at the [UNC Center for Urban Education](#) for seven years. Before the pandemic, Craven taught classes solely in a face-to-face format.

We asked him how he created a caring environment for students after classes went online in 2020. Caretaking is one of the tenets the Center holds most dear, and our professors did their best to continue to demonstrate it despite the lack of face-to-face contact.

"I had to think hard about it," Craven said. "In my experience, it's more difficult to build and maintain relationships with students online. So I focused on finding ways to help students make deeper connections with the content, their peers, and me."

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It came down to four ideas:

1. Lay out the course ahead of time.
2. Help students build relationships with each other.
3. Be flexible with due dates.
4. Hold students accountable.



David Craven with his wife, Tammy, and their six grandchildren

Plan Ahead

"You have to be prepared and do everything on the front end," said Craven. He laid out the whole course in Canvas weeks before the first class started. Craven recommends anticipating what kinds of issues and questions students will have.

He also said it's imperative to make the class as streamlined and easy to follow as possible. "I didn't want them to wonder what they were supposed to be doing at any point," said Craven. "I knew they must have a road map."

Build Relationships

Craven teaches educational technology, so the question he asked himself was, "How can I get students in a virtual environment to connect with each other?" Craven strongly believes the more prevalent technology becomes, the more important it is for students to make a human connection and build relationships.

With that goal in mind, he assigned an autobiography. "The students used 21st century tools to present parts of their lives we didn't know about," said Craven. For example, they learned that one student had a military parent and had lived in 15 cities, and another student was granted DACA status.

Craven observed that students were enthralled while listening to the autobiography presentations. "They asked lots of questions and responded to each other," he said. The outcome was that students felt closer to each other and stayed more engaged in class.



David Craven with his wife, Tammy, on a recent hike

Be Flexible

If you want to create a caring community for students, Craven advises flexibility. Tell students, "I know you're busy and life gets in the way. Due dates are flexible if you let me know ahead of time." Let them propose their own plan for a new due date. "Students appreciate the respect you're giving them and respond accordingly," said Craven.

He also advises checking in and asking students how it's going. "Once I had a sense that the life event had passed and the stress level had improved, I'd say 'Let's have a conversation about continuing the classwork and come up with a plan together.'"

Require Accountability

Lastly, Craven says he always held students accountable. That may seem to contradict the concept of "flexibility," but it doesn't. For Craven, it meant texting students to remind them they were behind and asking them "What's your plan?"

"It's more about the learning than the timing."

He had to up his game considerably when it came to keeping students accountable because he couldn't have the conversation face to face in the classroom. Craven added, "It's more about the learning than the timing."

The Takeaway

Craven's takeaway from the experience is that all teachers need to consider how to incorporate 21st-century tools into the classroom. But he cautions teachers to consider whether that technology helps them streamline their delivery and student interactions.

Craven said a good mantra to live by is, "Just because you can doesn't mean you should use technology." The bottom line? Use technology only in ways that deeply connect learners with the content and each other.

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