

Replying in the Dark:

Teaching, Emails, and the Invisible Burden of Carrying Student Distress

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Preface: Why I Needed This Book (Even Before I Wrote It)

Often I'm still awake at 1:00 a.m., staring at a blinking cursor in my inbox, trying to find the right words for a student who tells me their world is unraveling. I've rewritten responses six times before hitting send—too cold, too soft, too clinical, too emotional, too hopeful, too uncertain. I worry about sounding dismissive. I worry about implying promises I can't keep. I worry about becoming the last voice a student hears before they decide whether to keep going or let go. I worry about saying the wrong thing. I worry about saying too much. I worry.

After more than twenty years of teaching math at a large public university, I have taught well over 20,000 students. My classes are big: 300 to 450 students at a time, full of future engineers, nurses, scientists, computer scientists, first-generation students, exhausted commuters, quietly panicking high-achievers, and those who barely made it in but are fighting to stay. I've been fortunate to receive awards for teaching—some of the university's highest honors—and people often assume that means I've "figured out" how to teach well. And in many ways, I have learned how to guide students through calculus, build structured study systems, design fair exams, and encourage academic growth.

But nothing in my training—formal or informal—prepared me for teaching through email at midnight.

I have answered messages from students after a sibling died the night before the exam. After a panic attack left them shaking in the library bathroom. After failing an exam for the first time in their entire life and believing it meant they were no longer worthy of their major—or their dreams. After losing housing, after working 30 hours a week while attending full-time, after giving up hope, after losing friends to violence, after fasting, after not sleeping for days. And sometimes, after simply trying very hard and still falling short, with a quiet note that reads, "I feel like I'm drowning."

We are told to maintain boundaries. We are told we are not counselors. We are told to refer them to advising or mental health services. And yes—I do refer students when necessary. I care deeply about keeping students safe. But that's not the end of the email. The student still wrote to me. They wrote to their instructor because academic struggle is often entangled with emotional struggle, and sometimes the distress is not just about life—it's about this class, this exam, this feeling of slipping behind in a system they're desperate to succeed in. When they ask, "Can I still pass? What should I do? Am I

already too far gone?” —that is not a question an advisor or therapist can always answer. That is a question about my course. And in that moment, I am not just a referral source. I am the person who holds the gradebook they fear is about to define their future.

So I reply. And I carry the weight of that reply with me long after I’ve shut my laptop. Many nights, I don’t sleep well, wondering if I said enough, too much, or too little. I replay the voices in my head: the student’s voice, the anxious voice in me that doesn’t want to fail them, and the critical voice from colleagues who say, “Why do you spend so much time writing long responses? Just tell them to go to advising. That’s not your job.”

Maybe it isn’t. But I know what happens when an email goes unanswered or is returned with a sentence that reads like a dead end. And I know that I am, in fact, an expert—on how to recover from an exam in my course, on how to study more effectively, on how to build a path forward. I might not be their therapist, but I am their teacher. And sometimes responding wisely is part of teaching.

Over the years, I have developed patterns. I have built structures in my replies—balancing empathy with clarity, compassion with policy, hope with honesty. I have learned to show students a door without walking them through it. I have found ways to encourage without rescuing, to comfort without enabling, to redirect without abandoning. But it took years of trial, error, guilt, fear, learning, and refining.

This book exists because I believe no instructor should feel alone replying in the dark at 1:00 a.m., afraid of getting it wrong.

This is not a mental health manual. It is not legal advice. It is not a script to replace counseling or reporting protocols. But it is a companion for educators who know that emails from struggling students will keep coming—and that hitting “reply” will always matter.

I offer this collection as a starting point: a way to name the emotional categories of student distress, provide language frameworks rooted in humanity and fairness, and invite others to adapt, expand, or challenge these replies. Because this is not just my experience. I believe many of us carry these stories silently.

This is my way of turning the light on.