

COVID Case Management Team

Fort Lewis College

Durango, CO



Fort Lewis College has an incredibly unique and beautifully diverse student population. With this comes very specific needs that especially needed to be addressed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal of this practice was to create a safe and knowledgeable team of people to help support students affected by the pandemic with housing resources, navigating financial resources, food, aiding in access to medication, internet access, and connecting them with physical and mental healthcare.

As a Native American serving institution, Fort Lewis staff also helped students navigate the needs of their communities and what resources were available. With the severe COVID-19 hit to the Navajo Nation and the many reservations the students are from, staff wanted to make sure they were able to support them in a myriad of ways.

While many individuals played a big role in the success of this program, it was the brainchild of the Fort Lewis College student affairs director, Jeff Dupont. He sought out expertise in case management and tasked Kate Suazo with being the team lead. Suazo's team is made up of people from all over the college who worked collaboratively to make sure each student received as much support as they needed. The team also collaborated with several community partners in Durango, including the local food bank and housing resources.

The team created a form that was sent to students, staff, and faculty where the individual could provide a snapshot of their needs and concerns. The form was accessible everyone, even if they did not have internet access. Once the form came in, the team analyzed the information and assigned the request to one of seven case managers. That individual would introduce themselves to the student and help them determine the way in which the team could provide support.

Along the way, the first priority was creating a relationship with the student, allowing them to feel safe and seen. The Fort Lewis campus is incredibly student-centered. Suazo explains: "We allowed students to tell us what they needed, while also giving them the space to let us take the lead if they were overwhelmed. We met students where they were. This included mode of communication, assistance with different needs, and just being available for a check-in. We began to notice that word of mouth was our best way of getting students interested in requesting support from this program. What made this successful was relationship-building. Reminding students that they had a network of support on campus and in the community, we were there to just walk the journey with them."

This program needs to have a balance between relationship-building and resource-providing. If students are just given a list of resources, they might feel overwhelmed and not follow through. By having a solid relationship and creating trust, the student can navigate those resources based on their needs. Students are incredibly resilient; sometimes they just need a mentor to walk alongside them. One case manager shared: "My student said that she was two hours away from dropping out when she received my email, she felt it was a sign that she had help and wasn't alone."