



Listening Sessions for Return to Campus and Associated Stressors

Over the past year, we have grown to appreciate the importance of being able to share concerns and ideas with fellow members of the Carolina community. Whether it's dealing with general stress, the challenges and threats of COVID, or the deeply disturbing acts and manifestations of racism and violence, it helps to draw together and share thoughts and feelings. This guide is intended to help individuals and groups hold listening sessions, whether called by organizational leaders, or springing up organically among folks who work together.

If "Listening Session" is a term that carries negative connotations within your group, other possible names for these meetings might be: Sharing Conversations, Convening Conversations, Sharing Forums, Sharing Meetings.

There are many right ways to go about holding listening sessions!! The information here is intended to be specific enough to be helpful. Apart from respecting all who participate and their feelings, however, there is no "must do this" or "you can't do that." In particular, some listening sessions may be intended to accomplish no more than allowing people sharing their experiences, which may be very helpful. Some may go on to generate recommendations or action items.

If you have questions or other thoughts to share, please let us know at: UNCPCore@unc.edu

Background Stressors

Broad stressors have impacted nearly everyone in different ways.

1. Intrinsic stress of a mass return to campus, with no "one size fits all" plan, amidst continuing stressors associated with COVID-19 as well as an international reckoning with racism and political issues (e.g., police brutality, Nikole Hannah-Jones's tenure status)
2. Delta variant exacerbating all the pre-existing stressors by introducing widespread uncertainty
3. Need to rebuild trust among colleagues

Rationale

Listening sessions can help address some of these stressors by providing opportunities to connect peers with similar experiences.

1. Those facing common stressors gain strength by sharing, recognizing "I am not alone" and receiving support from their peers
2. In the absence of opportunities to connect and share such stressors, the feeling of isolation can be greatly distressing and even traumatizing for individuals, including in the workplace
3. Often, sharing among those facing similar stressors leads to identification of ways to help each other reduce or mitigate those stressors and sometimes ways that organizations can make changes for the better



Key Factors for Success

1. *Highly credible endorsement from organizational leaders* to ensure that listening sessions are not just for show. Endorsement can include, but is not limited to:
 - a. Logistics and communications support
 - b. Allowance of work time to plan and/or attend the listening session
 - c. Communication to address follow-up actions after the session
2. *Establish the purpose* for the listening session including how and to whom opinions shared and suggested follow-up actions will be communicated (e.g. purpose is to listen to your concerns and connect with one another, purpose is to propose actions to address concerns)
3. *Open, non-defensive stance and readiness to address shared concerns* among organizational leaders
4. *Empowerment from organizational leaders of supervisors, managers, etc. to use flexibility and discretion to tailor:*
 - a. Implementation of the sessions, as below, to their settings
 - b. Post-session action plans to their settings and missions

Implementation

Implementation of a listening session can and should be tailored for your group's context. Here are some broad steps and options that you can modify according to your context and purpose.

1. Announce listening session(s) as opportunity to share experiences, including concerns and challenges, in dealing with return to campus and related issues. Consider logistically:
 - a. Session may be called by anyone
 - b. Choice of session leaders and attendance of those in leadership positions needs to be carefully considered to assure Implementation, including [facilitation skills](#)
 - c. Schedule 1-2 hours for the session or have multiple sessions at different times
 - d. Promote inclusion by making sure the session is accessible, including allowing asynchronous, anonymous, virtual, and in-person participation opportunities (e.g. via anonymous Zoom Q&A, PollEverywhere, pre-session surveys, et al.)
 - e. Don't be afraid of making some mistakes at the start
2. Stress open, nonjudgmental atmosphere and guidelines for the session, including group ground agreements¹, such as:
 - a. Assume sincere intent
 - b. Listen respectfully, let speakers finish their comments before adding
 - c. Focus on common interest and purpose, not positions or roles
 - d. Don't freeze someone in time, allow them grace to grow

¹ Participants should be given some opportunity to add to/ask questions about these group agreements. The act of having everyone agree generates accountability within the group for maintaining the safety of the space.



- e. Provide suggestions for action, when possible
 - f. Talk about *what* was discussed during the session externally, not who discussed it (alternatively, “do not disclose what was discussed in the session”)
3. Provide a modestly structured agenda, e.g.,
- a. Why we are here (revisit throughout the meeting as needed)
 - i. Acknowledge situational context and stressors
 - ii. State purpose of the session; ex. listen, generate suggested actions
 - b. Introductions
 - c. Open with a discussion of challenges, concerns, threats, ways participants have found helpful to cope; helpful prompts include:
 - i. “I know lots of us are deeply troubled....”
 - ii. “What are you all feeling?”
 - iii. “What concerns do you have, not only for yourselves but perhaps for your colleagues or families?”
 - iv. However, we don’t want to communicate that all we have to share are our feelings – we can share solutions as well
 - d. Discuss ways we can be helpful to each other; helpful prompts include:
 - i. “What are some ways that you’ve coped?”
 - ii. “Where are you finding strength, hope, or inspiration?”
 - e. Discuss actions we would like to see from group leadership, if applicable
 - f. Discuss how progress on actions might be defined, if applicable
 - g. Share additional resources should they be needed (applicable to students, staff, and faculty):
 - i. [Mental Health Resources](#) collected by CAPS
 - ii. University Ombuds Office (ombuds.unc.edu)
 - iii. Add any Unit/Department-specific resources relevant for your session
4. If applicable, report to attendees and deans, other leaders of schools, departments, units, and university leaders with follow up of action steps and/or plan for subsequent sessions; note priority items and collected definitions of progress

Cautions

1. Sessions can take on a life of their own
 - a. Learn to bring the discussion back
2. Consider alternative structures if there are intragroup conflicts
3. There are resources for consultants, mediators
4. Work on being able to talk about subjects that might make you uncomfortable
5. The more comfortable and safer that people feel, the more they might share
 - a. Honor, validate what the person has shared
 - b. Most harm comes from ignoring, dismissing