

---

UCF Forum

---

11-1-2017

## It's Difficult to Concentrate During a Crisis – Especially for Students Away from Home

Jim Clark  
*University of Central Florida, james.clark@ucf.edu*

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/ucf-forum>

Information presented on this website is considered public information (unless otherwise noted) and may be distributed or copied. Use of appropriate byline/photo/image credit is requested. We recommend that UCF data be acquired directly from a UCF server and not through other sources that may change the data in some way. While UCF makes every effort to provide accurate and complete information, various data such as names, telephone numbers, etc. may change prior to updating.

---

### STARS Citation

Clark, Jim, "It's Difficult to Concentrate During a Crisis – Especially for Students Away from Home" (2017). *UCF Forum*. 278.

<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/ucf-forum/278>

This Opinion column is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in UCF Forum by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).



## It's Difficult to Concentrate During a Crisis – Especially for Students Away from Home

**By Jim Clark**

UCF Forum columnist

Wednesday, November 1, 2017

Within just a few days after recent Hurricane Irma, the emails began arriving: A student in Key West would miss my history class because her family home had been destroyed and she was helping them relocate. Another student needed to drive to Atlanta to pick up her grandmother who fled from South Florida to avoid the approaching storm.

When Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico, I noticed a student in class who seemed distracted. After class, I asked her if there was a problem, and she said she had been unable to reach her family in San Juan for three days.

It is difficult to ask students to concentrate on the intricacies of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act when they are going through the greatest personal crisis of their lives.

Increasingly, the concerns of the outside world have come to university campuses around the country, bringing the problems that confront every city. Campuses may seem idyllic with manicured lawns and well-tended buildings, but administrators have had to deal with problems that did not exist a generation ago. One student told me she would miss class because her brother was getting out of prison and her parents wanted her to go with them to pick him up.

Unfortunately, colleges are not immune to rising crime rates. In response, universities have established police departments with sworn officers, often replacing a small contingent of security guards. For its first few years, the University of Central Florida did not have a police department. Today, there are some nearly 75 officers protecting a campus of about 80,000 who learn, work and visit here. The crimes they handle reflect society in general.

The influx of foreign students has also brought new issues. There are more than a million foreign students studying in the United States and more than 2,000 at the University of Central Florida. They often bring the problems of their homeland. One of my students from Turkey was worried about her family caught up a revolution. Another student was awaiting news about a terrorist bomb set off near her family home in London.

Foreign students also offer radically different points of view that often challenge my innate Americentrism. When I taught about China entering the Korean War, a Chinese student not only objected to my take on the situation, he asked – and was allowed – to draw a map on the board at the front of class and explain why China was right to join the war. When I spoke of problems with the Sandinista dictatorship in Nicaragua, a student whose family fled Nicaragua challenged me. In the next class, she brought a picture of several Sandinista soldiers and pointed to a youngster who was about 9 years old. The smiling boy holding an automatic weapon was the student’s father who fought with the Sandinistas as a child.

For faculty members, the global changes have created new challenges. The first years I taught, the student reasons for missing class ranged from flat tires to illness to an occasional family tragedy. The new reasons can present difficulties. What do you say to the student who missed class to take her grandmother to dialysis? I have dealt with legions of students seeking to take the final exam early who cite such reasons as “My family is planning a vacation” or “My sorority is taking a cruise.” Those have been predictable and easy to deal with. Much tougher is a woman who asks to take the exam early because her daughter is scheduled to undergo surgery.

There are also students who have dramatic memories of regimes in their home countries. One student escaped Cuba on a raft with his family, another fled Haiti in a small boat during one of the many regime changes in that country, and a third left Vietnam in a boat and was rescued at sea by a passing freighter. It seems strange to teach them history when they have lived history.

Most college administrations have recognized the changing landscape. Security has been tightened and schools have established offices to deal with the new set of problems.

As the world’s demands come to the universities, I imagine the issues we deal with will increase – and so it will be up to teachers and administrators to stay alert and find the solutions.

*Jim Clark is a lecturer in UCF’s Department of History. He can be reached at [James.Clark@ucf.edu](mailto:James.Clark@ucf.edu).*