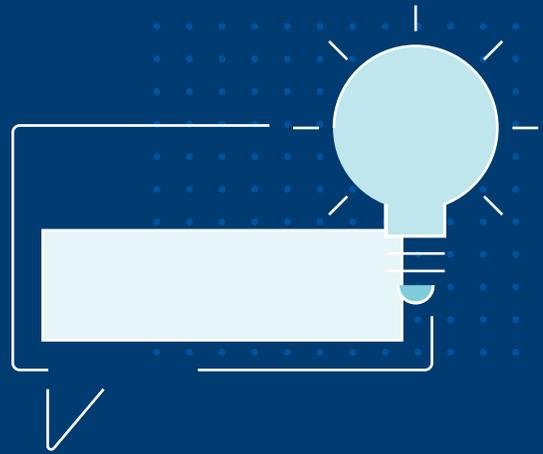# Lessons Learned

A Toolkit for Post-Pandemic Higher Education with Equity and Student Care at the Center

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Contents

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic that began impacting college instructors and students in March 2020 was an unanticipated stress test that revealed higher education's hidden weak points. Among other things, it exposed where resilience in procedures, policies, and course design were lacking, where students were economically vulnerable, and where racial inequities were papered over. The good news is that a stress test creates an opportunity to take a clear-eyed look at those weak points and design something better.

Lessons Learned: A Toolkit for Post-Pandemic Higher Education with Equity and Student Care at the Center is premised on the idea that colleges and universities shouldn't let a good crisis go to waste. As we finalize this toolkit in July 2021, there is reason to hope the crisis is subsiding, a "return to normal" is near — in the United States, at least — and that the three pandemic semesters won't be followed by a fourth. If the pandemic does in fact give way without a resurgence, higher education must use the experiences of the last year and a half as a basis for improvement — to identify what to stop, what to start, and what to extend and amplify beyond 2021.

Lessons Learned is made up of over 30 recommendations for improving practices in higher education. It asks where unexpected benefits showed themselves among the forced necessity of emergency remote teaching, and it encourages faculty, administrators, and academic and student support colleagues to continue collaborating to remove barriers, improve access, and update methods and tools. It optimistically asks where higher education can use the experience of the last three semesters to become more equitable and caring for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, poverty-affected, and first-generation students.

Lessons Learned presents these recommendations in four major sections:

1. **Remembering the Fundamentals**

2. **Course Design and Classroom Practices**

3. **Tech-forward Teaching for Equity**

4. **Cross-unit Collaboration for Student Success**

Each lesson references and links to other more comprehensive resources, most of which were published by Every Learner Everywhere or one of its network partners. For a more complete discussion of the theory and practice related to each recommendation, the reader is encouraged to make full use of those previous publications.

Any attempt to speak about a sector with over 4,000 institutions and over 19 million students in the U.S. risks overgeneralizing. While presenting these recommendations, we acknowledge a few caveats:

- There are no bright lines between the categories and roles that organize the recommendations below. Many of these actions are the responsibility of the whole campus.

- Different colleges and universities will have different priorities and levels of readiness. Some institutions are at a stage of optimizing what others are just starting. The same is true for individual instructors and other professionals within a college or university.

- Many of these recommendations are mutually reinforcing or interdependent. A campus community is unlikely to make progress on most of these recommendations singly without working on many of them in parallel.

- All of these recommendations are easier stated than carried out, which is why they point to foundational texts, more comprehensive research, inspirational examples to learn from, and numerous practical resources.

The biggest caveat is that many of the recommendations here aren't particularly new. Within a given college or university will be many individuals who have been advocating for and prioritizing them since long before the pandemic. For others, the last year has been a reminder of existing challenges and structural inequities they had been able to overlook. Arguably, colleges and universities and the professionals who work in them ought to have been using the practices in this toolkit before March 2020.

Nor is this a comprehensive look at equity-centered education. Rather, we've tried to identify lessons the pandemic semesters seemed to underscore. To consider just a few examples:

- Privacy has always been an important issue that educators ought to have had in mind, but the pandemic revealed privacy concerns in new ways and along new dimensions.

- Emergency remote teaching highlighted digital divides that always existed and showed where colleges and universities can do more to close them.

- Some student needs, like safety, consistency, and connection, are eternal, and some, like digital learning experiences informed by good pedagogy, are emergent.

The thesis of the Lessons Learned toolkit is that it would be a mistake to return to thinking online privacy doesn't matter in a "face-to-face" class; to feeling that a shared campus environment will erase unequal digital experiences; or to thinking that the effective use of digital tools to confront and remove barriers to access only matters in online courses.

One hopeful lesson learned during the pandemic is that colleges and universities and their students already had inspiring reserves of resilience to draw on. As Chavar Henry, a student leader at the University of the District of Columbia, said last year in a webinar on *The Equity Imperative and Social Justice*:

> *"Any student that made it through, any student that succeeded, any student that fought during the pandemic to keep their grades up and do all the work necessary to be successful, is really a champion student . . . . The drastic shift that happened when the pandemic fell upon us has been handled quite well by students. I think moving forward into the 'new normal' will be a very smooth process for students, because we, I think, went through the hardest of times in relation to having access to certain technologies . . . . If modified properly, and the 'new normal' is conditioned in such a way that students are actually super comfortable with learning online, I think that all students will be in a very good position."*
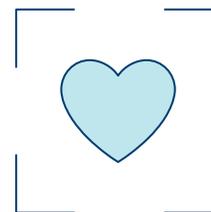
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To reference this work, please cite:

McGuire, R. (2021, July.) *Lessons Learned: A Toolkit for Post-Pandemic Higher Education with Equity and Student Care at the Center*. Every Learner Everywhere. https://www.everylearnereverywhere.org/resources/

Remembering the Fundamentals

Make equity a priority

The pandemic shed new light on the ways some Black, Latinx, Indigenous, poverty-affected, and first-generation students access, experience, and progress through higher education. It clarified that equity must be embedded as an institution- and system-wide principle. Educators must work proactively to accommodate differences in students' learning, rather than depending on "colorblind" or other neutral approaches. Ignoring structures and practices that create inequities in access, experiences, and outcomes is counterproductive.

Prioritizing equity avoids the broad framing of "all students," since instructors can unconsciously respond to the norm of designing only for students who historically live at the "center," reinforcing barriers for minoritized and poverty-affected students. As the *Caring for Students Playbook: Getting Started with Key Terms, Challenges, and Approaches* explains:

> *"Equity-minded teaching practices offer targeted support to students that address and mitigate the specific barriers they encounter by providing resources that meet their needs. Equity has the power and potential to significantly impact academic, economic, and social opportunities of students who have been at best ignored and at worst treated unjustly throughout their educational experiences."*

RELATED READING

- How Equity-Centered Design Supports Anti-Racism in the Classroom

- 5 Ways to Put Equity at the Heart of Instructional Design

A note on terminology

Some readers may be unfamiliar with the term *minoritized,* which we use to indicate how individuals are placed into categories by systemic and oppressive practices. We use it in place of *minority,* which reinforces the idea that social constructs are characteristics. For additional discussion on this and other equity-centered language, see *Getting Started with Equity: A Guide for Academic Department Leaders*.

Make student care a priority

The well-being of students has hopefully always been a priority for every institution, but the pandemic forced many to consider it from a fresh perspective. One premise of the policies and practices in this toolkit is that the health and emotional security of students are necessary before learning can progress.

The *Caring for Students Playbook* provides resources for putting student care at the center of teaching and learning in areas like syllabus design, assessment, and collaboration with student services.
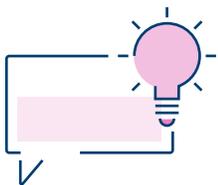
Lessons from students

When classes all went online in spring 2020, first-year student Zakia Tookes took the pass/fail option that Howard University offered, because she was concerned she would find it harder to learn that way.

A few of her professors worked to make the transition to online learning more interactive. Her Spanish professor focused on oral exams during group calls. Her stage management professor required students to comment on each other's posts in order to encourage discussion. But it wasn't the same as having a lively conversation in class. "There's a really huge difference from having a teacher stand in front of you and having to watch videos online," says Tookes.

Choosing the pass/fail option reduced Tookes's stress around maintaining her GPA, although in the end she found she did better than she'd expected in all her courses.

– Adapted from *Emergency Remote Extracurriculars: How This Rising Sophomore Is Staying Active*

Seek out student voices

This is one of many areas Every Learner Everywhere seeks to improve. As we look over the webinars and other resources that inform this toolkit, we see that the perspectives of students are often included but not as much as we hope going forward.

Some of the qualitative and quantitative surveys that have captured student perspectives and informed our work in the last year and a half include:

- **EDUCAUSE 2020 Student Technology Report: Supporting the Whole Student**

- **Student Speak 2020: Peer-to-Peer Survey Results**

- **Student Speak 2020: Student Voices Informing Educational Strategies**

Normalize using resources and getting support

Some students may feel self-conscious about advocating for themselves or accessing campus resources such as laptop loaner programs, continuation grants, food pantries, counseling, or even office hours. Equity efforts won't be effective if the resources associated with them carry a stigma. Many of the recommendations in this toolkit help make clear that needing and getting support is a normal part of academic work. Campus resources should be widely publicized to make them more accessible, and instructors can make their courses more inclusive by frequently referring to those resources as options for every student.

Build in institutional resilience with flexible modalities

Even pre-pandemic, for many students, a degree was only possible through flexible course offerings. Then 2020 showed that circumstances for individual students — or for the whole institution — can change dramatically during an academic term.

But the pandemic also demonstrated how flexible course designs can enable students to attend in the classroom, online, or both, changing their mode of attendance by week or by topic to meet their needs. One way to build in resilience is to always keep a digital version of the class in mind. While working backward in your course design from objectives through assessment and learning activities, imagine how students with diverse needs will all fully participate should their circumstances change.

To support continuity during the pandemic, some universities created "Keep Teaching" resource pages like these:

- [Indiana University](#)

- [Ohio State University](#)

- [University of Mississippi](#)

RELATED READING

See pg. 30 of the [Adaptive Courseware Implementation Guide](#) for more on backward course design practices.

Commit to continuous improvement and operational excellence

As *Time for Class — COVID-19 Edition Part 2* recommends, now is the time to "use the momentum of this watershed moment to elevate your approach to online and hybrid instruction."

Improving Critical Courses Using Digital Learning & Evidence-based Pedagogy: A Guide for Academic Administrators offers resources to pursue the continuous improvement in flexible learning environments catalyzed by the pandemic.
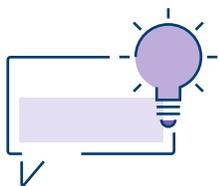
Lessons for administrators

Invest in continuity planning

Barbara Means, Executive Director of Learning Sciences Research at Digital Promise, makes the point that enabling faculty to teach in multiple modalities is a part of continuity planning for colleges and universities.

"That's where they really need to go — recognizing that their models need to be resilient across different disruptions that may happen," she says. "It's not that people don't want to get together, don't want to meet face to face. They do. But sometimes that's not a choice. So it's no longer a question of whether online is as good as face to face . . . . You've got to be ready to do this virtually, if necessary."

– From the webinar *The Equity Imperative and Social Justice: Bridging the Digital Divide in Times of Uncertainty*

Revisit first principles and build from mission

In a webinar on how public universities were continuing to deliver high-quality instruction during the pandemic, Noel E. Wilkin, Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs at the University of Mississippi, provided a reminder of how important it is to keep returning to the learning objectives and to the mission of the institution:

> *"I've heard faculty who have said to me, 'If I had known this was coming, I would have retired. At the same time, I am a better faculty member and a better professor because I went through this.' I think that's true of our academic institutions as well. As we've worked together and realized that we're all connected in this fabric of academic institutions that are on the course to change society through education, I think who we want to become as an academy is also on the table for us to truly define."*

> **"One of the things that I see as a positive that comes out of this is that we have engaged faculty in different ways and encouraged them to be more inclusive in their teaching, more compassionate, to put students first, and to trust that we will help them do that. So I feel like we're going to come out of it as a slightly more student-centered institution."**
>
> – Beth Boehm, Executive Vice President and University Provost at the University of Louisville, in the webinar *Public Universities Respond to COVID-19: Serving Our Students*

Course Design and Classroom Practices
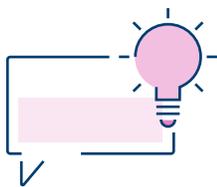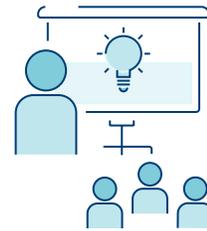
Lessons from students

In each of first-year student Jayce Mays' classes at Georgia Southern University, professors took different approaches to adapting to emergency remote teaching in spring 2020. His geology professor filmed himself in front of the whiteboard of an empty classroom and shared slides with students in real time as though he was teaching the class like normal. In another, students were given links to online videos, asked to answer questions about them, and told to email if they had problems.

"I continued to learn in my geology class, because he was still teaching the material," says Mays. "But for my other classes, they just gave us the material and we had to teach ourselves. Why would I go to school to do that when I could just look up a few YouTube videos? Most students aren't going to email to ask you to teach them what you were supposed to be teaching in the first place."

– Adapted from *Coping with COVID-19 Shutdowns: One Freshman's Experience*

Put equity in action

Optimizing High-Quality Digital Learning Experiences: A Playbook for Faculty introduces "equity in action," an intentional orientation toward equitable course design that eliminates bias and promotes equal opportunities to succeed. The practices it recommends include:

- **Be explicit that you value diversity and inclusion** in your course, in ideas and perspectives, as well as in interactions with all students. This can include using pronouns in your email signature, land acknowledgements on your syllabus, or inviting guest speakers with a range of backgrounds.

- **Monitor course activity for potential bias, microaggressions, and/or stereotypes** that may make it difficult or uncomfortable for some students to be engaged or feel a sense of belonging.

- **Welcome all students** in your first communication, and express appreciation for diverse ideas, experiences, and perspectives.

- **Clearly state your expectations** for interaction and performance with regard to acknowledging and respecting diversity. Ensure that these standards are upheld, and take corrective action where appropriate.

RELATED READING

- Getting Started with Equity: A Guide for Department Chairs

- What Are the Risks of Algorithmic Bias in Higher Education?

Design for inclusion and confront barriers to access

Move away from deficit thinking and gateway structures and toward teaching Black, Latinx, Indigenous, poverty-affected, and first-generation students. Focus on creating a student-ready college environment. Design to remove invisible and structural hurdles to participation and progress in your courses.

For example, disparities in computer access won't matter less "back on campus," because even most face-to-face courses incorporate digital learning technologies. (In fact, these disparities will matter more if a campus is investing less in computer labs.) Likewise, the tension between coursework and family and work commitments won't go away for many students after the pandemic.

To design around barriers like these, Francesca Carpenter, Director of Equity Initiatives at Achieving the Dream, advises providing students multiple ways to engage with a course, including:

- downloadable modules so work can be done offline;

- lecture notes incorporated inside a slide deck as well as on a separate document;

- collaborative note taking, which can help students learn during the lecture and also creates a resource that can be referenced after the lecture;

- audio files as an alternative to video, because they require less bandwidth to download;

- sharing video to platforms like YouTube, where they can easily be viewed without downloading; and

- mailing printed materials to students who may not have any way to access the internet.
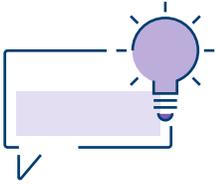
Design for universal accessibility and for clarity

The *EDUCAUSE 2020 Student Technology Report* makes clear that many students with disabilities choose not to register with their campus disability services offices or to request accommodations from their instructors. Educators can proactively make their courses more accessible for every student by using Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

RELATED READING

- See pg. 37 of Improving Critical Courses Using Digital Learning & Evidence-based Pedagogy

- See pg. 18 of Optimizing High-Quality Digital Learning Experiences: A Playbook for Faculty

> **"We're hoping that all of the training that we're providing and all of the energy that the institution is investing and the resources that the institution is investing will pay off for a better experience on the other side, because we fully understand that, with this digital divide and with it being an issue of social justice, the university has to do more."**

> - Lawrence Potter, Chief Academic Officer/Provost at the University of the District of Columbia, in the webinar *The Equity Imperative and Social Justice: Bridging the Digital Divide in Times of Uncertainty*

Commit to culturally responsive teaching

Ruanda Garth-McCullough, Associate Director of Teaching and Learning at Achieving the Dream, said in an interview that truly engaging every student means being aware of how they experience the curriculum, course policies, and classroom dynamics.

"Too often, we give students the message to check all your cultural information at the door — your beliefs, your ways of being — so we can transform you in this 'academic' way," she said. That puts a burden on students to start from scratch in the classroom, exacerbating the disparities that already exist.

She pointed out that updating course materials to be more inclusive is only a first step in culturally responsive teaching. A deeper understanding will grapple with diverse tacit cultural knowledge and worldviews and consider, for example, how students not from the dominant culture may respond differently to competitive work environments or to projects that emphasize individual effort versus collective knowledge.

RELATED READING

- See pg. 35 of Improving Critical Courses Using Digital Learning & Evidence-based Pedagogy

- See pg. 15 of the Caring for Students Playbook: Getting Started with Key Terms, Challenges, and Approaches

Incorporate trauma-informed teaching practices

Students who have experienced trauma bring its lingering effects with them to the classroom in ways that can impact their academic experience. Racially minoritized students are at greater risk of experiencing trauma and re-trauma. Now, several surveys are documenting that many students have been experiencing the pandemic as a trauma, including deaths in their own families, or as a stressor that brings up prior traumas.

Educators can make learning experiences more inclusive by designing to avoid the uncertainty, inconsistency, and inflexibility that are often the source of stress for traumatized students.
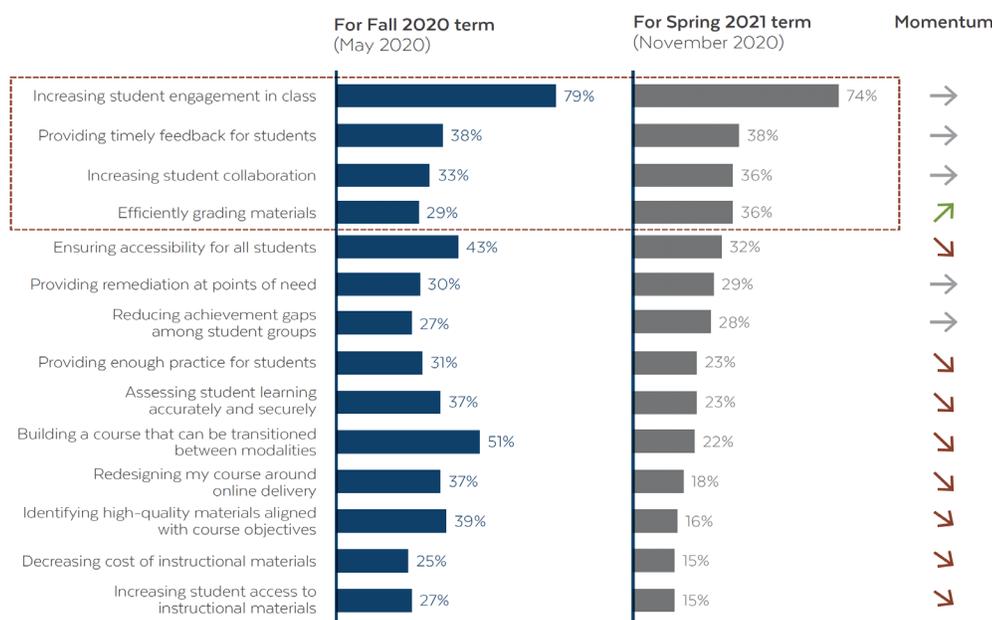
RELATED READING

Bringing Trauma-Informed Teaching Into the Online College Classroom

Focus on engagement

Tyton Partners conducted three *Time for Class — COVID-19 Edition* surveys during summer and fall 2020, and across all three increasing student engagement was a high priority — and a challenge — for faculty.

FACULTY PRIORITIES FOR THE COMING TERM

	For Fall 2020 term (May 2020)	For Spring 2021 term (November 2020)	Momentum
Increasing student engagement in class	79%	74%	→
Providing timely feedback for students	38%	38%	→
Increasing student collaboration	33%	36%	→
Efficiently grading materials	29%	36%	↗
Ensuring accessibility for all students	43%	32%	↘
Providing remediation at points of need	30%	29%	→
Reducing achievement gaps among student groups	27%	28%	→
Providing enough practice for students	31%	23%	↘
Assessing student learning accurately and securely	37%	23%	↘
Building a course that can be transitioned between modalities	51%	22%	↘
Redesigning my course around online delivery	37%	18%	↘
Identifying high-quality materials aligned with course objectives	39%	16%	↘
Decreasing cost of instructional materials	25%	15%	↘
Increasing student access to instructional materials	27%	15%	↘

Image: Time for Class — COVID-19 Edition Part 3: The Impact of 2020 On Introductory Faculty and Their Students

By the time of Part 3 of the survey, at the end of the fall 2020 semester, 60 percent of faculty said they were building engagement by embedding more active learning elements like group discussion, up from 46 percent before the start of the semester.

In response, a number of webinars conducted during the pandemic emphasized practical steps for increasing student engagement in distance learning modalities. Each of the following webinars features advice from experienced online teachers:

- Transform Engagement: Interaction and Online Course Design

- Creative Strategies for Equitable Engagement in Online Classes

- Designing with Quality and Engagement at the Forefront

- Webinar On Online Teaching and Learning Through Disruption: Communication and Engagement at a Distance

- Creating a Dynamic Learning Environment Online by Leveraging Technology

Plan for effective communication with students

Authentic, consistent, and frequent communication fosters success. Create a course communication plan that is timely and meaningful. Solicit feedback, check on students falling behind, and provide resources in one place, such as a dedicated webpage.

Most importantly, keep in mind the varied and changing schedules and technology resources individual students will have. An inclusive and effective communication plan won't presume every student will log in or be present at a given location at a given time. Instead, it will have built-in flexibility, such as open office hours along with scheduled or by-request office hours.

Create authentic and equitable grading and assessments

The pandemic required compassionate and flexible grading policies, and that temporary flexibility provides an opportunity to rethink assessment for the long term in ways that put equity, student care, and learning at the center.

The *Assessments and Grading Toolkit* on Every Learner Everywhere's Solve site is a practical place to start. It recommends:

- Considering alternatives to letter grades

- Reviewing how learning outcomes align with assessments

- Formative assessments that open up opportunities for dialogue

- Applying learning to real-world issues

- Assignments based on research and critical thinking

- Eliminating grading on a curve

- Including more effort-based grading

- Removing time constraints for exams

- Designing for retakes, revisions, and flexible deadlines

When Lorain County Community College Professor of Mathematics Kathryn Dobeck first learned about the adaptive courseware included with the textbook for her course, she was intrigued.

"I was never really into 'capital A' assessments," Dobeck says. "As a data person, at least the way it's happening currently, it seems like garbage in, garbage out. This [courseware] was targeting learning outcomes and measuring it, and I thought, 'This is what assessments should be.'"

– Adapted from *How This Early Adopter Trained Faculty Colleagues On Adaptive Learning Software*

Help students stay resilient

To support students' continuity and progress during the pandemic, some universities created "Keep Learning" resource pages like these:

- **Colorado State University**

- **Northern Illinois University**

- **Georgia State University**

- **North Carolina State University**

Resource pages typically include targeted tech support guides and study skills advice. Consider how coping with stress, anxiety, and structural barriers remains an ongoing challenge for many students.
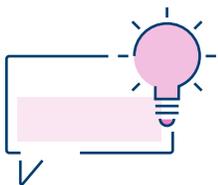
Lessons from students

Georgia State University junior Malachi Moultrie feels he does best in face-to-face settings, so the switch to online learning in the Spring 2020 semester was difficult at first.

"I was a little nervous," he says. "I didn't know how I would function in that type of environment because I've never done anything like that before. It took a good week for me to actually adapt to 'okay, we're online. I can still do this.'"

– Adapted from *"Together We Can All Get Through It": How This Criminal Justice Major is Adapting to Remote Learning*

Review the syllabus

To achieve any of the goals described here, it is necessary to make sure the syllabus isn't communicating different priorities and that information contained in the syllabus is clear and easily accessible to students. If your institution has a syllabus template, consider using it, as it may already contain resources for students and institutional policies they'll need to know.

The *Syllabus Review Guide* developed by the Center for Urban Education at the University of Southern California suggests ways to comb through a syllabus for unintended signals of exclusion.
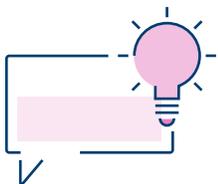
Lessons from students

For courses with long meetings, Georgia State University senior Ca'Shawn Brown prefers asynchronous learning. She points to the Introduction to Audiology and Hearing Sciences class she took as part of her Communications major.

"It was a three-hour class, and it was a little bit later in the day," she says. "I could only pay attention for an hour and 30 minutes before I wanted to go home."

This year, Brown had another course with the same professor that uses recorded lectures, and that made it easier to pay attention.

"I can pause her lecture so I can catch up, and I can do it on my own time," she says. "That's a benefit of remote learning."

– Adapted from *Planned to a T: How This Linguistics Major is Managing a Remote Senior Year*

Keep an eye on regulatory issues

Starting new online programs or converting existing programs to online can raise a number of regulatory issues that administrators may be responsible for managing but that faculty should be aware of.

If you are not generally involved with this subject, a good primer is the blog post *The Regulatory Issues Administrators Are Thinking About While Faculty Design Online Courses*. It explains the interrelated evaluation and monitoring requirements driven by regional accreditors, programmatic accreditors, state agencies, and the U.S. Department of Education. These bodies mandate complex reporting of attendance, satisfactory academic progress, and program oversight. If a program or institution is inattentive to these requirements and drifts out of compliance, it can jeopardize that institution's qualification to receive student financial aid funds and therefore financial stability and student access.

RELATED READING

[Pursuing Regulatory Compliance for Digital Instruction in Response to COVID-19: Policy Playbook](#)

Use instructional designers

Instructors shifting to unfamiliar distance learning modes for the first time during the pandemic may also have consulted with instructional design colleagues for the first time. Those collaborations can continue to benefit faculty and students going forward. Lean on instructional design professionals for insights and resources that help align pedagogy, practices, and technologies around learning objectives.

RELATED READING

- [Building Your Adaptive Learning Implementation Dream Team](#)

- [Teamwork to Seed Change: How Foreign Language Faculty at UCF Are Improving Learning Outcomes](#)
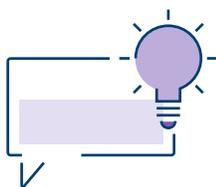
Lessons for administrators

Offer online teaching certifications with rigorous standards

In the webinar *Equity Imperative and Social Justice*, Lawrence Potter, Chief Academic Officer/Provost at the University of the District of Columbia, described how UDC quickly ramped up an existing online teaching certification delivered by their Center for the Advancement of Learning. Since over 24 percent of full-time faculty had already earned the certification, the university was well positioned to transition to remote learning at the start of the pandemic. Through spring 2020, they pushed to get that to 48 percent of all faculty, or another 77 individuals.

They believed the certification set a high standard that made faculty more effective when teaching online and hybrid courses. Therefore, to speed up adoption of the certification before the fall 2020 semester, they made it a requirement for teaching online courses in summer 2020. Potter explained:

> "Our students paying tuition deserve the very best instruction and the very best educational and learning experiences . . . . We are taking this very seriously, because . . . when you're thinking about students, particularly lower-income students who are coming to a university less prepared with respect to technology, who have job responsibilities, childcare, elder care, connectivity, or one device in the home, faculty absolutely have to be in a position to provide synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities."

Tech-forward Teaching for Equity
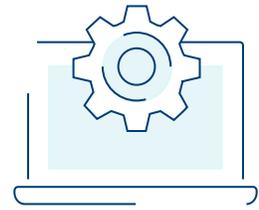
Seriously consider adaptive learning

Adaptive learning technology promises the possibility to personalize learning for every student and increase completion rates and learning outcomes. Making that transition isn't simple, but other colleges and universities — or perhaps colleagues in your own institution — have blazed a trail in this area, and evidence and good practices are starting to accumulate. (Every Learner Everywhere's Solve platform includes case studies about adaptive learning courses in specific disciplines, including biology, chemistry, and math.)

Meanwhile, a positive effect of the pandemic is that most students are now familiar with hybrid learning formats and with more digital learning technologies. Institutions, out of necessity, now have more experience with integrating and deploying new technologies. Now may be the time to seriously consider if adaptive learning would be a positive addition to your courses.

RELATED READING

- Every Learner Everywhere & Lighthouse Institutions: First-Year Experiences

- Adaptive Courseware Implementation Guide
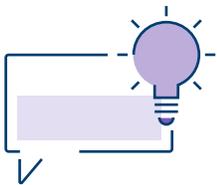
Lessons for administrators

Point faculty toward good digital technology tools

The three *Time for Class — COVID-19 Edition* surveys noted that during the emergency shift to distance learning in the spring of 2020, faculty often turned to information and guidance from vendors and from peers but less often from institutionally vetted resources.

Part 1, in particular, noted that faculty are overwhelmed with choices and need resource guides: "Institutions need to tailor these guides to direct faculty to institutionally adopted and supported tools to reduce cognitive load and variability of experience for faculty and students."

Use the data

Digital learning technologies generate a lot of data, and the best tools are designed to provide that data in ways that can inform adjustments during the term, during a course design, or at programmatic, departmental, or institutional levels.

For example, the data dashboards from many adaptive learning platforms can highlight which students may need extra individual attention, which planned lessons may be redundant, and which past lessons may need a review. Meanwhile, departments reviewing past semesters may be able to see if a high fail rate is attributable to particular points in the curriculum or particular teaching practices.

Part 1 of *Getting Started with Equity: A Guide for Department Chairs* outlines the steps for a data-driven equity audit.

RELATED READING

- Disaggregating Learning Data to Support Equity Efforts
- Using Data and an Iterative Approach to Revise Course Content
- How One University Uses Dashboard Data to Make Mid-Stream Adjustments in Math Courses

Three community colleges cases to learn from

- How Partnering with the Center for Teaching Excellence and Learning Helped Broward College Launch an Adaptive Pilot
- Championing Adaptive Learning Courseware: One Department Chair's Story
- The Faculty Learning Community In Action: A Profile of Cuyahoga Community College

Keep online harassment out of online learning

While most online harassment that students are subjected to happens outside of class on their personal social media profiles, online education platforms aren't always 100 percent safe places for every student. The *EDUCAUSE 2020* survey found that among the students who say they have been harassed online, 12 percent say they were harassed via platforms provided or sponsored by their institution. For Black and Latinx students, that figure was 17 percent.

As the use of digital learning technologies grows, therefore, educators have a responsibility to think about the safety of those spaces. EDUCAUSE recommends:

- Strengthening and clarifying student codes of conduct and policies for responding to online harassment.

- Fostering an anti-harassment culture by training students, faculty, and staff, including "bystander intervention" education.

- Developing systems for reporting and tracking online harassment.

RELATED READING

Are Students Experiencing Harassment on Your College or University's Digital Learning Platforms?

Design for privacy

Remote learning during the pandemic revealed that many students are working with little privacy or anonymity. For example, for some students, a classroom discussion about issues of personal identity will feel safer on campus and away from home and family, and for other students, the opposite will be true. Simply moving an existing discussion online, where it may be overheard by family or dorm roommates, will create new privacy concerns. Similarly, many students may not want to share their living conditions with the rest of their class in an online meeting.

Whether teaching remotely, in person, or hybrid, consider co-created community standards, a privacy statement on the syllabus, and backchannels for discussion for students who have something to say that they don't feel comfortable sharing publicly. This privacy statement example from Student Privacy Compass is a good start.

Keep in mind that some students experience harassment via digital learning platforms sponsored by their institution, often in the form of invading privacy.

Design for the digital divide

When a course was primarily face to face, the digital divide — the possibility that some students returned home with less access to computers and wifi than their peers — may have been less visible to educators not experiencing it themselves. The sudden shift to remote learning made it more visible and clarified that it has always been a real and pernicious experience for many students.

In short, faculty can't assume students at home will be able to engage with a lesson or assignment on a laptop with up-to-date software and internet access. Inclusive practices are flexible about due dates and synchronous participation in discussion, lectures, labs, and other learning activities.

Give the digital divide a closer look

The digital divide has more facets than many discussions of it acknowledge. Even in an ideal scenario where every student had the same computers, how those devices are used can differ greatly. Some will have experienced creative project-based assignments, and some will have been parked in front of "drill-and-kill" courseware. They will also differ in the informal technology support surrounding them at home.

In the webinar *The Equity Imperative and Social Justice: Bridging the Digital Divide in Times of Uncertainty*, Barbara Means, Executive Director of Learning Sciences Research at Digital Promise, described a more comprehensive understanding of the digital divide. Educators should account for the varied uses of technology that students are exposed to and how much households can vary in the tech-savvy "social capital" that supports them.

Revisit your acceptable use policy for devices

EDUCAUSE 2020 found that students perceive an inconsistency when it comes to devices in the college classroom. On one hand, faculty use, and expect students to use, a lot of digital learning technology. On the other hand, fewer faculty allow students to use their own devices in the classroom.
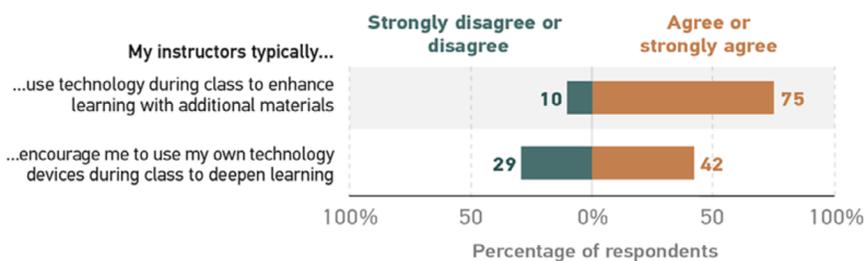
Mixed Messages

Image: EDUCAUSE 2020 Student Technology Report: Supporting the Whole Student

The report suggests that "the emergency pivot to remote learning may have highlighted the importance of students' own digital devices to learning," and it recommends implementing an acceptable use policy "informed by evidence-based practice and students' preferences for device use."
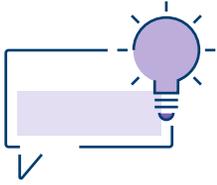
Keep building the infrastructure for the digital transformation

The *Time for Class* surveys demonstrated the need for effective leadership, technology, and support services to build high-quality digital learning. Part 2 says:

> "Institutions that move beyond band-aids to scaled approaches to delivering high-quality online learning via professional development, infrastructure, and assessment will be best positioned for a more digital future . . . . There are core elements of the infrastructure — IT, instructional design, professional development — that need to be in place across departments and silos. Consider the capacity you need to build, the partnerships you can create, in order to achieve the desired student experience and outcome."

Remember the role of the library in tech-forward teaching

Students count on the campus library for wifi access, computers, and a quiet space to study. Many laptop loaner programs are operated through campus libraries and not widely publicized.

Librarians, meanwhile, support vital components of good online course design, including information literacy and research. Working with a librarian extends students' access to research assistance, alerting them to relevant articles or books and creating targeted research guides.

RELATED READING

Meet the Expert: How This Research Librarian Helps Faculty Innovate for Equity

Choose well-designed tech products and create consistent experiences

Every software is made up of its underlying architecture, databases, a user interface, and the way it is deployed or implemented. Think about how each of those elements influences how effective a learning experience can be.

A student survey from GlobalMindED shows that students are looking for more effective user experience design in their digital learning tools. It found a need for institutions to choose and implement platforms and software that provide learners with the most consistent and straightforward experience possible

Similarly, a study of student perceptions of adaptive learning software showed that students value it when it is well integrated into the course design, gives autonomy over their learning experience, gives insights or tasks to improve grades, and efficiently targets gaps in mastery.
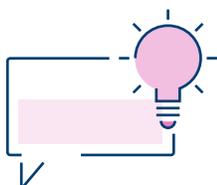
Lessons from students

Jerius Smith, a computer science major at Georgia Tech, noticed his professors tried several approaches to teaching remotely at the start of the pandemic. For example, his math professors, who were used to writing formulas on a whiteboard while they lectured, struggled to find a way to do that online.

In one case, the professor set up a camera pointing down toward a pad of paper. That could have worked, Smith says, "But the quality wasn't great. In the future I hope universities would have the capabilities to give resources like an iPad to professors who teach that way."

Many of Smith's classes relied on teacher's aides to help transition to remote learning. In one, a TA set up a collaborative workspace on Microsoft Teams where students could ask questions. Other TAs held drop-in office hours through video conferencing software.

"I was blessed with the type of classes I was taking," says Smith. "It was helpful to keep that access to our TAs."

– Adapted from *Remote Learning During COVID-19: A Computer Science Major's Experience*

Three outdated practices to eliminate

Counterproductive course policies

It's time to end "no excuses" policies for late assignments and attendance policies based on the idea that attendance is a proxy for learning. Consider instead policies that articulate the added value of timely work and classroom attendance.

Conflating capacity with commitment

"This is the time to trust your students: Trust their evaluation of what they can do, trust them when they bring you limitations, and trust that they're still committed to learning, even if their capacity is reduced."
- *Assessments and Grading Toolkit*

Treating hyflex and hybrid as an afterthought

These teaching modalities are uniquely challenging. "Faculty teaching in hybrid and highly flexible formats were less likely to report feeling prepared and more likely to report dissatisfaction with student learning outcomes," reports *Time for Class — COVID-19 Edition Part 3*. "This underscores the need for more support in designing and delivering high-quality hybrid and highly flexible courses and additional research on impact and efficacy."

Cross-unit Collaboration for Student Success
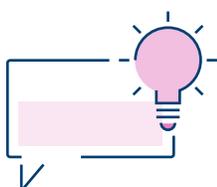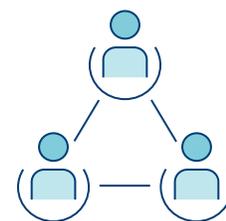
Lessons from students

While the emergency response to the pandemic focused on academics, first-year Howard University student Zakia Tookes wanted colleges and universities to take a more holistic look at how students are doing.

"Student situations are all extremely different once you go home," she says. "When you're on campus the school can provide you resources to make sure you're protected. But when you're at home, there's a lot going on that the school can't control."

Even when campus reopens, Tookes thinks retaining some online tools used during the pandemic can enhance student experiences, including the online orientation panel she helped create for incoming first-year students. She suggests recording future panels and uploading them to build a growing resource library for future students.

– Adapted from *Emergency Remote Extracurriculars: How This Rising Sophomore Is Staying Active*

Build a focused and committed team

Improving Critical Courses Using Digital Learning & Evidence-based Pedagogy emphasizes that meeting increasingly complex needs of students, while relying more on emerging education technologies, requires a diverse team dedicated to a collaborative culture.

Role	Description
Project Lead/Executive Sponsor	An individual who leads and supports an implementation team from start to finish. The Project Lead can also act as an Executive Sponsor who advocates for the success of the initiative throughout the decision-making processes. This person is responsible for overseeing activities such as meetings, planning, documenting, and communicating with team members during every phase of the implementation process.
Course Lead	Faculty member(s) who will be responsible for improving student success by adopting and effectively utilizing evidence-based teaching and digital technologies in their newly designed courses.
Instructional Design	This individual(s) drives and supports decision-making related to course design and the adoption and implementation of educational technologies.
Academic Administration	Individual(s) who has decision-making power or authority with respect to resource allocation and course curriculum.
Teaching & Learning Support	Individual(s) with experience in instructional design and/or teaching and learning who provides a range of related support.
Faculty Support	On-campus individual(s) or outside company personnel who deliver educational technology and/or other course-related faculty support services, including the possibility of providing faculty training.
Student Support	Includes functions such as student advising, bookstore, financial aid, etc. Can help orient students to any new instructional approach and provide access to instructional materials.
Research & Analytics	Individual(s) who pulls and analyzes implementation data.

Image: *Adapted from Improving Critical Courses Using Digital Learning & Evidence-based Pedagogy*

Align across divisions for student success

The well-being of the whole student depends on faculty, student support services, student success, enrollment management, and others working together.

The *Student Speak 2020* survey makes clear that peer-to-peer and mentor support — particularly in virtual forms — can nurture more connection than classrooms alone do. The *Caring for Students Playbook* provides practical strategies for instructors to collaborate with support services colleagues. Those include:

- integrating institutional support services into course activities to reduce stigma;

- mapping pathways to support resources by including a module during a course that lists what is available;

- creating activities and assignments that require students to utilize offices like career services or tutoring; and

- calling on support services colleagues to serve as guest speakers during courses.

When Nathan Smith, OER Coordinator and Instructor of Philosophy at Houston Community College (HCC), was appointed project leader of HCC's pilot adaptive learning project, he wanted to collaborate with Amanda Guerrero, Director of Instructional Support, Academic Instruction. Guerrero oversees an academic tutoring program with 14 on-campus locations that provide 90,000 hours of student tutoring per year.

Smith felt the tutoring experience could be a powerful factor in HCC's new adaptive learning initiative. After all, the adaptive learning courseware would be generating data about what concepts or skills students are struggling with. Typically, faculty use that data to adjust their courses. But what would happen if the data could inform sessions in the tutoring centers?

Smith and Guerrero believed if they could train tutors to refer to the adaptive learning data and to ask the right questions, it would provide structure and focused help for students. After two semesters of close collaboration between faculty and the HCC Tutoring Center, students are getting the targeted support they need, and the college is seeing a positive impact on pass rates.

– Adapted from *Why and How Houston Community College Involved the Tutoring Center In Its Adaptive Learning Pilot Project*

Point students to resources

Revisit your communication plans to ensure students benefit from the resources you do have. A number of recent surveys emphasize the importance of targeted communications that empower students to access campus resources. For example, the *EDUCAUSE 2020* report advises "a marketing campaign raising student awareness of the tools available to students, where to find those tools, how to use them, and how they can help advance educational and career goals."

# Center mental health and well-being

The end of the pandemic will not be the end of the grief, trauma, anxiety, depression, and other mental health impacts students are experiencing. As Chavar Henry, a student leader at the University of the District of Columbia, said last year in the webinar *The Equity Imperative and Social Justice:*

"The mental health of students has to be put into the conversation, because there's one thing when you're at home and you are learning online, but there's another thing when the only place you are seeing is the four walls of your home. It really has a big impact on the progress of students."

RELATED READING

[Preparing for the Increase in Student Anxiety and Depression in the College Classroom](#)
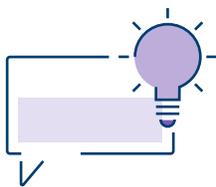
Lessons for administrators

Review your faculty development investments

The pandemic highlighted where faculty need support making the transition to teaching effectively with digital learning technologies. The *EDUCAUSE 2020 Student Technology Report* advises professional development investments that "prepare faculty to implement accessible instruction, cultivate inclusive learning environments, understand the functional impact of specific disabilities on academic performance, and support accommodations requests."

Similarly, *Time for Class — COVID-19 Edition Part 1* suggests supporting faculty to implement effective online instructional practices such as "checking in with students to ensure access and agency, combining synchronous and asynchronous course elements, incorporating real-world examples, assigning small group work, 'chunking' content, and administering frequent quizzes to assess learning and adapt instruction."

It also recommends segmenting and tailoring support for adjunct faculty and for faculty teaching introductory and STEM courses, since these faculty teach the "high-enrollment introductory courses that have a disproportionate impact on student progression and success, especially for students of color."

Focus on tech implementation as much as selection

The *Time for Class 2020* report, summarizing several years of the survey, demonstrates that how adaptive learning is implemented is far more consequential than which specific tools are selected and that "institutions can take key actions to ensure that courseware is being implemented in ways that create a better faculty experience."

Invest in sustained team building

Colleges and universities got through the difficult emergency transition to distance learning through supportive cross-functional collaborations that drew expertise from all corners of the campus. A renewed spirit of teamwork will be necessary to achieve many of the improvements described in this guide.

Improving Critical Courses Using Digital Learning & Evidence-based Pedagogy: A Guide for Administrators outlines ways to ensure faculty are constructing high-quality learning experiences by consulting and collaborating with support office staff, instructional designers, academic development professionals, student affairs colleagues, and institutional research.

Stay positive

"One other last observation is one that was made by Dr. John Young. He's our Elsie Hood Teacher of the Year this year . . . . He has an incredible message and I'm just going to take out one snippet of what he said. He said, 'Negativity and calamity do not define us. They give us the means to define our true selves and chart a path to who we want to become.' Stop and think about that for a minute. 'Negativity and calamity do not define us. They give us the means to define our true selves and chart a path to who we want to become.'"

– Noel E. Wilkin, Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs at the University of Mississippi, in the webinar *Public Universities Respond to COVID-19: Serving Our Students*

Selected resources

[Adaptive Courseware Implementation Guide](#)

A resource for centering racial and socioeconomic equity and student voice in the adoption and implementation of adaptive courseware. Drawing on lessons from course instructors and institutions, this provides practical strategies and resources to implement adaptive courseware with an equity-minded and student-centered approach.

[Assessments and Grading: How Should I Approach Assessments and Grading for This Term?](#)

A toolkit on Every Learner Everywhere's Solve page developed in partnership with Intentional Futures. Even before COVID-19, postsecondary education has had no shortage of perspectives, theories, and research on how to approach assessment and grading to maximize equity and best support student learning. The sudden widespread shift to online courses has only accentuated the debates and complexity of how to create authentic and equitable grading and assessments. This toolkit is intended to help instructors navigate the myriad choices they will face in rapidly moving to online learning.

[Caring for Students Playbook: Six Recommendations for Caring for Students](#)

A comprehensive digest of resources for educators to put student care into action. Each section includes practical recommendations, concrete strategies, and tools to support instructors in operationalizing equity-focused, inclusive teaching strategies by acknowledging student challenges while identifying student assets. It comes with a companion publication, *[Caring for Students Playbook: Getting Started with Key Terms, Challenges, and Approaches](#)*.

[EDUCAUSE 2020 Student Technology Report: Supporting the Whole Student](#)

The 17th annual report from the EDUCAUSE Center for Analysis and Research (ECAR) reports data on the experiences and attitudes of undergraduate students with information technology. This edition includes a new emphasis on research related to student success, including sections on technology use and environment preferences, data privacy, online harassment, and accessibility and accommodations.

[The Equity Imperative and Social Justice: Bridging the Digital Divide in Times of Uncertainty](#)

In this webinar, Kamran Zendehdel, Acting Director of the Center for Sustainable Development and Resilience at the University of the District of Columbia, asks experts and practitioners about the digital divide in higher education and what we can do about it. The featured guests are Dr. Barbara Means, Executive Director, Digital Promise; Dr. Lawrence Potter, Chief Academic Officer/Provost at the University of the District of Columbia; and Chavar Henry, UDC's Board of Trustees Student Representative.

[Getting Started with Equity: A Guide for Academic Department Leaders](#)

A resource guide for developing and curating an educational environment that is justice centered and equity advancing. It includes practices and tools for an intersectional analysis of race, gender, power, and capital and for academic departments working toward equity and justice in their curricula and teaching.

[Improving Critical Courses Using Digital Learning & Evidence-based Pedagogy: A Guide for Academic Administrators](#)

This guide addresses how to build a collaborative team of stakeholders who support a diverse student population faced with learning environments that rely heavily on educational technologies. It features resources academic administrators can draw from to effectively support a continuously improved teaching and learning environment that is sustainable for years to come.

[Optimizing High-Quality Digital Learning Experiences: A Playbook for Faculty](#)

This faculty-focused playbook is intended to improve course design, teaching, and learning in online environments. With special attention to the needs of instructors teaching online for the first time, the guide offers strategies for getting started and improving over time.

[Public Universities Respond to COVID-19: Serving our Students](#)

An April 7, 2020 webinar moderated by Karen Vignare, Executive Director of the Personalized Learning Consortium at The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, with provosts from APLU member institutions sharing how their universities have adapted to remote learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Beth Boehm, Executive Vice President and University Provost at the University of Louisville, and Noel E. Wilkin, Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs at the University of Mississippi, discussed their experiences and lessons learned regarding assessments, labs, equity, access, and more.

[Pursuing Regulatory Compliance for Digital Instruction in Response to COVID-19: Policy Playbook](#)

A comprehensive outline of the federal, state, and accrediting agency policies and regulations that influence the transformation courses and programs to digital formats such as remote, online, blended, or hyflex. The playbook educates administrators about these differences and how they might work with faculty to maintain regulatory compliance. It includes information on recent waivers in place in response to the COVID-19 emergency.

Student Speak 2020: Peer-to-Peer Survey Results

A summary of results from interviews with 102 students across the United States at 47 different higher education institutions conducted in September 2020 by GlobalMindEd in collaboration with The Equity Project. This includes insights about how racially minoritized students have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-related digital, personal, health, professional, familial, and emotional/social challenges.

Student Speak 2020: Student Voices Informing Educational Strategies

This report summarizes learnings from a series of facilitated focus groups with a wide cross-section of higher education students attending diverse institutions ranging from community colleges to major research universities. It provides a national snapshot of diverse college students, including many who are first-generation, showing that while these students have the greatest need to be heard and served, their voices are often neither included nor understood.

Time for Class — COVID-19 Edition Part 1: A National Survey of Faculty During COVID-19

The first in a series of surveys and focus groups with faculty designed to understand the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning in higher education. More than 4,000 faculty at over 1,500 higher education institutions nationwide shared their experiences. This analysis focuses on understanding the extent of the spring 2020 transition to remote learning.

Time for Class — COVID-19 Edition Part 2: Planning for a Fall Like No Other

The second in a series of surveys and focus groups designed to understand the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning in higher education. The report surfaces the challenges and concerns of faculty preparing courses for the Fall 2020 term and gauges their attitudes toward institutional policies and support. It focuses on pedagogy, digital learning tool adoption, and views on student equity.

Time for Class — COVID-19 Edition Part 3: The Impact of 2020 On Introductory Faculty and Their Students

The third and final in a special series designed to examine the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning in higher education. This report focuses on the experiences of faculty teaching introductory-level or "gateway" courses that have a critical impact on student retention and progress.

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Acknowledgments

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