



# INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP ABSTRACTS

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## Student and Faculty Engagement and Support in a Pandemic



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It's been seven long months since our world was turned upside down with the onslaught of COVID-19. We all remember clearly the chaos of March 2020 transforming our in-person, on-campus instruction to remote models; frantically securing technology for students, faculty, and staff to work remotely and standing up phone and videoconference operations for all of our support and administrative services. Our campus faculty and staff worked incredibly hard to pivot teaching and learning to support students' successful completion of the Spring 2020 semester. I think many of us thought it was a pipedream to get to Commencement and actually graduate students in Spring 2020 – but we did it! They did it. The resilient students of Spring 2020 showed up in Zoom, and

GoogleMeet, and Blackboard Collaborate; they quickly learned how to navigate new course environments and they succeeded.

We know it wasn't easy for anyone to transition last Spring. We also know that the challenges of teaching and learning remotely in a pandemic disproportionately affected our students who have limited access to technology and WiFi, less support at home for participating in college, and familial and essential work responsibilities (Fain, 2002). In this brief abstract I will share what we learned at SUNY Orange from our Spring 2020 students and how that shaped our actions and response coming into the 2020-2021 academic year.

### Assessing Students' Engagement and Experiences in Remote Instruction

At the end of May 2020, the State University of New York (SUNY) system (of which SUNY Orange is one of 64 campuses) instituted a survey of Spring 2020 students throughout the system. The purpose of the survey was to evaluate the impact of SUNY institutions' transition to remote learning and gain valuable student feedback that would inform our plans for Summer and Fall 2020 semesters. We hoped to learn how best to support students' engagement in their college experience, knowing how critical engagement is to persistence and retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2012), especially in remote learning environments. The survey

was administered to all enrolled SUNY Orange students in Spring 2020 (4,434); 1,137 responses were received, resulting in an impressive 25.6% response rate.

The findings from the survey centered on four specific areas: Remote Instruction Problems, Impact of Change, Personal Challenges, and Support Services. The top three challenges raised regarding remote instruction problems were: (1) access to study space, (2) high speed internet, and (3) access to a computer. When it came to students' reflection on the impact of the change to remote instruction, students indicated that increased responsibilities at home and a lack of engagement with [their] professors were top barriers. Students also indicated several common personal challenges including family caretaking, performing essential work, health challenges, learning environment, and inability to complete applied skills remotely. When students were asked to rate the effectiveness of various support services in the remote environment, they indicated that course registration and academic advising were most effective, whereas tutoring and financial aid services were least effective.

One important question on the survey asked students to give their advice for how the College could improve remote instruction. The following themes arose from their open ended comments:

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### Improve communication with instructors

- **Students indicated their strong preference for alternatives to email communication**

### Improve consistency between courses, instructors

- **Students expressed frustration and confusion due to a lack of consistency when navigating course content online**

### Orient students to technology tools that will be used

- **Students desired more support for learning how to use tools such as Zoom and Blackboard**

### Require synchronous communication between instructor, students

- **Students indicated live, synchronous communication was important to their sustained engagement in their courses**

### Train and support faculty for remote teaching best practices

- **Students recognized that many faculty were not well prepared to transition to remote instruction modalities but that the College should increase faculty training and support**

Students' feedback via the SUNY system survey was immediately useful as the College planned for its Fall 2020 semester instructional and student support modalities. Over the summer and during pre-Fall semester workshops, the College's Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) and Office of Academic Technology leapt into action to offer increased professional development to support faculty's technology skills development and preparation for a largely remote Fall semester.

#### Strengthening Faculty Support

One direct programmatic response to the students' feedback was the CTL's design of a summer training series, entitled "Engagement by Design." The series included four modules: (1) Communication by Design, (2) Content Delivery by Design, (3) Assessment by Design, and (4) Technology Refresh. The communication module focused on

creating community in remote instruction, as well as creating regular opportunities and clear expectations for engagement. In the content delivery module, faculty learned how to make their course content more accessible and navigable for all learners. The assessment module guided faculty in exploring a variety of assessment methods and rubric development. Finally, the technology module helped faculty brush up on the College's major platforms for remote instruction: Zoom, Google Workspace, and Blackboard.

In addition to the CTL summer series, one academic department collaborated to create a uniform course "shell," or template, in Blackboard that would create consistency between courses as students navigated the various components of the course. The decision to create a uniform course shell was in response to both students' responses on the SUNY system survey as well as the

department's own survey of their students from the Spring 2020 semester.

#### Growing Student Support

Just as students expressed the need for increased faculty support, they too desired increased support including access to resources and training for remote instruction. In response to this desire, as well as general support for succeeding in remote instructional formats, a Student Success Toolkit was developed and populated across all students' Blackboard accounts. The Toolkit (pictured below) houses links to critical resources and support such as the College's technology lending program; short video trainings on Zoom, Blackboard, and using Google Docs; a blueprint for time management and links to the College's Center for Student Success.

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Not finding what you need? Please reach out to [studentsuccess@sunyorange.edu](mailto:studentsuccess@sunyorange.edu).

**Student Success Toolkit: TECH**

**Q:** What materials and equipment do I need?  
**A:** Click [HERE for a checklist](#) for all your tech equipment requirements.

**Q:** What if I don't have a computer or other required equipment?  
**A:** SUNY Orange has you covered. Click [HERE](#) to fill out the technology request form.

**Q:** I don't have an internet connection. What should I do?  
**A:** Explore local providers who may be offering low cost access for students. Click [HERE](#) for a list of Internet providers and contact information.

**Q:** Where do I go for help with technology or troubleshooting?  
**A:** SUNY Orange HelpDesk can help you out. Call the help desk at (949) 341-4749 or click [HERE](#) to review common questions or select the **CHAT** feature for direct help during regular business hours.

**Student Success Toolkit: TOOLS**

**Q:** What is Blackboard and how do I access my class?  
**A:** [Click here to go to the Student Orientation to Blackboard.](#) \*Opens in a New Tab

**Q:** How do I use ZOOM or Collaborate for class?  
**A:** [Click here for the student guide to SUNY Orange ZOOM](#)

**A:** [Click here for the student guide to SUNY Orange Collaborate](#)

**Q:** How do I use my SUNY Orange email?  
**A:** [Click here to go to instructions for using Gmail at SUNY Orange.](#)

**Q:** What are Google Docs and how do I use them?  
**A:** [Click here for the student guide to SUNY Orange Google Docs](#)

**Q:** Students Get Microsoft Office for free. How do I get the software?

**Student Success Toolkit: TIME**

**Q:** What are the skills I need to succeed now?  
**A:** Here are [the habits and routines \(PDF\)](#) for doing your best work (on top of your other commitments). And check out [this guide \(PDF\)](#) for staying organized in your online classes.

**Q:** How do I find the time to study?  
**A:** Your time is limited! We have [the info \(PDF\)](#) and [the SUCCESS \(PDF\)](#) you need for better time management.

**Q:** What do I do if I have questions for my instructor?  
**A:** Communication is vital to your success. Here is [the breakdown \(PDF\)](#) of writing emails and why they matter.

**Q:** What can I do right now to make sure I'm staying on top of my work?  
**A:** See the info below on how to contact with the Center for Student Success. We can work with you to improve your learning strategies and keep you in control of your success!

## Looking Ahead

With midterm assessments behind us and looking toward the last half of the Fall 2020 semester, the College is beginning an intensive outreach effort to currently enrolled students. “Care” calls are being made to check in with students and offer resources, support, and encouragement as we begin to close in the remaining weeks of the semester. Offices such as the Library, Advising, Admissions, Financial Aid, and the Center for Student Success are all using a live chat to increase their accessibility to students and improve students’ experiences. As we gear up for the Spring 2021 semester, it’s clear that the need for continued and expanded remote support will be necessary for students’ engagement and success for the foreseeable future.

In the weeks ahead, I hope you’ll take a moment to reflect on how far you and your faculty, staff, and students

have come in this incredibly challenging time. We’re leveraging online platforms for learning that can be effectively achieved asynchronously and we’re thoughtfully designing opportunities for live, synchronous engagement. We’re expanding our technology skills and finding new, creative, and innovative ways to support each other and our students. While we all look forward to returning to more in person instruction and campus activities, let’s also use what we’ve learned and created during this pandemic to make lasting and important improvements in support of today’s and tomorrow’s community college students.

## Resources:

Fain, P. (2020, June 17). Higher Education and Work Amid Crisis. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/06/17/pandemic-has-worsened-equity-gaps-higher-education-and-work>

Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Tinto, V. (2012). *Completing college: Rethinking institutional action*.

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