

## Preparing for the 2021-2022 Academic Year

As we plan and prepare to start a new academic year, it is important to remember that, even at the nadir of the past year, the University of Central Arkansas never shut down. Several hundred students still lived in campus housing during the summer of 2020, meals and medical services were provided, and teaching and learning continued. In August of 2020, new students started school as others graduated, new faculty and staff were hired, all services were available, the grounds were maintained, and our governing bodies continued to meet and take on important tasks. In other words, meaningful work continued. With each passing month, we have learned more: more about the virus, health and safety, teaching and learning, equity and inequity, the importance of science, communication, attention to self and others, and the centrality of community.

Perhaps the most significant consideration of our future in higher education relates to what we have learned about setting students up for success across all course modalities.

The transition to post-pandemic teaching requires multiple layers of consideration for faculty, including lingering classroom safety concerns, the consideration of new teaching strategies that emerged during the pandemic, and questions around student preparedness.

Based on student feedback and instructor experiences, we have learned to place more emphasis on ongoing, frequent, transparent communication between faculty and students. We have learned the importance of making instructor expectations even clearer in the transition year following the pandemic.

As a campus community, there are concerns about the preparedness of our incoming and continuing students as they enter our classes and corequisite experiences. These reservations are shared by both faculty and students. In addition to other tolls the pandemic has levied, many students have suffered losses in educational opportunities. In courses taken during the pandemic, material and topics may have been covered in less depth, and hands-on or group activities have often been impossible to achieve. The Bears Care Student Focus Group Study identified retention of course content during the past year as a top concern for our continuing students. This is especially concerning in scaffolded courses where students are expected to build on information and skills obtained in previous courses. It is also of note that these effects have disproportionately impacted minority students and students facing economic challenges.

In the interest of student success, it is imperative that we rise to the unique challenge of meeting the students where they are academically without sacrificing the goals and competencies that students are expected to achieve. And while we may have professed this as a core commitment in the past, this shared experience has required a campus-wide willingness to think and act with keen intentionality about the student <-> teacher <-> subject relationship. We must strategically find ways to ensure that students are given opportunities to fill in readiness gaps while making progress toward fulfilling their learning goals. And we must commit ourselves to holding fast to the experiential and relational work ahead.

COVID-19 has exacerbated the equity gaps that affect students of color, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, international students, students with disabilities, and students

with health issues. These gaps and challenges will persist even after effective, ongoing vaccine and booster programs are implemented for higher education faculty, staff, and students. Data suggest that Black and Latinx workers are more likely to have lost their jobs during the pandemic. Our college students are struggling to find and keep both summer employment and part-time employment to support them while they are in college. Students are also struggling with their physical and mental health. Many have experienced loss and uncertainty, causing a rise in the need for both medical and mental health services. “The toll of this pandemic is, in a word, devastating,” John King Jr., president and CEO of the Education Trust and a former U.S. secretary of education during the Obama administration, said during a call with reporters in late May. “It’s eroding students’ academic success, their emotional well-being and their personal finances.” (Inside Higher Education, June 2020.)

As with all things, the restrictions to many kinds of activities led to innovative and creative approaches to achieve desired outcomes. Research and creative activity, especially projects requiring in-person interventions, field research, and public performative avenues, often continued in modified forms. Moreover, we have faculty who transitioned almost overnight to new learning platforms. They have put in additional hours and resources to support struggling students all while supporting themselves and their families. Many have experienced compassion exhaustion. A survey published by Course Hero in November of 2020 found that more than half of the 570 respondents reported increases in emotional drain, work-related stress, and frustration working during the pandemic. More than 40% are considering leaving their university position. (The Philadelphia Inquirer, March 2021). Many of our colleagues of color have experienced both the pandemic and 2020’s significant political and social unrest on a personal and systemic level. Therefore, it is necessary to put into place structures to support both our most vulnerable students and faculty. To that end, what follows are recommendations and action steps to support student and faculty success.

## **Student and faculty success**

### **Technology-related:**

- Starting with fall 2021 courses, IT will open all Blackboard courses to students one full week in advance of classes beginning each term as an ongoing policy.
- Academic Affairs and IT are working together to ensure each academic college has at least one technician assigned to/embedded in the college to support instructional technology needs.
- Academic Affairs and IT are working together to find an appropriate and secure online testing solution with a goal of having this in place for the fall semester.
- The university will continue to support the move to paperless whenever possible, including expanded use of *DocuSign* across campus. This is both cost-effective and environmentally responsible.

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- The university has entered into a three-year agreement for 1,000 Zoom licenses, with a maximum of 300 'seats' per meeting, not only for instructional purposes, but to enable richer student-to-student communication and collaboration.
- The laptop initiative will continue in the fall semester, ensuring all students have the appropriate technology they need to engage in web-enhanced learning, research, and engagement.
- The university will continue to have rooms available on campus for students who need to participate in classes both virtually and in person.
- The university will add more outdoor WIFI to encourage use of outside spaces as weather permits.
- Academic Affairs will continue to replace and upgrade faculty laptop computers for a "UCA Anywhere" approach. This will also include docking station, monitor, wireless keyboard and mouse.
- UCA plans to use federal funds to update computer labs to ensure hardware and software are compatible with the technology necessary for learning, research, and engagement.
- UCA plans to use federal funds to ensure classroom teaching stations are updated to ensure continuity and uniformity in instructional spaces. There will be both PC and Mac teaching stations, depending upon the primary disciplines of the room usage.
- CETAL will maintain and add to the list of free and low-cost instructional technology applications that have aided instruction during the pandemic.
- Blackboard will include Ally, an instructional technology tool that will automatically check materials for ADA compliance, offer guidance to faculty in how to make their online content more accessible, and provide alternative formats for online course content.

### Best practices in communication and student success:

- Faculty should continue to post syllabi and grades on Blackboard, and if using a different platform, put links in their Blackboard shells.
- The default Blackboard shell has been updated with direct links to student support services including the Office of Student Success and Counseling Center.
- Faculty should include information in the syllabus and/or make an announcement about how the course will be conducted if there is a shift to a different modality required (as we did due to the ice and snow event.)
- Students should receive frequent feedback on assignments, and that feedback should be given to them in a timely and uniform manner (through Blackboard or another approved system), thus allowing students ample opportunity to make adjustments that facilitate their learning and/or improve their grade
- Faculty should transition students to a more active learning approach. For many students, learning in the pandemic shifted to a passive experience. As capacity for meeting in person increases, more hands-on activities, group work, and experiential exercises should be employed to enhance learning.
- "If you see something, say something" is *vital* with regard to using the alert system (Grades First, Behavioral Intervention Report). If a student stops showing up to class (virtually or in person,) struggles with getting work turned in or being successful in their work, report it through the alert system so support services can reach out to the student.
- Faculty should encourage students to use the Center for Writing and Communication, Tutoring, Peer Coaches, mental health counseling, the HPER, and to reach out to their academic advisor.

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- Faculty should encourage students to attend events, find an RSO, and get involved. Involved students have a greater likelihood of success because they experience belonging.
- Faculty should take advantage of professional development through CETAL to learn more about inclusive pedagogy.

### How do we make sure we bring forward what we have learned about technology-enhanced teaching and learning?

Prior to the pandemic, UCA offered about 12% of its courses every semester in a fully online format. This percentage includes courses for fully online undergraduate and graduate programs. Although we have learned much about online teaching, there is no desire to change our identity, as experiential education and relational education are hallmarks of UCA. Being able to move to fully online instruction for a short period of time due to external and extenuating circumstances allowed us to provide instructional continuity.

In addition, the past year has shown us that while many technology tools enhance learning access and allow instructors to do things they could not do otherwise, there is a preponderance of courses for which in-person interaction is absolutely vital. In a [recent publication](#) by UNESCO on the future of post-pandemic education, educators and administrators are urged to “Protect the social spaces provided by schools as we transform education. The school as a physical space is indispensable. Traditional classroom organization must give way to a variety of ways of ‘doing school,’ but the school as a separate space-time of collective living, specific and different from other spaces of learning, must be preserved.”

#### Suggestions:

- In multiple sections of a course, be sure that multiple instructional methods are available.
- Be judicious about offering lower-division courses, especially those that introduce students to the major, in a fully online format.
- Avoid offering high DFWI courses and gateway courses in a fully-online format.
- If a course is listed as a Hybrid course, students can and should expect to have meaningful and regular in-person instruction.
- Faculty should seek assistance from CETAL and colleagues who are successful and comfortable teaching in an online format.

### Health and safety considerations

- The Pandemic Planning Committee will continue to meet as necessary. The membership of this group has adjusted in response to need.
- The university will continue to have quarantine and isolation housing available for students as necessary.
- The university will continue to partner with the Arkansas Department of Health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, UAMS, and the Arkansas Department of Higher Education throughout the year. Trends will be monitored closely, and if we need to move to virtual instruction temporarily, there should be fair notice that it is under consideration.
- All plexiglass partitions will remain in place for the foreseeable future. The university will continue to have cleaning supplies on hand and change out air filters.

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- All individuals should feel supported to wear a face covering if this increases their comfort level.
- Every individual who is comfortable doing so should receive the vaccine, although there will be no requirement that individuals receive the vaccine, nor that they provide evidence of having been vaccinated.

## Best practices for enhanced in-person instruction

The transition to post-pandemic teaching offers multiple layers of consideration for faculty, including lingering classroom safety concerns, emerging student engagement issues resulting from additional instructional technology, and the consideration of new teaching strategies that emerged during the pandemic.

Faculty are encouraged to agree, as much as possible, on department or college-wide expectations for accommodating virtual participation when a student would normally be in person. Examples of situations for virtual participation may include athletes traveling to and from competition (as WiFi allows); students who have been placed in quarantine or isolation; or students with a medical-related absence.

Some faculty have suggested allowing a set number of “Zoom days” that each student is allowed to use in lieu of physical attendance. This must, of course, be tied to the appropriateness of the course.

- Students benefit when faculty supplement in-person and hybrid synchronous classes with asynchronous content in Blackboard, so faculty are encouraged to continue web-enhancing their classes with online content after the pandemic ends.
- Faculty should continue to offer virtual office hours on a regular basis and encourage students to use them. Moreover, faculty could explore platforms to enable richer student-to-student communication (e.g., GroupMe, Zoom, etc.)
- Faculty should consider using virtual office hours for group study support to help students with difficult content.
- CETAL will maintain and add to the list of free and low-cost instructional technology applications that have aided instruction during the pandemic, including tools already available such as Top Hat and extending to newer tools such as Annoto and NearPod.

## Zoom etiquette expectations should be clear and in the syllabus. Examples include:

- Participants' workspace should include a supportive chair, good lighting, and all of the materials and technology needed for class.
- Participants are expected to conduct themselves in a professional manner and to treat all other participants with courtesy and respect. Examples of unacceptable conduct include, but are not limited to, harassment, discrimination, verbal abuse, threats, intimidation, or disruption.
- Participants are expected to comply with any instructions of speakers and moderators (such as mute your microphone, enter a discussion room.)
- If students are aware of conduct that is not aligned with these expectations, they should notify their instructor.

- Consider the Zoom Room as you would a physical classroom with regard to respectfulness, interaction, and engagement.
- As much as possible, participants should find a quiet and distraction-free place to attend class. They should not attend while driving, working, or engaging in other activities.

## Student preparedness

As stated previously, we must strategically find ways to ensure that students are given opportunities to fill in readiness gaps while making progress toward fulfilling their learning goals.

### Suggestions and strategies

- **Instructors should provide students with very clear guidance on the prerequisite skills needed to master the current material being taught.** This guidance should be peppered throughout the current course rather than an overwhelming list at the start of the course. If it is possible, pinpoint the prerequisite course where the material should have been learned. Provide students with opportunities to complete targeted reviews or supplemental activities that are self-paced.
  - In some cases, one or more weekly office hours may be set aside to specifically review a prerequisite topic.
- **For identified prerequisite skills, provide supplemental materials** such as videos, text references, and review problems for students to review if needed.
  - Faculty should not overwhelm their time creating new content. Appropriate content is often already available. Use videos found online, and excerpts from open-source texts such as those found on [Openstax.org](https://openstax.org). Faculty can also partner with each other to share materials made for the prerequisite courses in order to manage the additional workload.
  - Avoid expensive review tools found online. Requiring these will only exacerbate the economic hurdle that some students are facing.
- **Focus on good communication between instructor and student.** It is probable that each student will have a unique set of skills in need of remediation. Instructors need to foster an environment where students are comfortable seeking individual help.
  - Messaging services such as [Remind](#) or [GroupMe](#) are often seen by students as less formal than email or phone calls. Using these can help students overcome the fear of asking for help.
  - Preferred contact methods should be well-established at the start of the semester.
  - More than ever, it is imperative that instructors have and keep office hour commitments.
  - Emails, calls, or other forms of communications sent by a student should be responded to promptly. This fosters the connection between the student and instructor and makes it more likely that the student will seek help in the future.
- As a community, we must **foster an environment where students are aware of services that are here for their assistance.**
  - Our campus has numerous resources for students such as tutoring. We need to ensure that these resources are visible by advertising them well throughout the semester.
- Because traditional incoming students likely have experienced some level of under-preparation in their high school curriculum due to the shift to online learning, courses

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taken in high school and grades earned in those courses during the pandemic are less likely to be strong indicators of preparedness. **We must take great care in advising students new to UCA** to avoid overloading them with courses based solely on their transcripts. We should supplement that information with discussions with students to better understand their level of preparedness before recommending course enrollment.

- **We must avoid strategies that remediate students at the cost of meeting the original goals of the course.** While we must adjust to the current climate and meet the needs of current students, we have an obligation to them to make sure that their degree is not diluted. When our students enter the job force, graduate schools, or other endeavors beyond their degree at UCA, they will suffer if we sacrifice quality in their degree programs.
- In this [recorded discussion](#) from the Chronicle of Higher Education, a panel discusses how institutions can maintain or even increase retention and close equity gaps by changing their teaching strategies.

As we begin to emerge from the pandemic, we would be remiss if we did not celebrate our collective efforts over the last 14 months. Faculty and staff have stretched their comfort zones and adapted to the greatest challenge any of us has ever faced, and we have done it together. Let's take advantage of the many things we've learned over the last year as we look forward to a more normal fall semester in 2021.