Dear Associate Deans,

On behalf of the University Students' Council at Western University and the 35,000 undergraduate and professional students we represent, I write to share our thoughts on the past semester of online instruction.

In March of 2020, our institution made an unprecedented pivot to online learning that came as an incredible learning curve to students and teaching faculty alike. While students were saddened to have lost out on the remainder of the year, we welcomed this shift and appreciated Western's decision to prioritize the safety and wellbeing of the campus community amidst the pandemic.

When it was clear the threat of COVID-19 would not subside prior to the start of the Fall semester, we were thankful for your leadership and prioritization of our in-person learning experience that led to one of few blended post-secondary models in Canada. This past semester there were significant investments in student financial relief, digital course design and technology-based supports for online learning. We are understanding of the challenges associated with this shift in educational delivery, appreciative of the countless hours dedicated to our success and believe the best interests of student's learning should remain at the forefront of your decisions moving forward.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had considerable impact on the post-secondary sector, leaving everyone from faculty to students needing to consistently re-evaluate what's going well and how we can continue to adapt. The path forward in digital learning will rely on open dialogue between institutions and their students, as it is the only way to truly identify how to effectively engage an online classroom. As our first-ever predominantly digital semester draws to a close, the USC compiled some of this feedback to highlight the positive initiatives taken by faculty members at Western, as well as recommendations that your faculty could incorporate into their courses as they are reconfigured to support student success in the Spring 2021 semester.

This pandemic has had a unique and widespread impact over the course of the last 10 months. Students have suffered from food and job insecurity, complex living situations and extended periods of social isolation which have resulted in increased stress, anxiety, intense feelings of loneliness and an overall drastic decline in their mental and physical health. These among other factors have caused significant stress and will likely leave a lasting impact on their futures. The USC is committed to the success and wellbeing of undergraduate and professional students and in light of the aforementioned challenges, urge you to adopt the following recommendations while approaching your students with increased compassion.

University is one of the most exciting and defining time periods in one's life journey. We hope you can appreciate how the university experience has been altered as a result of the pandemic and the subsequent impact it is having on students and their wellbeing. Western's fundamental belief in creating, disseminating and applying knowledge for the benefit of society is what makes us one of the leading institutions in Canada and what makes the USC confident that you will thoughtfully consider the student feedback and recommendations enclosed in this brief.

We are grateful for your leadership throughout the challenging year of 2020 and welcome the opportunity to further discuss and define the future of post-secondary education in 2021.

All the best in the New Year and Spring semester.

Sincerely,

Victoria Barroso
Vice-President University Affairs

For ease of reference, this brief is broken into three sections that address various perspectives of online learning for students: Interacting with Course Content, Interacting with Other Students and Interacting with you, their Instructor.[1] Each section contains a set of recommendations instructors are encouraged to implement in their courses this semester as well as future semesters as appropriate. Additionally, all recommendations are summarized on the last page of this document.

Section 1: Interacting with Course Content
Consider how students will engage with the course (i.e. reading, listening to/viewing lectures) as well as how to elevate their learning beyond these basic expectations (i.e. what will students actually DO with the course content).

a. *Integrating synchronous components, even in asynchronous courses.*
While there are benefits to asynchronous learning, the reality for many students this year has been a lonely and isolated educational experience. Making sense of course material from behind a screen has been draining, especially when this often requires additional energy and effort to clarify concepts and ask questions through individual meetings with faculty and teaching assistants. **Incorporating synchronous lectures or a suggested work schedule** can help students manage coursework and upcoming deliverables. For asynchronous courses, **introducing an optional session once a week to review concepts taught through self-directed learning** can assist students in solidifying their knowledge as well as provide a space to ask questions, relieving the scheduling burden of individual meetings from both the student and you as an instructor.

b. *Staying within the specified class time and providing regular breaks.*
As many faculty and staff have experienced, the transition to zoom meetings has created a back-to-back schedule that could result in hours of uninterrupted screen time. This issue exists similarly for students with back-to-back lectures

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[1] "Student-Centered Remote Teaching: Lessons Learned from Online Education," EDUCAUSE Review, January 15, 2021, https://er.educause.edu/blogs/2020/4/student-centered-remote-teaching-lessons-learned-from-online-education.

that no longer incorporate the 10-minute break that was once necessary for travel time between classes. By remaining conscious of the time between classes, instructors are reminded to **end class with enough time for students to take a reasonable break** - stretch, use the bathroom or get a quick snack before their next online commitment. **If a lecture is scheduled for longer than one hour, the USC encourages instructors to give students a short break.** In this new reality, you never know how long someone has spent sitting at their desk. Briefly stepping away from the screen has been proven to improve engagement and focus[2] and will allow everyone, including teaching faculty, to return more energized.

c. *Creating built-in extensions for assignment deadlines*
Many professors have broken their courses down into smaller, more frequent assessments. While this is a good way to help students stay on track and up-to-date on material, having multiple assessments for multiple courses each week has resulted in an overall increase in workload and faster burnout of students. In many faculties, professors have implemented an automatic extension on major assessments. **This could mean giving two extra days for students to submit an assessment without penalty so they can manage their workload with slightly less pressure.** Some courses have even gone so far as to set all major deadlines on Fridays with the weekend as an automatic grace period for students if needed. The feedback the USC has received from students indicates that this change has had a positive impact on their mental wellness and academic success. Therefore, we highly encourage you to implement built-in extensions into your courses next semester. **If this is not possible, clearly communicate to your students how they can request an extension or accommodation if needed.**

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[2] "The Science of Taking a Break," OnlineSchools.org (OnlineSchools.org, November 24, 2020), https://www.onlineschools.org/science-of-study-breaks/.

d. *Opt-in to accessible practices and universal design for learning.*
For many students, the transition to online learning has posed more challenges than just keeping up with additional coursework. Students with disabilities and learning exceptionalities have faced increased barriers in digesting course content and having their necessary accommodations met. When approached by students who require accommodations, we ask that you approach them with compassion and make the necessary efforts to **ensure they are able to engage with the material for your course**. We urge you if you are not already, to **caption any videos or recorded lecture content.** If you have questions about accommodation or how to ensure your material is accessible, Accessible Education is happy to assist in navigating this process and working towards a universal design for learning! They can be reached at aew@uwo.ca

e. *Avoid remote proctoring where possible.*
The introduction of remote proctoring software this year has forced students to download invasive software to complete major assessments in which many modules rely on for degree progression. At the USC, we have engaged with many students on this issue and the bottom line remains that like many faculty members, we also strive to uphold the integrity of our degrees through fair and honest assessments. Following the data breach and subsequent shutdown of ProctorTrack this past semester, we have seen that the pivot to alternative assessments is not only possible, but a way for students to demonstrate their knowledge in a more meaningful way. **We encourage you to continue to shift in this direction as long as online learning is a reality - creating alternative assessments such as assignments, projects and reflections that allow students to apply their knowledge** rather than an anxiety-inducing environment that involves the use of an invasive software.

Section 2: Interacting with Other Students
How can students work with others while isolated in their homes? Consider how students can collaborate, meaningfully engage, think critically and challenge one another beyond just competing assignments and assessments.

a. *Effectively integrating group work and fostering student-student connection[3]*
   After 10 months of isolation, students are struggling with the lack of social engagement and often feel alone in their studies and in their free time. At the USC, we understand that helping students engage with one another in a digital learning environment can be difficult but are excited to share some strategies which resulted in positive feedback from students this past semester. While synchronous lectures can be a good way to allow students to engage with each other, both group work and virtual breakout rooms have also proved effective in fostering those connections.

   i. *Group Work*
      Creating roles within assigned group projects that each member can assume will help to ensure equitable distribution of labour among the students. By taking on this responsibility as an instructor, you are helping to eliminate the tension and awkwardness that comes with meeting and working with new people in an online environment. Additionally, **providing a clearly defined project timeline and checkpoints** that help students move forward from one phase to the next and **eliminating any element of competition for grades within the group** can help to ease the tension and allow students to focus more collaboratively on the learning outcomes.

   ii. *Breakout Rooms*
      Creating breakout rooms can be a great way to engage students in lecture material. By **breaking into groups that are smaller, yet big enough that students are incentivized to participate (e.g. 4-6),** you provide them the

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[3] "Inside Higher Ed," Advice for how to successfully guide students in group work online (opinion), October 28, 2020, https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/10/28/advice-how-successfully-guide-students-group-work-online-opinion?utm_source=Academica%2BTop%2BTen&utm_campaign=aaf8314f7e-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_10_29_08_31&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b4928536cf-aaf8314f7e-52014378.

opportunity to engage with the material and their classmates which elevates their learning and their overall mood. However, **consider having groups work on their progress in a shareable document** such as 'Google Docs' which can then be sent to you or a TA to be graded for participation. This strategy allows instructors to monitor the progress of multiple breakout sessions at once by watching the progress of each document, as well as saves valuable class time by preventing each group from having to summarize their discussions upon their return.

While being cognizant of COVID-19 fatigue, instructors should **strive to structure group work around real-world problems** in both cases. We also know that this generation of graduates will have a difficult time finding work amidst the pandemic so **wherever possible, teach students how to communicate their academic projects and achievements on their resume** and **regularly foster discussions about how to utilize your area of study in the workforce**.

b. *Remain understanding of the current reality of student life and show students kindness and compassion.*
Being kind and compassionate does not excuse students who ignore or fail to meet the criteria, not does it lower learning expectations or undermine your role as an instructor. However, being kind and compassionate does **foster healthy classrooms, lower anxiety, fear and nerves as well as models important behaviour for life after and outside of university.** As mentioned in the opening letter to this brief, students in all years are missing out on some of the most formative times in their lives. Young adults are being affected by the pandemic in ways that are often not seen or heard, and bearing the weight of maintaining various aspects of their lives to a degree of perfectionism is sometimes overwhelming. **Approaching students with compassion and understanding can not only teach your students an important life lesson, but also surprise you as your most effective driver of classroom engagement**.

Section 3: Interacting with You, Their Instructor[4]

Have you considered the ways in which your students can interact with you now that you're not longer in the classroom? How do you guide student learning in a digital environment while also remaining flexible and adaptable to different student needs? Are you continually looking to improve the way you convey information to reflect the needs of your students?

a. *Over-communicate with your students and engage with them on your preferred platform.*

A key component of each course is interaction with the instructor. Many students have provided feedback to the USC that their instructors are only communicating with them once a week, sometimes even less. We believe that student-instructor engagement can drive class participation and overall course satisfaction as a result of students feeling more connected to the material and delivery of the course. As a result, we encourage instructors to **participate and engage with students about the course content via discussion forums or other collaborative outlets on OWL** or alternate learning management systems already being utilized. Another way to meaningfully communicate with your students is by **recording and posting short videos to introduce major concepts or assignments and then hosting a Q&A session to clarify student concerns.** This allows students to refer back to your instructions when in doubt, as well as saves you the time of clarifying repetitive questions throughout the term. Finally, wherever possible we encourage instructors to **provide detailed feedback - written or recorded - on assignments.** With so much learning reliant on self-direction, it is critical that students receive constructive feedback that identify areas for measurable improvement.

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[4] Aaron Langille and Victoria Kannen, "Profs Teaching Online Need to Focus on Increasing Their Compassion toward Students," University Affairs, November 18, 2020, https://www.universityaffairs.ca/career-advice/career-advice-article/profs-teaching-online-need-to-focus-on-increasing-their-compassion-toward-students/?utm_source=Academica%2BTop%2BTen&utm_campaign=830918eb8b-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_11_20_08_00&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b4928536cf-830918eb8b-52014378.

b. *Ask for feedback*
This year has forced both students and faculty alike to make the unfamiliar transition to digital learning, and the reality is that not everything we try works perfectly the first time. Your students are the only ones who can provide you honest feedback on what is working well and what needs to improve with respect to the assessment and instruction of your courses. By breaking down this barrier and **asking students for feedback**, things can only improve for the educational quality and teaching experience of all parties.

c. *Manage realistic workloads.*
With almost all courses moving to predominantly online delivery, many professors have incorporated smaller, more frequent assessments such as weekly quizzes and forum posts into their grading structure. While we understand and appreciate the effort to help students stay on-track with course materials, having multiple assessments in multiple courses each week has been proven to lead to poor mental health and burnout for students. This semester, take a moment and **write out all of the deliverables expected of your students (each quiz, forum post, assignment and midterm)** to gain a better understanding of what their holistic workload actually looks like. If there are ways you can **reduce the workload of the students enrolled in your courses**, we highly encourage you to do so. In tandem with ensuring a realistic workload, instructors should **post content regularly** as well as **provide reminders** to their students on upcoming deadlines. **Generous assessment expectations** including multiple attempts, open-book opportunities and increased time can also be beneficial to relieving stress associated with an increased online workload.

d. *Providing mental health resources and support to students.*
Having both Western-administered and community-based mental health resources available to students through OWL or other learning management systems shows students their instructors and institution care for their well being. As mentors, we encourage professors to **uphold an open door policy** where

students can feel comfortable approaching instructors to **navigate the resources available to them and seek support.** Updated resources can be found at https://www.uwo.ca/health/ as well as the USC's wellness navigation portal, https://www.mystudentplan.ca/purplecare/en/home

Thank you for taking the time to consider our student feedback, we hope to see many of the aforementioned recommendations implemented this spring semester as well as in future years of online and in-person course delivery.

Recommendation Summary:

Section 1: Interacting with Course Content

a. *Integrating synchronous components, even in asynchronous courses.*
- Synchronous lectures or providing a suggested work schedule
- Optional sessions once a week to review concepts taught through self-directed learning

b. *Staying within the specified class time and providing regular breaks.*
- End class with enough time for a reasonable break
- Short breaks in classes longer than one hour

c. *Creating built-in extensions for assignment deadlines*
- Giving two extra days for students to submit an assessment without penalty so they can manage their workload with slightly less pressure.
- Clearly communicate to students how they can request an extension or accommodation if needed.

d. *Opt-in to accessible practices and universal design for learning.*
- Ensure all students are able to engage with the material
- Caption any videos or recorded lecture content.

e. *Avoid remote proctoring where possible.*
- Create alternative assessments such as assignments, projects and reflections that allow students to apply their knowledge

Section 2: Interacting with Other Students

a. *Effectively integrating group work and fostering student-student connection*
  i. *Group Work*
   - Create roles within assigned group projects that each member can assume
   - Provide a clearly defined project timeline and checkpoints
   - Eliminate elements of competition for grades within the group
  ii. *Breakout Rooms*

- Create groups that are smaller, yet big enough that students are incentivized to participate (e.g. 4-6)
- Have groups work on their progress in a shareable document
- Structure group work around real-world problems

b. *Remain understanding of the current reality of student life and show students kindness and compassion.*
- Compassion helps to foster healthy classrooms, lower anxiety, fear and nerves as well as models important behaviour for life after and outside of university.
- This teaches students important life lessons and is likely to be your most effective driver of classroom engagement.

Section 3: Interacting with You, Their Instructor
a. *Over-communicate with your students and engage with them on your preferred platform.*
- Participate and engage with students about the course content via discussion forums or other collaborative outlets on OWL
- Record and post short videos to introduce major concepts or assignments and then host a Q&A session to clarify student concerns.
- Provide detailed feedback - in written or recorded format - on assignments

b. *Ask for feedback*
- Ensure the feedback process is anonymous.

c. *Manage realistic workloads.*
- Gain a better understanding of students' holistic workload by writing out all of the deliverables expected of your students (each quiz, forum post, assignment and midterm)
- Reduce the workload of students in your courses wherever possible.
- Post content regularly and provide reminders.

d. *Providing mental health resources and support to students.*
- Uphold an open door policy to help students navigate resources and seek support.