

UF Online: Ideas for Ensuring a Thriving Learning Community



We offer this document to the teams that are working hard – right now – to realize a new reality. We are all grappling with how to transition our Universities to a more flexible model to best ensure our students may persist and thrive in their academic pursuits with the support of faculty, advisors and essential staff teams. *Each and every dimension* of our Universities must now be transformed into a more physically-distanced and likely online reality while we heed wise guidance of campus leadership and public health experts. We offer this document to aid in the collaborative process occurring across colleges. That said, we know that this is just one approach and we look forward to learning from the approaches of others as well. The University of Florida has been supporting thousands of Gators in fully-remote programs since 2014 via UF Online. For those interested, we also offer some of our lessons learned from our first four years in the front section of our [2019-2024 Plan for UF Online](#), published December 2019. ***We hope you find our experience and seven-part framework useful as you design your own future models for your students in your programs.***

UF Online has been focused on these same challenges and opportunities for the last five years. The core question being: how can we deliver a fantastic and supported Gator experience to each UF Online student, regardless of their location? To achieve that, we started by focusing on two key pieces: ensuring high-quality course and lab environments (designed and taught by UF faculty) and, also equally important, ensuring a thriving, networked, collaborative, and engaged learning community. By giving equal priority to both values, we were able to evolve into our current model: *Seven Dimensions of UF Online: Ensuring a Thriving and Engaged Learning Community*. All these steps are only possible thanks to the efforts of teams across UF. We refer to that as our *Campuswide Commitment*.

Yes, there are seven, but please don't see it as a daunting list of steps. The seven dimensions are simply a depiction of what you and your college have already been doing: just now typed out so you may consider how to remote enable and/or physically distance each one. Truth is, we know you go far beyond these dimensions. We also know that each layer is unique to your college thanks to your local culture. You can translate your culture into a physically-distanced model – we know you can. We've done it now for five years for UF Online students and each year we get better at it. Thankfully, this effort has paid off and our students are thriving, and UF Online is now a proud part of UF's ongoing commitment to our students.

We hope you find this document useful. We hope this helps you think through how you may wish to approach not only your classes but how you foster community with your students outside their classes and with your teams. Each dimension is described below to assist your teams in thinking through how to remote enable your University environments, right now.

Your colleagues at the [University of Florida Online](#)

UF Online: Seven Dimensions that Ensure a Thriving Online Learning Community



- **Dimension 1: Student Academic Achievement and Effort.** Starting at the far right, all our efforts as a campus contribute to our students' success, but at its core, our model starts with the academic achievement and effort of our students. This dimension, therefore, is the domain of the student. In fact, our core programmatic dimension is the accomplishment, effort and learning by UF students. Driven and controlled by the students themselves, we expect each student to engage academically and to be present in their chosen pathway with a receptiveness to timely advice from advisors and faculty. To facilitate that, UF Online also strives to provide individualized support to each of our students.
- **Dimension 2: Faculty Leaders and Mentors.** The next dimension focuses on the efforts, impact and approaches of UF faculty as teachers, mentors, research advisors and more. Combining the initiative of students eager to engage and prioritize learning, UF faculty lead the way in content, course design, and teaching. UF faculty and many UF graduate students work tirelessly to design, deliver, teach and evaluate all academic delivery to students. Faculty foster innovation, drive success and often serve as mentors to students outside the digital classroom. This dimension, therefore, is focused on the role of faculty, their effort and what is required to truly support them in these endeavors.
- **Dimension 3: Coursework and Labs.** Fueled with the creativity and acumen of their discipline or field, faculty design all courses and labs for UF students, often with or without the aid of a teaching support team comprised of expert instructional designers, graphic designers, and more. Faculty start with articulating the learning objectives tailored to and for each individual course. From there, faculty ensure an engaging and thoughtful learning experience to achieve those objectives using a variety of teaching approaches, tools and formats. Plus, each course benefits from a mid-course check-in with students to weave in real-time feedback into the delivery of each course. Each course can also point students to enriching resources to help achieve course objectives such as UF library resources, supplemental digital content, optional visual digital catalogs, in-home applied learning exercises, academic in-home kits, and/or videos or optional observations via live-streamed events and more.
- **Dimension 4: Academic Program Pathways.** The next dimension we focus on – beyond the individual course and role of individual faculty and student effort – is the deliberate design and delivery of UF academic programs and pathways, comprised of courses, labs, and experiential learning requirements, as designed by faculty, departments, and colleges here at UF. This category includes not only curriculum but sequencing of courses, experiences, co-curriculars, as well as a variety of delivery formats, modalities and duration for completion. In light of the pandemic,

academic majors and pathways have been altered or reinvented during the COVID-19 response and, as such, this dimension requires special attention as we continue to effect a new reality for our campuses.

- **Dimension 5: Academic Advising.** The next category of our UF undergraduate experience is the key role played by academic advising. Advising exists outside of, on top of, and in synergy with classroom learning. Looking across each student's academic coursework and their progression along their academic program pathway, advising is the critical partnership *between student and advisor*. This professional cadre across campus advises students in a myriad of ways, using various methods, approaches and fora. Advisors build a relationship with the UF student focused on supporting the student in their pursuit of their academic goals while at UF. Advisors also assist in course registration, proper course sequencing, connecting students with academic support services (i.e., tutoring, career counseling), mapping career interests to degree offerings, and overall advisors help ensure each student has the support they need to excel academically. UF colleges may also opt to have additional experts that focus on career counseling and job placement or promotion for specific disciplines or majors.
- **Dimension 6: Amplified Learning Programs.** While highly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, these amplified learning programs complement a student's academic major. From internships to capstone courses to study abroad, students can take advantage of amplified learning programs. These opportunities complement our robust academic offerings by allowing students to explore their interests through a hands-on approach. These programs must also be remote-enabled to enrich the experience of our UF students as they pursue academic and career goals. Research projects, service projects, field study, and student authorship are all examples of programs that can and should be available even in a fully-remote college model. Although not driven by faculty, student-driven clubs and associations can also thrive in an online environment with meetings, mentorship, and collaborative projects, all possible via Zoom and more.
- **Dimension 7: Learning Environment and Community.** Taking dimensions 1-6, you have an almost complete look at the UF college enterprise experience, yet category 7 focuses deliberate attention on how UF fosters and experiences community across our colleges, across all undergraduate programs, and among faculty, advisors, staff and students across all majors. You can think of this as your college experience, or in UF Online, we look at how to engage and connect students across the 10 colleges with now 25 majors in UF Online. In this dimension, consider how you will foster an amazing experience so that your students truly feel like Gators, part of the UF community even while apart. In UF Online we engage our online students via [the UF Online Plaza, a virtual community environment](#). What might you embrace to support and engage your students? Consider service projects, led by faculty, all now enabled with remote teams and collaborations, as just one example. Now fully-remote, what practices or experiences can be brought into your virtual environment to connect students in your college as well as across disciplines and colleges?

Each semester we all will learn and improve our learning environments. With empowered teams on all the above, no doubt we will thrive in our new normal. We're the Gator Nation and the Gator Nation is everywhere. It's great to be a Florida Gator!

We'd love your feedback. What's missing? Anything unclear? We'd love to hear from you: info@ufonline.ufl.edu.