



September 2021 Leadership Update

Colleagues,

Now that we're a full month into our fall term, I hope many of you are settling into your routines and getting used to teaching, learning and working in the blended environment — in-person and virtual — in which we find ourselves.

It's a far cry from the atmosphere we'd experience on our campuses during a normal school year, but the opportunity to finally engage in person with some students and colleagues has certainly helped me to feel the sense of community that is a cornerstone of the Oakton Experience.

Engagement and connection. That has always been the key to the magic that happens at Oakton, for students and employees.

I know there's a lot happening as we work to fulfill our day-to-day responsibilities, both professionally and in our personal lives. But I can't emphasize enough the importance of taking time to continue to meaningfully engage with one another and our students. From my personal experience speaking with students, that is what they tell me they want and need most.

There have already been opportunities to engage with students this term, and more are on the horizon. I hope many of you enjoyed the Welcome Weeks events and Fall Fests on both campuses. Our equity commitment calls us to be intentional in creating a sense of belonging for all students at Oakton, particularly for students who have historically been minoritized. This week, our Black Student Success program hosted several welcome events, not only to inform students about the support services available, but also to provide opportunities to engage with both Oakton employees and peers, creating the connections that we know are so important in creating a sense of belonging.

There are also events planned for the next several weeks as we continue to celebrate [Latinx Heritage Month](#). The Latinx Heritage Month committee (Brenda Cruz, Stephanie Herrera, Beth Wrobel, Evelia Giraldo, Sandra Payan Cataño, Dr. Eva De La Riva, and Valeria Benson-Lira) have put together a range of programs that offer opportunities to deepen our learning about the Latinx community and to create connection and community for students and colleagues.

Next week, our COMPASS leaders, Dear Aunaetitrakul and Stacey Vanada, will host a mixer for our AAPI community. These focused outreach and engagement opportunities are critical in creating the holistic support that allows students to thrive at Oakton.

We also know that current events are impacting members of our community, particularly our Haitian and Afghan communities. Take time to check in with students and colleagues, particularly those who are personally connected to these communities. Let them know you see them and support them and remind them of the support offered through the Wellness Center and the Center for Campus Inclusion and Diversity (CCID).

Despite our intentional outreach and engagement efforts, we've continued to experience significant enrollment declines. Our 10th day (Census Day) enrollment numbers indicate an 11.4% decrease in enrollment, compared to fall 2020. Remember, it's not too late to engage current and prospective students who may benefit from enrolling in a late-start class this fall. This is an excellent way for students to progress toward their Big Goals, even if they missed the start of the fall term.

Engagement is needed now more than ever, as we continue to formulate bold strategies to increase enrollment and persistence rates, as we did ahead of the fall semester.

You may recall we incentivized students to invest in their education this fall by offering three free credit hours to any student enrolled in at least nine credit hours. Nearly 3,300 students qualified for this incentive, some of whom registered or increased their class load specifically to do so. All told, this amounted to more than \$1.3 million in tuition savings for students this fall.

Perhaps as important to our enrollment strategy as attracting new students to Oakton, is ensuring current students remain enrolled and persist toward their goals.

When I became president in 2015, I established the Wildly Important Goal (WIG) of increasing student persistence rates from 45% to 54%. Our fall-to-fall persistence rate for all students is 49.1%, down slightly from last year's rate of 49.7% (we achieved our peak persistence rate of 51.4% in fall 2019.)

Like attracting new students, we must also continue to implement bold strategies to improve persistence and retain students. Students involved in the Faculty Persistence Project consistently persist at higher rates than non-persistence project students. New students enrolled in at least one Persistence Project course last fall persisted at an 18% higher rate than non-Persistent Project students. It's not too late for faculty to [sign up to be part of the Persistence Project](#).

Enrollment and Persistence will be the topic of this semester's first Equity Summit, Wednesday, Sept. 29 at 3 p.m., via Zoom. Please join us to examine data using an equity lens and explore strategies to help students enter and persist along their academic paths and reach their Big Goals. ([Link to join](#))

Even though there remains much work to do, I want to again emphasize how truly grateful I am for all you've done to engage students during this seemingly unending pandemic.

That's especially true for this month's Lifesavers, recognized by their peers and students for their outstanding commitment and dedication, including:

Mohamed Amirisefat
Jason Arndt
Carlos Briones
Julio Capeles
Debbie Christie
Manuel Contreras
Vanessa DeJesus
Chris Dube
Princess Escudero
Peter Hurley
Tamara Laws
Matthew Lee
Tess Lesniak
Sujie Mann
Jeff Manson
Kristin McCartney
Kayla Mitchell
Dale Navigato
Ricardo Olave
Rob Peterson
Jennifer Reeb
Joe Scifo
Raynard Shelton
Prashant Shinde
Marian Staats
Julie Sumner-Garibaldi
Jon Turnbull
Barbara Vazquez
Joan Warmbold Boggs
Larry Williams

Thank you to all who have provided proof of your COVID-19 vaccination or enrolled in weekly COVID-19 testing, per the state mandate. If you haven't completed your vaccination status form, please do so as soon as possible. You can find the link to the form at www.oakton.edu/return. I also want to acknowledge the tireless efforts of the Covid Response team for operationalizing our compliance with this mandate, particularly IT, for developing a technical solution for verification and HR and Student Affairs for coordinating compliance processes.

Getting as many employees and students as possible vaccinated and conducting regular COVID-19 testing are the best ways to preserve our community health and resume more face-to-face classes and operations — something we all need to remain engaged and connected.

Finally, as a reminder, please save the date of Wednesday, Oct. 27, for the annual all-College Learning Day.

The topic for Learning Day is Strategic Planning. As most know, the College's next Strategic Plan is currently in development and will go into effect in mid-2022. This plan will guide us toward achieving our bold vision of creating just communities through education. I look forward to exploring how we can work together to realize our bold vision and big ideas during Learning Day. All employees scheduled to work that day are expected to participate. More information will be forthcoming.

Yes, we continue to navigate through challenging times, but I'm so proud and grateful for all we've accomplished through our collective dedication, hard work, and of course, grace and flexibility. Continue to take time for yourself and your family to ensure your physical, mental and emotional wellness as we continue to engage with one another and our students throughout this semester and beyond.

In community,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Jri'.