

# OLC Leadership Network Symposium

2023 REPORT



# AUTHORS

**Kristen Gay**

Online Learning Consortium

**Andrew Swindell**

Online Learning Consortium

**Jennifer Culver**

Southern Methodist University

**Renee Ford**

Penn State University

**Megan Holt**

Northern Illinois University

**Connie Johnson**

Colorado Technical University

**Janue Johnson**

San Diego Mesa College

**Sarah K. Lee**

Collin College

**Catherine Manly**

Bay Path University

**Dacia McCoy**

University of Cincinnati

**Renee Pilbeam**

Arizona State University

**Stephanie Poczos**

Excelsior University

**Kena Ray**

Arizona State University

**Valora Richardson**

United Negro College Fund

**Tina Rettler-Pagel**

Madison College

**Anita Samuel**

University of Health Sciences

**Matthew Vick**

University of Wisconsin-Whitewater

**Michelle Wiley**

Penn State World Campus

**Yan Xu**

Spelman College

**Heather Zink**

American Public Education, Inc.



# CONTRIBUTORS

**Dylan Barth**

Online Learning Consortium

**Madeline Shellgren**

Online Learning Consortium

**Jonathan Lashley**

Idaho State Board of Education

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# WELCOME LETTER

MARY NIEMIEC

I have just returned from spending the week as a faculty member and convener at the 2023 Institute for Emerging Leaders in Online Education (IELOL), hosted by the OLC and the University of North Carolina – Charlotte. First created by Larry Ragan and the team at Penn State, IELOL is now in its 17th year, and the program’s hundreds of alumni are in leadership positions throughout higher education. As always, the week had a profound impact on my passion for online learning, my gratitude for amazing colleagues, and my hope for the future of our field. The opportunity to provide a welcome for this valuable report on the Leadership Network Symposium, with the observations and takeaways from the week with the IELOL family still fresh in my mind, is one too good to pass up.

Leadership in our field is not a straight road and it does not originate from only certain positions within an organization. It is a winding road that hardly ever begins at the top. Many of us who found ourselves leading online efforts did not begin with that career goal in mind. I did not fill out my ‘what I want to be when I grow up’ on my kindergarten profile card as an Associate Vice President for Digital Education. I also did not leave a legacy in my high school yearbook that I saw myself

in that position when I retired. Instead, situations beyond my control put me in a place to recognize and take advantage of an opportunity to be an entrepreneur in an organization that was not known for embracing change.

Three of my colleagues, Cristi Ford, Karen Pedersen, and Jason Rhode, recently led a session on “future ready skills.” During that session, they introduced the concept of VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) in a changing landscape. If you are currently working in higher education, then you have come face to face with VUCA. Our field requires us to continuously evolve to address the ever-changing advancements, requirements, and societal views that impact the work we do. This is why I found the concept of VUCA riveting, but the following concept my colleagues introduced resonated even more: turning the acronym into actionable, positive steps – vision, understanding, clarity, and agility. We can respond to ever-present change by pivoting, adapting, building collaborations, and forging a new path.

The ability to pivot and see opportunities is a wonderful skill to nurture and develop. But it would be naïve to think that an individual



alone would achieve true growth and change. The incredible value of a network of colleagues, within your organization and beyond, is key to success. Becoming that entrepreneur in my organization happened because I had the most amazing colleagues, mentors, and advocates along the way. Quite frankly, if it were not for my very talented team and the engagement with organizations such as the OLC, I know that my career and my ability to lead effectively would have been a fraction of what it was. My achievements were due, primarily, to the amazing network of individuals who so very generously provided advice, input, partnership, and friendship.

As my friend, Garvey Pyke, often says – “lead from wherever you are.” Leadership is not defined by a job title, and it is not limited to those who have decision making authority. Leadership is a willingness to take a risk and make yourself vulnerable to criticism. It is a

determination to have a vision and own it. It is the resilience to pursue goals when confronted by barriers and, to adapt expectations (yours and others) to keep moving forward. Leadership is the ability to communicate purpose and focus to others – no matter your role at the institution.

The OLC Leadership Network provides resources for building effective practices, sharing, and connecting. There is no one road map for our field – mission, vision and external factors all require a customized plan. As you create that unique path for yourself and your institution, begin here – harvest the resources, nurture relationships and partnerships, engage, contribute, and participate. Your return on investment will be significant.

**Mary Niemiec**

Board Member and Former Board President  
Online Learning Consortium



# WELCOME LETTER

LIZ CIABOCCHI

In reading through the report to follow, I am immediately struck by the significant changes that have occurred in online and digital leadership development programs since the early years of the Online Learning Consortium ("OLC," formerly Sloan Consortium). For me, the OLC has always been a beacon of leadership development in our field. Its founding and earliest members – all leaders and pioneers in their own right – were rightly focused on cultivating future leaders in the field, and they have done so consistently and admirably. Their initial efforts, typical of the time, were situated in the context of asynchronous online teaching and learning and the OLC Five Pillars of Quality Online Education ("the Pillars"): Learning Effectiveness, Scale, Access, Faculty Satisfaction, and Student Satisfaction. Professional development events and activities, e.g., conferences and workshops, in the earliest years of the Consortium were appropriately aligned with the Pillars. However, the contexts within which online and digital higher education leaders implement and operationalize them has shifted dramatically. We can easily see evidence of these changes, some of which

are sweeping and immediately obvious to anyone who has been paying attention to online learning for the past decade, and some of which are more subtle.

I believe it is no accident, for example, that one of this report's themes is humanism and values-based leadership. Now more than ever, regardless of position and title, individuals in online and digital learning leadership roles must approach their relationships with professional colleagues and constituents with care, concern, and compassion. Leadership is, by definition, an activity that should first and foremost create community, and it should also elevate and strengthen the collective. While I have participated in some excellent professional development programs throughout my career, much of it delivered by the OLC, this particular emphasis on humanism and values-based leadership has risen to the top over time and was not necessarily a major focus of our earlier programming. While a grounding in leadership theories and their application in online higher education remain critically important in leadership development, the manner in which we lead and who we are as leaders are just as important.



On a related note, we have seen a huge shift in emphasis on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) in our leadership development programming. This is a positive and necessary focus that has brought the talents, skills, and knowledge of individuals who were previously excluded from these leadership development opportunities – both as learners AND facilitators – to the table. One of the most valuable assets of the OLC is the richness and diversity of its membership, executive leaders, staff, and Board of Directors. OLC has made very conscious, deliberate choices over the years to center its activities around the strategic priority of promoting DEI. Nowhere is this more evident than in its Leadership Network, as well as its programming for the Institute for Emerging Leadership in Online Learning (IELOL). DEI is a thread that connects the two ends of the leadership development spectrum, represented by these two programs.

Lastly, I would turn your attention to the critical importance of using valid and reliable data for decision-making – another theme in this Leadership Network Symposium report. In an era characterized by constrained resources, considerable pressure from all quarters to demonstrate the return on investment of a college/university education, rapidly evolving teaching and learning technologies, and an increasingly diverse and changing population of learners, online and digital higher education leaders must become at least conversant, if not proficient,

in the use of data (set in its proper context, of course) to justify important decisions. These decisions include the setting of strategic priorities, resource allocation (financial and human), financial management, academic program development and student enrollment, to name but a few.

There is much more to say about the OLC Leadership Network and the incredibly rich discussions and outcomes featured in this report. To anyone interested in taking a leadership role in online and digital higher education, I would say read the report, reflect on those areas that speak to your particular interests and role, and get involved with the OLC at whatever level and in whatever way feels most comfortable and helpful to you. To those who are further along on the leadership journey and aspire to greater heights (I am thinking of our recent IELOL alums here), I believe you have found ‘your people’ already! I urge you to join the OLC Leadership Network and continue your journey with us. The OLC is ripe with opportunity for anyone with a passion for online and digital higher education – there is a place for everyone and so much work that remains to be done to continuously improve our field.

**Elizabeth (Liz) Ciabocchi, Ed.D.**

Vice Provost for Academic Affairs  
Adelphi University  
Immediate Past President, OLC Board of Directors  
IELOL Class of 2010



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# ABOUT THE ONLINE LEARNING CONSORTIUM AND Uwill



The [Online Learning Consortium \(OLC\)](https://onlinelearningconsortium.org) is a collaborative community of education leaders and innovators dedicated to advancing quality digital teaching and learning experiences designed to reach and engage the modern learner—anyone, anywhere, anytime. OLC inspires innovation and quality through an extensive set of resources, including best-practice publications, quality benchmarking, leading-edge instruction, community-driven conferences, practitioner-based and empirical research, and expert guidance. The growing OLC community includes faculty members, administrators, trainers, instructional designers, and other learning professionals, as well as educational institutions, professional societies, and corporate enterprises. Learn more at [onlinelearningconsortium.org](https://onlinelearningconsortium.org).



Student Mental Health & Wellness

Colleges partner with [Uwill](https://uwill.com) to complement their mental health and wellness solution by offering students immediacy and choice with no obstacles to tap into our community of licensed therapists. Uwill offers an immediate appointment with a licensed counselor based on student needs and preferences, a direct crisis connection, wellness events, and more.





# ABOUT THE LEADERSHIP NETWORK SYMPOSIUM AND THIS REPORT

## The Inaugural Event

Leadership has been foundational to OLC initiatives, workshops, and events since the founding of the Sloan Consortium in 1992. As interest in leadership strategy and community-building has grown over the intervening years, we have been inspired by the success of our previous Leadership Network events and requests from leaders across the globe to create a meaningful space to convene and connect with experts, decision makers, and thought leaders in the areas of online, blended, and digital learning. This outpouring of interest resulted in our launch of the inaugural OLC Leadership Network Symposium (LNS), sponsored by [Uwill](#), at the 2022 Accelerate Conference in Orlando, Florida. The symposium featured a keynote, concurrent sessions, and a closing panel related to themes such as centering equity in digital learning, aligning institutional and digital strategy, and designing sustainable ecosystems for equitable, quality digital learning. These sessions were led by 33 speakers from a diverse range of institutional contexts, which resulted in rich conversations about the most pressing challenges and opportunities facing online, digital, and blended learning educators.

The OLC will continue to host an annual Leadership Symposium at our Accelerate Conference. We hope that these ongoing conversations will continue to drive innovative thought, actionable strategies to achieve and sustain quality online, digital, and blended learning environments, and resilient programs that are able to adapt to changing educational landscapes.

## Our Process

This report serves as a living memory of the important conversations, challenges, and opportunities raised during the inaugural LNS.

The OLC's Director of Research, Kristen Gay, and Director of Global Events, Katie Fife Schuster, assembled a team of OLC archivists and trained them to capture important themes and takeaways during the symposium sessions. We also welcomed volunteers at the conference to participate in the note-taking process during sessions to track significant topics, resources, and questions. After the notes were compiled, Kristen Gay and the OLC's Educational



Researcher and Publishing Coordinator, Andrew Swindell, analyzed the notes for emergent themes.

Once we had established the most frequently referenced and discussion-provoking themes, we invited all LNS attendees to participate in an asynchronous, collaborative writing retreat. Co-authors reviewed our corpus of OLC and volunteer archivist materials and Accelerate sessions that were tagged for the Leadership Track, even if they were not a part of the symposia.

The sections that follow feature our syntheses of these themes and highlight notable insights and key takeaways to inform the ongoing work of all leaders in higher education. The multi-faceted picture that emerges is of a community that is driven by a continuous improvement mindset, always seeking to better serve students and center equity and quality in our practices. The report also reveals the enduring importance of events like the LNS that provide opportunities for discussion and resource sharing as we chart sustainable futures in online, digital, and blended learning.





# 2023 LEADERSHIP NETWORK SYMPOSIUM THEMES

## Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

### *DEI Development and Definitions*

In the LNS sessions focused on the topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), strategies emerged surrounding a key question: How can leaders most effectively mobilize DEI initiatives to support students? In [Centering Equity in Digital Learning Leadership: Findings and Perspectives from the Field](#), Valora Richardson, Ruanda Garth McCullough, and Terry DiPaolo (with Melody Buckner moderating) discussed the dangers of “achievement gap gazing,” or noticing the achievement gap without responding to it with meaningful action. Garth McCullough noted that this can create an immense cognitive load for students who are not being educated in a culturally responsive way. Panelists suggested that there is also a challenge in doing DEI work that it can sometimes be “the same 12 people you’re talking to” because culturally-responsive and anti-racist professional development are not often required or incentivized effectively by leaders. They challenged leaders to ensure that all instructors and staff are required to access robust training: “[The] role of institutional leaders is to invest in

professional learning. Include it in the tenure and promotion process. Do not make it optional.” As they noted, our students are savvy and see how we engage with DEI initiatives. They are often frustrated when we pay lip service to DEI work without making it a priority in practice.

The panelists also explained that an ongoing barrier to DEI work is a lack of understanding of what “equity” actually means. Garth McCullough cautioned: “Institutions need to start by defining equity. Diversity and inclusion are not equity. I worry when we go to measure equity later – what are we actually measuring? What standards do we use to hold faculty and programs accountable? We don’t define equity the same way.” Failing to adequately define equity will result in failing to implement and assess equity-driven practice.

### *Ecosystem for Equitable Digital Learning Infrastructure*

In [Creating a Sustainable Ecosystem for Equitable and Quality Digital Learning Infrastructure](#), Kristen Fox, Karen Vignare,



and Michael Berman defined equity as a “heightened focus on groups experiencing disproportionate impact in order to remediate disparities in their experiences and outcomes.” They explained that if it is implemented thoughtfully and intentionally, digital learning can lead to more equitable learning experiences for students. Their suggestions for effectively leveraging digital learning to facilitate equitable learning included:

- Emphasize digital learning, equity, and student success goals publicly for organizational consistency and accountability;
- Incorporate faculty voices into decision-making to create a shared commitment across the organization for digital learning;
- Incorporate student voices into planning and decision-making;
- Secure sustainable resources and funding and explore flexible funding options such as the institution’s own foundation or philanthropic grants;
- Empower faculty and department leaders to take risks and align incentives and policies accordingly;
- Use data disaggregated by race, income, and other student characteristics to inform decision-making and ongoing learning;
- Consider when and where to build vs. partner.

A key takeaway from the session was that DEI work cannot be successful in a vacuum; it requires buy-in and active engagement from students, faculty, and staff in order to be effective.

In [Equity Considerations in Evaluating Online and Blended Learning](#), Janue Johnson and Cheryl Murphy highlighted the need to move beyond lip service to ask intentional questions such as:

- Are you planning for equity?
- What policies do you have that speak to equity?
- What data are you using to know whether or not your institution or program is moving the needle?
- Are you regularly hearing from faculty and students to better understand how you can support them?

Johnson and Murphy encouraged leaders to critically reflect upon their role and responsibility and to avoid attributing outcome disparities to perceived deficits in students (identities, life circumstances, or capabilities). They concluded by highlighting our need to continually ask who our policies are designed to support. Are they supporting the institution? Faculty? Students? And, if they are designed to support students, we need to continually ask: which ones?



## Humanism and Values-based Leadership

In the 2022 Leadership Network Symposium (LNS) presentation titled [Strategic Approaches for Cultivating Emerging Leadership](#), Amanda Major, Cristi Ford, and Emma Zone argued that values-based leadership begins with caring for others. Participants were encouraged to reflect on the people who had invested in them and to think of ways they could reciprocate the gift to other emerging leaders. The panelists shared that leadership is about thinking beyond one's comfort zone; it involves participating in a community outside of one's own institution and recognizing the potential of colleagues and the work they produce, even when results are not immediately visible.

During the session, the presenters further emphasized the importance of leadership in digital learning and career advancement. Key takeaways that emerged for leaders were:

- Maintain a focus on sharing knowledge and gifts;
- Be a change agent;
- Create a legacy;
- Break away from the reliance on titles to lead from where one is.

The role of leadership in creating and sustaining equity was emphasized, especially in the wake of the pandemic and the shift to online learning. Presenters encouraged attendees to get out of their echo chambers

and be open to new ideas and experiences as they forge the way forward. Tips for career advancement included creating communities, determining and playing to one's strengths, and advocating for oneself when necessary. The use of social media for brand building was also discussed, with presenters recommending that attendees post once a week, engage with LinkedIn as a community of practice, and share innovative content that gets people thinking in new ways. The final call to action was to take risks, be bold, confront fears, create opportunities, and be patient in doing meaningful work.

### *Utilizing and Leveraging Social Media*

Josie Ahlquist presented on [Digital Leadership: Humanizing How We Communicate, Teach and Lead Online](#) and delved into research from the past ten years from faculty, administrators, and campus executives. Ahlquist explained how to apply a strategic and values-based approach to leveraging social media. The framework for digital leadership is not just about improving one's personal brand; it also involves finding humanizing ways to reach students, support staff, celebrate faculty, and more. This session demonstrated how higher education leaders are actively leveraging social media tools using the guiding principles of digital leadership, personalization, change, connection, strategy, and legacy. Ahlquist suggested that digital leadership in higher



education should be personalized, value-based, and purpose driven. Leadership is relational, so it is important that leaders reflect on their “why” for leading online and who they are leading rather than focusing on accruing followers.

### *Systemic Assessment of Academic Integrity*

Carissa Pittsenberger, Laura Williams, Christopher Kline, and Lestelle Greenwalt from Western Governors University presented [The Whole Package – Integrity as a](#)

[Holistic Institutional Approach](#). These cross-functional educators shared their start-to-finish assessment process specifically designed to ensure academic authenticity and integrity given the increase in cheating during pandemic emergency remote instruction. Panelists argued that taking a holistic view of the assessment lifecycle can help increase the security of assessments, uphold academic integrity, and increase the value of credentials and degrees.





## Workforce Education

Promoting equity and accessibility has consistently remained an important goal in workforce education. The panel [Charting the Future of Workforce Education](#) focused on how educators can best prepare students to achieve their professional goals. In this session, Angela Gunder moderated a conversation with three co-presenters: Luke Dowden, Jill Buban, and Andrew Shean. The panelists discussed how higher education institutions play a crucial role in facilitating “employment-relevant learning” opportunities for students. Universities increasingly provide a mix of degree programs and non-degree, credit-bearing, and non-credit-bearing programs, such as career pathways, certificates, or micro-credentials. These programs are designed to lead to a job or enhance adult learners’ upskilling or reskilling goals. While such programs provide added opportunities for students, they also pose new challenges for higher education leaders.

One major challenge is that although adult learners look for better, faster, and cheaper programs, higher education institutions that strive for program scaling often place a higher emphasis on the “faster” and “cheaper” variables while overlooking the “better” piece. In order to meet this challenge, the presenters suggested that leaders recognize that adult learners are not

only a subpopulation; they are the force that drives education, and educators should consider their needs as they design courses and programs.

The following are strategies that were discussed to help foster quality workforce education:

- Nurturing a lifelong learning culture;
- Humanizing the populations the institutions want to serve;
- Forming strategic collaborations with industry partners, employers, and competitor programs to connect students to opportunities.

While such an approach brings value to multiple stakeholders in workforce education, especially adult learners, their employers, and the industry, it also demands that higher education institutions closely analyze the needs of workforce sub-groups instead of treating them as a monolithic entity. In addition to providing customized educational options for the workforce, leaders should also engage adult learners in applying what they learn in professional contexts and developing higher-level critical thinking skills.



## Institutional Leadership

Higher education leaders today are engaging not only with strategy surrounding online programs and courses, but also a range of digital tools, learning management systems, and student management systems. Equally important are the changing roles and responsibilities of faculty who are, at many institutions, focusing on student outcomes while also grappling with new digital technologies and shifting expectations for flexible course design that meet the needs of online, remote, and blended student modalities. At the 2022 LNS, several key areas of institutional leadership were highlighted: situational leadership, which is needed to effectively navigate today's higher education landscape; leadership development, which is a focus area of the digital learning community and necessary to continue building capacity to guide change; and strategic leadership, which is needed given the proliferation of learning modalities and

digital tools. These leadership competencies were recognized as vital for leading organizational change and digital learning initiatives in higher education.

Bettyjo Bouchey, Shelley Kurland, and Erin Gratz, editors of the inaugural publication of the OLC Press, [From Grassroots to the Highly-Orchestrated: Online Leaders Share Their Stories of the Evolving Online Organizational Landscape in Higher Education](#), spoke in a panel format with select *Grassroots* authors about the impact of institutional structure on digital learning leadership. Due to differences in institutional structures, cultures, and missions, panelists argued that a one-size-fits-all approach to digital learning leadership is not effective. Instead, leaders should leverage insights from their local contexts and communities.

Panelists in the presentation, [Creating Alignment Between Institutional and Digital Strategy: Insights from Digital Learning Leaders](#), discussed strategies for institutions during different stages of online program implementation and development. Central to this discussion was the importance of creating “leaky silos” at institutions and finding opportunities for faculty to be consulted in strategic conversations surrounding digital learning.





## Leveraging Data

How do we effectively use data to make decisions, including determining what data are appropriate for decision making? How do we engage appropriate decision makers and faculty in the data collection process? In the discovery session [We Built This House on Data: Building Infrastructure and Culture Around Data Access and Usage](#), Jamie Holcomb from Unitek Learning discussed the importance of aggregating multiple data sources and the challenges associated with collating data from multiple sources. A key takeaway from this session was to not just use data in a vacuum, but rather to ensure that data collection and analysis are focused on answering specific questions. Moreover, the practice of using a collaborative and real-time 'data dashboard' was discussed as a practice leaders can employ to better organize the complete data landscape, from

original research question(s) to data driven answers.

In [Not-So-Secret Agents: Leveraging Campus Advisory Groups to Guide Professional Learning Goals](#), Eric Loepp and Nicole Weber from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater guided a discussion around supporting the use of data for action, intervention, and decision making. One approach for engaging faculty in using data to support learning initiatives is to create a faculty advisory board to discuss ideas, trends, and review data as a first step to sharing research with other stakeholders. Such a group can assist with data collection efforts and decision making based on these data. The presenters caution that structure and planning is central to the success of an effective advisory group.





## Quality Teaching and Learning

### *Program Quality, Assessment, and Redesign*

In [The Changing Landscape Of Online Education \(CHLOE\): Empirical Findings For Digital Learning Leaders](#), Eric Fredericksen, Bethany Simunich, and Richard Garrett led attendees through CHLOE 7 report's strategy and findings. The panelists argued that online and hybrid learning are not just a temporary response to the pandemic; they are modalities that are here to stay. Given this new landscape in teaching and learning, a central lesson from this session was the need for leaders to better grapple with the question: How are we measuring quality across modalities?

A prominent answer that emerged was that quality in an online course manifests differently when compared to a face-to-face course, but many institutions still do not have quality standards for face-to-face delivery. Additionally, institutions should have conversations about online policies related to the student experience, such as response time, feedback deadlines, and communication expectations, which all contribute to effective learning for students. Ultimately, the discussion of the CHLOE 7 report revealed that while many institutions have adopted quality assurance standards for online courses, there is a considerable gap in the measurement and evaluation of those standards. Digital learning leaders must find ways to adopt a set of quality

teaching standards, implement these standards across their departments, and regularly assess their impact.

### *Micro Credentialing*

In their presentation titled [Charting the Future of Workforce Education](#), Angela Gunder, Luke Dowden, Jill Buban, and Andy Shean touched upon the need for innovative “unbundling” of degrees as well as improvements in quality teaching and learning. Jill Buban spoke about the need for institutions to be innovative and think beyond traditional degrees by offering microcredentials and stackable degrees. She referred to this approach as “pursuing a degree in bites” and provided the healthcare industry as an example of a field greatly in need of this innovation to respond to short-term workforce shortages.

Andy Shean shared how a senator told him that “Higher Education needs to be cheaper, faster, and better.” We are entering an era where stakeholders are expecting educational institutions to “bend the cost curve.” At the same time, lifelong learning and employment-oriented learning are going to increasingly drive conversations in higher education. Luke Dowden expanded upon this when discussing the need to scale up innovation, but not by seeking to “design from a place of stability.” Instead of seeking stability, we need to approach design from a

people-centered perspective. “Better” cannot be forgotten when considering the values of: “Better, Cheaper, Faster.”

### *Student Success and Choice*

In the [Building Hyflex Programs Through Crossfunctional Collaboration presentation](#), Rachel Stern-Lockerman, Joshua Barnes, and Andrew Farrell discussed designing eight Hyflex courses to meet the varied needs of students enrolled at CUNY Queens College. Although faculty were asked to step out of their comfort zone, instructional designers, instructional technology specialists, and staff from the Center for Teaching and Learning

guided educators through designing and delivering their first Hyflex course. As presenters noted, despite growing pains, they were successfully able to honor student choice in regards to course modality without sacrificing course quality. The collaborative efforts of the teams improved the quality of the course delivery for the students. As higher education providers, the future of HyFlex will continue to hinge upon collaboration among faculty and support teams and a commitment to incorporating student feedback to facilitate positive student outcomes.





## Emergency, Pandemic, and Crisis Management

Leadership plays a critical role in emergency, pandemic, and crisis management in higher education. Leaders must be proactive in their approach to crisis management by developing plans, preparing staff, and identifying potential risks. In times of crisis, leaders are also tasked with the challenges of: ensuring that proper protocols and procedures are in place; making difficult decisions; providing stability and clear and consistent communication to their team; leading response efforts in a timely manner; and coordinating with outside organizations and stakeholders, such as local health departments and government agencies, to ensure a comprehensive response. As a crisis unfolds and resolves, there is also an impetus to remain aware of the potential impacts on students, faculty, and staff. Leaders might take steps to mitigate these effects by providing support services and resources, such as counseling and mental health services, to help the community recover from the crisis.

The COVID pandemic put many higher education leaders in unique positions to put emergency and crisis management steps into practice. Several sessions from Accelerate 2022 addressed emergency, pandemic, and crisis management in the digital learning landscape.

In the session, [Ten Years Later: Lessons](#)

[Learned about Crisis Management and Instructional Technology](#), Hanna Howell shared how the University of Alabama-UA Online implemented a proactive approach for future crisis situations by engaging stakeholders in using the Crisis Management Cycle. This cycle includes five phases: planning, prevention, response, recovery, and learning. The University of Alabama-UA Online has used this cycle twice in the last ten years, for example, for both a natural disaster and the COVID-19 pandemic. The institution's response was improved from one crisis to the next by using existing instructional technology and reflecting on successes and failures during the learning phase.

Cynthia Berthram's session, [Opportunities for Educational Transformation from COVID-19 Disruption](#), engaged attendees in a reflective, inter-institutional exploratory experience to identify and share lessons in online teaching and learning from the pandemic. The session used Stanford University's "Report on Opportunities for Educational Progress from our COVID-19 Experience" as its backdrop for the session. The report was produced through a two-phase research process, including internal institutional data analysis and over 50 qualitative interviews with university leaders, faculty, staff, and students. The report highlighted that instructor empathy was crucial, the move to



remote teaching increased access for some but not all students, the faculty-student relationship changed, and staff were key in rebuilding instruction online.

The challenge of completing a decennial reaffirmation process during a global pandemic was the focus of Greg Pillar's and Melissa McCartney's session, [Surviving a Decennial Reaccreditation During a Global Pandemic](#). Decennial reaccreditation refers to when universities and colleges that hold institutional (also known as regional) accreditation are required to reaffirm their accreditation on a consistent cycle (i.e. every 8 or 10 years). Using the backdrop of a small, private university, the presentation focused on the challenges of maintaining and documenting compliance with more than 70 standards, particularly those related to distance education. The challenges included maintaining forward progress in reaffirmation efforts despite overextended/stressed faculty and staff, capturing real-time data and information on temporary changes in policies and practices, and assuring consistency in capturing assessment and institutional effectiveness despite changes in operations. Multiple strategies for completing (and surviving) the reaffirmation included building a network of support institutions, strategically focusing resources, and ensuring consistency in documenting compliance.

In [Continuing to Collect the CHANGE: Further Exploration of an Aggregation Model for Change](#), Tawnya Means and Kelvin Thompson offered an aggregated change model to help institutions lead organizational change. This deliberate change management approach focuses on how small changes add up and acknowledges that leaders often lead from wherever they are in their institution. The Collect the CHANGE model focuses on the long-term impact of small, iterative steps, and can be applied in areas such as faculty development, course design, or program development.

The major shifts required by the unexpected switch to emergency remote learning during the pandemic highlighted the need for quality in online learning. Kaye Shelton encouraged attendees to consider [What We Learned from COVID and Turning the Ship to Quality Online Learning](#). Online learning advocates faced new challenges after the pandemic since the negative experiences many faculty and students had during emergency remote learning now needed to be addressed. This was exacerbated by the need to make the ongoing case for quality educational experiences that online learning can facilitate. The OLC Quality Scorecard is one tool that can address these challenges, offering guidance for developing quality online learning experiences as well as demonstrating that quality in online learning is practical and possible.



Best practices for facilitating and managing online education have evolved over the years, and the Changing Landscape of Online Education (CHLOE) study has chronicled such changes since 2016. The most recent report was discussed in [The Changing Landscape of Online Education: Findings from the CHLOE 7 Study](#) by Eric Fredericksen, Bethany Simunich, Ron Legon, and Richard Garrett. CHLOE is informed by surveys of chief online officers around the United States, who report pandemic-induced changes in the management of online and accelerated

learning. CHLOE offers context for planning and managing online learning by sharing what other institutions are doing to support their online students and the faculty and staff who deliver online learning experiences. Key CHLOE findings discussed in this session included: increased net student enthusiasm for online learning after the pandemic, the trend of some institutions minimizing support for faculty development, and increased institutional investments in online mental health support.





## Faculty and Instructional Designer Support

### *Faculty Support*

In their session [Exploring Faculty Support Models: A “Faculty Concierge” Model](#), Anita Samuel discussed the changing landscape of higher education. The pandemic shifted how students and instructors interact in online and onsite classroom environments, precluding the “return to normal” that many anticipated. Samuel’s concierge model consisted of three faculty members who provided individualized guidance and support on instructional design, educational technology, and online education. Special attention was paid to the unique structure of each course and the needs identified by instructors. As faculty gained more familiarity with teaching in online environments, their support requests were reduced, and faculty reported satisfaction in discovering that their unique course brand was preserved in the

transition to an online modality. A key takeaway was that this model effectively empowered faculty as the owners of the course, helping facilitate a smooth transition to online instruction.

### *Instructional Designer Community Building*

Conversations stemming from the [Book Club, Coffee Chats, and Burrito Bars: Building Community on Instructional Design Teams](#) presentation mirrored many of the changing pedagogical trends observed during the pandemic. Presenters Adam Davi, Stephanie Tammen, Janet Smith, Laura Smith, and Cathy Russell, noted that while they had previously enjoyed team building activities such as yoga, walks, and an annual burrito bar, their team engagement had to be reimagined in the face of a remote work environment. As a way to foster communication and generate new instructional design strategies, Adam Davi discussed how the development of a team book chat simultaneously enabled him to preserve a strong team dynamic and refine his own managerial practices.





## Enrollment and Retention

A clear marketing strategy is vital for online programs to successfully tell their stories and connect with potential/current students. This topic was discussed in [Leading Marketing and Enrollment Strategy: New Approaches and Methods for Our Digital Learning Future](#), featuring Terry DiPaolo, Melissa Vito, Samantha Becker, and Darcy Hardy. The presenters argued that developing a unique, holistic value proposition for online programs helps to create a niche with the competitive market and determine appropriate strategy for an organization. Marketing should not be approached merely as selling, it should be viewed as a crucial way to tell a story about what is happening on one's campus.

The panel also discussed how the University of Arizona focused on quality and did their own market research in developing their marketing strategy. They quickly learned that they needed an enrollment team that understood the needs of online students. They also found it productive to consider questions such as:

- Who are our authentic students?
- Who will we be serving?
- How do we build an online program that reflects those needs and can continue to grow and be agile as the market changes?

Darcy Hardy specifically spoke about a need for online providers to understand that “build

it and they will come” does not work.

Programs should not assume students will automatically enroll in a program because it is online and flexible. They need to identify their own particular niche and vision for online education. Panelists stressed that marketing initiatives will not be effective until a program can clearly articulate their vision.

The panel also highlighted ways for institutions to market strategically in the face of declining enrollments. If a college, already facing declining enrollment before COVID, views online learning as a way to increase enrollment, they may be setting themselves up for failure. They need to first identify their target audience (regional students, dual enrollment students, etc.) and promote their services accordingly. Storytelling is not effective if your audience is “everyone.” “Everyone” will just ignore the blur of your message. Effective marketing has a specific target persona and a strategy designed to connect specifically with them. Questions to ask include:

- Why should this student want to be part of your family?
- How is the university welcoming students into your family and supporting them?

Storytelling personalizes the marketing experience for everyone; potential students are able to see themselves in the online



program, and faculty and staff also see the role they play in the larger institutional story. But in order for this to happen, the storytelling piece has to be compelling and captivating.

Additionally, many are now questioning the value of a college education in our current historical moment. The panel suggested that programs focus on skills, competency-based education, and workforce readiness to justify investments of money and time and highlight relevance. They also noted that the marketing story should feature how the institution has been able to help a variety of students achieve their goals.

When discussing program retention, presenters recommended that leaders avoid focusing on student readiness for online learning. Instead, they should flip the approach and focus on how the institution can be ready to meet different types of students where they currently are. Students are paying for the opportunity to learn; they don't need to be viewed as consumers, but their investments of money and time should be respected.





# CONCLUSION

Exploring the challenges and opportunities that face online and digital leaders has perhaps never been a more salient topic, especially given the renewed attention to online, digital, and blended approaches to learning. The purpose of this report is to share key takeaways and emergent themes from the first annual LNS with current and future leaders in the field of online, digital, and blended learning working. These themes have significant implications for leaders in a range of contexts – from institutions of higher education, to government and non-profit organizations, to the private sector. As the collaborative writing undertaken by the authors and contributors of this report demonstrates, collaboration must play an ongoing role in leadership development across sectors.



**Figure 1.** Nine Core Themes from the 2022 Leadership Network Symposium



While this is by no means an exhaustive list of the complex ideas that emerged during LNS presentations and discussions, we believe it highlights the rich dialogue attendees enjoyed and captures significant moments and resonant themes for ongoing consideration. The breadth of topics represented also speak to the diverse skill set and challenges that digital and online leaders need to address in their daily work. Leadership in digital, online, and blended environments is not just about leading or managing people; these ever-changing environments demand that leaders remain flexible and immerse themselves in contemporary education challenges, including keeping up with workforce and enrollment trends, ensuring online, blended, and digital landscapes are driven by a commitment to equity, and leveraging data to build sustainable programs.

The first LNS provided an important space for leaders to gather and share their challenges, successes, hopes, and ideas for the future. We look forward to charting the future of online, blended, and digital leadership together and encourage you to add your voice to these crucial conversations by attending a future LNS Symposium event.





**Online Learning Consortium**

6 Liberty Square #2309

Boston, MA, 02109

[research@onlinelearning-c.org](mailto:research@onlinelearning-c.org)