**South Texas College**

**July 2020 News Center**

**‘Q’-Tips: Expert Advice for Hacking the ‘New Normal’ this Fall.**

A new semester. A new *normal*.

As the battle against COVID-19 continues to threaten higher education this fall, South Texas College is bringing flexibility to the fight.

With plans in place for an 80-percent online/20-percent hybrid model prioritizing student safety, STC is ensuring that students don’t miss a beat, even as the health crisis evolves. And though it may have commanded the attention and effort of virtually every member of the campus community, South Texas College is officially ready for the re-boot.

“Everyone pitched in,” says Dr. Anahid Petrosian, Vice President of Academic Affairs. “For our part, we just try to be very flexible.”

From faculty and facilities, to scheduling and support, the cross-departmental effort entailed a review of online and in-person offerings from every possible perspective. By front-loading the considerable logistics and legwork this summer, the College hopes to eliminate confusion, and relieve stress for students in the fall.

“I think this is going to change our students in how they are students,” philosophizes Dr. Brett Millan, English Professor and online education innovator at STC. “When we establish those lines of communication with classmates and faculty…[we] create a network of support.”

So… what sorts of changes can South Texas College students expect this semester?

***Online***

**Exceptional Faculty… Online-*Approved*.**

On the distance learning side, STC has delivered on plans to accredit virtually every faculty member to teach online, through Online Training Certification (OTC) courses. According to Dr. Petrosian, this will bolster the College’s already robust online offerings, while creating the infrastructure necessary to host the influx of remote learners.

“When we come back in fall, we’ll be in a much, much better situation, based on faculty that will be very well prepared in best practices for online teaching,” says the Chief Academic Officer, who reports that 98 percent of faculty has completed the OTC course.

***More* Virtual Options.**

Already a pioneer in Texas online education, STC has expanded virtual offerings by moving thousands of sections online. In addition to Blackboard-powered lectures, nearly four in five sections will now meet remotely. Students will have the option to choose their method of learning and will not necessarily be limited to their initial choice.

The idea, says Dr. Petrosian, is to give “students flexibility to change their minds,” potentially transferring into open in-person sections, or dropping hybrid classes to join an online section before semester begins. Meanwhile, if state coronavirus mandates were to shift, “we know we have to be ready at any moment to take everything online.”

***24/7* Remote Support.**

If the pandemic has a silver lining for higher education, it may be the fast-tracking of distance learning protocols. In fact, to many pioneers of online education, the remote revolution was destined to happen independent of the health crisis.

“Students who were afraid of online learning before…will realize the advantages online learning can provide,” says Dr. Millan, who received a Distinguished Teaching & Learning Award for his contribution to online education in 2008. “[It’s] more intimate, ironically.”

With new ways to connect come new challenges. On the student support side, STC has committed to full remote conversion of counseling, career, financial aid, academic support, and transfer services through the Centers of Learning Excellence. As part of the shift, faculty office hours will also be moved online.

In addition, the College has contracted with Blackboard Student Help Desk to provide after-hours support, and the Distance Learning department will offer newly enhanced online orientation sessions.

As for those students concerned that they “just can’t learn online”?

“They can,” says Dr. Millan. “It [just] takes a different set of priorities and skills.”

***In-Person & Hybrid***

**Pre-Screening Checklist**

While faculty geared up to go remote, the facilities and maintenance teams were busy solving a Rubik’s Cube of logistics. The primary challenge? How to communicate and enforce an ever-changing set of guidelines, while continuing to deliver a worthwhile classroom experience.

The result was the South Texas College [Policies List](https://www.southtexascollege.edu/emergency/coronavirus.html) and [Daily COVID-19 Screening Checklist](https://www.southtexascollege.edu/emergency/pdf/daily-covid-19-screening-checklist.pdf), published in late July. The documents, available in PDF and physical format, outline common coronavirus symptoms and procedures for locating information and assistance. The handouts will continue to evolve as campus protocols and state guidelines shift. “Every week, we’re still reviewing,” says Dr. Petrosian.

**Reduced Traffic, Distanced Desks.**

Don’t be surprised if many campus hallways look more like ghost towns this semester, says Dr. Millan.

The desolation is by design. In collaboration with facilities and custodial employees, college leadership has drawn a complex blueprint for staggered use of buildings, floors and classrooms this fall. Meanwhile, in-person classes will be limited to 20 students, divided into two cohorts of 10, with desks more than six feet apart to ensure student safety and comply with the governor’s orders.

“We’ve never had large class sizes,” says Dr. Millan. “[Now] it’s organized so we don’t have sections back to back.”

Beyond in-class distancing, the knotty logistics of fall semester safety entailed an intense review of the buildings themselves. “You have to disinfect… if you put a class on the second floor, there are ADA issues,” says the professor, referencing just two of the most pressing logistical concerns.

The solution? Limiting hallway use to one side at a time and running elevators on a reduced schedule to coincide with regular custodial visits.

“The college has a detailed routine in place,” ensures Dr. Petrosian.

**Up with PPE.**

Delivering a safe, successful semester means more than just mandating masks. And while face coverings will be required for all in-person learners while on-campus, they’re just *part* of the PPE plan.

The College undertook a large-scale purchasing effort over the summer, working with faculty and maintenance staff to identify the materials most critical to the safety of the campus community. The plan is to supplement the required masks with optional face shields, intensified custodial schedules, and additional protective coverings for hands-on labs.

“First and foremost we had to think about student safety,” says Dr. Millan. “We’re ready for students when they’re ready for us.”

*[SIDEBAR -- INSET]:*

**Tips for a fantastic fall semester…**

After an exhausting summer of labor and logistics, South Texas College is 100% open and committed to hosting students — online and in-person — beginning August 24.

To help students get up to speed, we’ve asked two veteran South Texas College leaders for advice, suggestions, and hot tips for this first-of-its-kind fall semester.

**Tip #1: “Expect the Weird.”**

With the “new normal” shaping up to be *anything* *but*, STC English Professor Dr. Brett Millan is urging open-mindedness:

“This is uncharted territory,” says Dr. Millan. “We know things are going to change. Just expect the weird. Accept the ‘I don’t know.’”

**Tip #2: “Settle in.”**

There’s no avoiding it, says VP for Academic Affairs Dr. Anahid Petrosian: the first week of fall classes will be something of a whirlwind. According to Dr. Petrosian, however, it’s a time for *preparation*, not for panic.

In fact, *all* South Texas College classes will be held remotely during the last week of August, to ensure communication and compliance regarding COVID-19 protocols.

“We want to give faculty and students a chance to settle in during that first week,” says Dr. Petrosian.

**Tip #3: Seek Support.**

From first-time students to veteran administrators, virtually every member of the campus community is feeling the pressure to bring things “back to normal.” And while STC’s support services have largely migrated online, they’ll continue to play a crucial role in giving students the tools they need to persist.

“[Last semester] we delayed withdrawal dates and worked with students on grades and deadlines to help them reduce stress,” says Dr. Petrosian. “For our part, we just try to be very flexible.”

Visit **studentservices.southtexascollege.edu** for assistance with applying, registering, making a degree plan, or transitioning to online learning.

**Tip #4: Keep *Focused*.**

It’s a myth, according to Dr. Millan, that online learning makes it harder for students to connect with their curriculum and classmates. In fact, the decreased anonymity of online sections, coupled with increased focus and intimacy, can actually *improve* engagement for some types of students.

“It changes the dynamic,” says the professor and online learning innovator. “Maybe they’re too shy to ask a question in class… [but] online they send me 10 questions, so they’re not stuck or confused.

“For some students I’ve had both online and face-to-face… it’s the same *person*, but it’s a *different student*.”

**Tip #5: Stay *Safe*.**

When in doubt, urges Dr. Millan, *always* prioritize personal safety. From making a habit of applying (and re-applying) college-provided hand sanitizer, to practicing social distancing in classrooms and on campus quads, student safety will ultimately depend on the actions of individuals.

“I like to avoid clichéd phrases, but it really does take a village,” says Dr. Millan.