USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences
Academic Quality Plan, Fall 2020

As requested by the Provost, this document outlines USC Dornsife’s plans for delivering online education that meets our quality expectations and the needs of our students, faculty and programs.

As our sudden pivot to online teaching and learning in March 2020 showed, we are gifted with large numbers of faculty who were able to get the most from the many rigorous and creative pedagogical opportunities the online environment affords. Of course, we also encountered challenges, but having initially responded in “crisis mode,” our aim is now to provide online education that is intentionally designed and expertly delivered. In pursuit of these goals, our efforts have been divided as follows:

1. Establish Standards for Online Educational Excellence
2. Build Communities of Practice
3. Support Training
4. Provide Instructional Resources
5. Update Campus Infrastructure
6. Survey Students

Please note that in the event that the public health situation deteriorates to the point that in-person and hybrid courses are required to go fully online, all classes will be held to the standards articulated in this document.

1. Establish Standards for Online Educational Excellence

In collaboration with the Dornsife Faculty Council and the Dornsife Directors of Undergraduate Study, the Office of Curriculum and Instruction has developed a framework for online pedagogy. In keeping with the academically-diverse nature of Dornsife, our commitment to applying practices grounded in disciplinary expertise, and our strong tradition of intellectual independence, this framework is not intended to be prescriptive or autocratic, but rather to provide a scaffolding within which faculty can situate their own practice. As such, the “Primer” opens with the statement that “The faculty own the curriculum” and that “USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences recognizes that its faculty preeminently create and enhance the academic excellence of the university. As such, we uphold the prerogative of the faculty to determine the content, structure, assessment and management of their courses in accordance with their status as disciplinary experts, dedicated teachers and scholars of distinction. For further information on faculty rights and responsibilities, please see the USC Faculty Handbook, Chapter 3-B.” From there, the “Primer” elaborates on six key principles:

- Encourage Active Learning
- Nurture a Sense of Community
- Combine Synchronous and Asynchronous Material
- Reflect the Distinctive Qualities of USC Dornsife
- Ensure Equity and Accessibility
- Care for Yourself and Your Students

The principles are laid out in a web resource entitled “A Dornsife Primer for Teaching Online,” with each principle serving as an umbrella for a range of pedagogical strategies. The “Primer” is the result of several months of work and constitutes the foundation for our approach to online
teaching. More information is available here: https://dornsife.usc.edu/teaching-in-dornsife/dornsife-primer-for-teaching-online/

2. Build Communities of Practice
Individual departments and programs within Dornsife are organizing groups of faculty around key courses or areas of study. In English, for example, faculty have organized discussion groups around topics such as introductory literature surveys; creative writing workshops; and upper division courses organized around genre, period and theme. These groups will exchange ideas and coordinate strategies to teaching online. College-wide, we are developing the community discussion through our practicum blog, “Teach On, Dornsife!” which already contains a considerable amount of valuable content: (https://dornsife.usc.edu/teaching-in-dornsife/lasblog/) The blog is updated several times a week by volunteer posts solicited from the faculty and by a core team of contributors with prior experience of teaching online.

3. Support Training
Many Dornsife faculty have taken advantage of CET trainings, including a very large number who have participated in the Accelerated Online Teaching Intensives this summer. In addition, Dornsife hosts a range of resources on the Curriculum and Instruction website (https://dornsife.usc.edu/teaching-in-dornsife/dornsife-online/), and is hosting a series of web conversations, “Teaching in Dornsife,” this summer in coordination with its three divisions. The first of these will be organized in collaboration with the Levan Institute for the Humanities.

4. Provide Instructional Resources
In May, the faculty were asked via the Directors of Undergraduate Studies to list the hardware and software they anticipated needing for the fall. With this in hand, Dornsife Technology Services (DTS) has stockpiled a range of the most commonly-requested equipment including laptops, desktops and tablets, as well as additional monitors, microphones and other items available for loan or purchase. In addition, we have secured expanded licenses for the most frequently requested software packages, including online lab packages, Camtasia, Adobe Creative Cloud, etc., and aim to fully meet the technological needs of every faculty member teaching online this fall. DTS has announced a series of workshops for faculty focused specifically on technical issues. For faculty intending to teach in the streaming hybrid mode, we will provide a teaching assistant to help manage online and in-person audiences and organize the class.

5. Update infrastructure
DTS is currently inventorying all the roughly 90 Dornsife-scheduled classroom and instructional spaces with a view to ensuring their technology supports the various modes within which we will deliver content this fall. For in-person classes, each space needs only a projector or LCD panel. If the class will be used for pure online or streaming hybrid modes, rooms will be fitted with a projector/LCD screen, camera, microphone and speakers. In addition, we are upgrading ACB 238 to create an online teaching studio containing some newer and more feature-rich learning technologies with a DTS media services technician on-site. This studio can be booked by faculty and can be used to stream lectures or prepare in advance a quantity of asynchronous material with higher production values and utilizing equipment such as a lightboard.

6. Survey Students
In order to ensure academic quality at the level of individual programs and courses, Dornsife will invoke its “Peer Evaluation of Teaching” model that devolves responsibility for ensuring teaching quality to the experts within the departments. Each department will be charged with disseminating the principles of online teaching that constitute the “Primer” and with ensuring the
quality of their instruction. At the College level, we intend to survey the students in weeks 3 and week 7 to build a picture of their experience to date, and to address any problems that arise. Any significant issues that emerge will be handled directly by the Dean for Undergraduate Education and Academic Affairs. Regularly checking in with our students through all available channels of communication will be key to the success of the coming semester, and we also intend to do this with faculty too.