

Looking Back After the Pandemic: How We Stayed Open by Closing Our Doors

By Marc Baum, Oak Crest Institute of Science | Photo by Paul Webster



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Biomedical innovation depends on scientists running laboratory experiments, so a pandemic-imposed long-term closure of Oak Crest in 2020 could have had serious consequences for the Institute. To remain operational, in March 2020 we developed a PCR-based test following CDC guidelines to detect the SARS-CoV-2 virus on nasal and/or oral swabs and

became subjects in our own clinical workplace surveillance study. The study was approved by our Institutional Review Board and everyone at the Institute (faculty, staff, family members, and visitors) joined the study even though there was an option to stay home while remaining on the payroll.

Closing our doors to everyone except those who were regularly tested for SARS-CoV-2 offered a complete protection against workplace transmittal of this little known disease. We were safe in our quarantine and could work together on important research projects as a team. Our laboratory-based research continued, with a focus on the SARS-CoV-2 virus and COVID-19 infection, and was able to provide important scientific contributions to understanding the disease. By closing our doors we also protected our staff and household members.

A small group of community college students joined us in the clinical study and continued working in the labs. These students also helped when we joined forces with the Los Angeles Unified School District, UniteLA, and Monrovia-based students to provide online learning, lab tours, and mock interviews, and since 2020 we were able to reach more students than we did before the pandemic.

We gave students insight about what a biomedical research laboratory is like and introduced them to a broad range of scientists involved in research. Students met young people from the local area in their early career stages to discuss their educational choices. The students also talked with established scientists to ask questions about issues affecting their lives. In the early days of the pandemic, the questions focused on what viruses were and how protective measures worked. Later, the students began to ask about immunity, vaccinations, and how antibodies worked. It was a good indication that pandemic panic was cooling down when student topics moved onto issues of climate change, the problems with naming things in biology, and the role serendipity plays in science discovery.

The Institute is proud to report that by closing our doors to the outside world we continued operations in a safe and responsible manner, provided staff with a sanctuary bubble during difficult times, and increased our online outreach contacts.



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Oak Crest Institute of Science (Oak Crest) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization established to teach and conduct cutting-edge science research. The institute provides an experience-giving role in education, where students work on authentic, funded research projects and develop a sense of belonging to the STEM community.

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