REPORT

Responding to COVID-19: A chief academic officer's perspective

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Introduction

When it became clear to me in early March that the global COVID-19 pandemic was indeed going to reach my liberal arts college in the upstate region of South Carolina, my first thought was: *Can we even do this?*

For four years, I have been the Provost of Wofford College, a private, residential liberal arts college in the South. The Provost is a college's chief academic officer, responsible for the quality and delivery of an institution's academic curriculum and co-curriculum. Wofford has about 1,800 undergraduate students and no graduate programs. Our 143 full-time faculty are teacher-scholars who are dedicated to creating and maintaining a challenging, rich and carefully mentored learning experience for our students. I want to emphasize the word *residential,* not only because close to one hundred percent of our undergraduates live on campus for four years, but also because it underscores the crucial nature of the face-to-face experience for everything we do. In a time when enrollments are declining in private, four-year liberal arts colleges across the country, Wofford has been fortunate to experience steady and even growing enrollment, while retaining more than ninety percent of the annual incoming class. Part of the reason for that success is the close, interpersonal work in which we specialize and for which liberal arts colleges are known. So, when it was clear that the rising tide of the global pandemic would soon be lapping at our shores, making remote instruction suddenly necessary, my first worry was: C*an we even do this?*

The *can* of my worried question took on two dimensions. On the one hand, I wondered about technology. Did we possess the necessary software, hardware and bandwidth for our faculty to teach remotely and for our students to learn successfully? Did our students all have the WiFi and hardware access at home that would make it possible for them to persist in their spring courses? If not, how could we quickly acquire what we needed? On the other hand, I harbored a deep concern about methods and approach to teaching. As Dr. Anne Catllá, Dr. Dan Mathewson and Dr. John Miles, my wise colleagues in Wofford College's Center for Innovation and Learning (CIL), soon pointed out—technology is a tool, not a pedagogy. Even if we turned out to have the necessary technology on hand, would faculty be able to adjust quickly and effectively to the distortions and attenuations of the suddenly mediated environment in which they had to work?

Planning for a Pandemic

From my perspective as provost, three things were paramount: protecting the health and safety of everyone in the Wofford community; ensuring that the spring semester (then not quite half over) would be completed; and in service to those goals, providing students and faculty the vital support and training they needed to make all of this possible remotely. Beginning in earnest on March 12th, my team and I shifted fully into crisis mode. Regular meetings were postponed, new ones were hastily scheduled. Knowing that the

likelihood of sending everyone home was growing by the minute, I huddled with our IT staff and the director of our teaching center to inventory our assets and challenges, and to sketch a picture of how continuity of instruction might look. I learned more in those couple of days about Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Moodle, Wofford's course management system (CMS), than I ever imagined was possible.

Most important to me was that sound pedagogy, not technology, lead the way. I therefore asked our director of the CIL, Dr. Anne Catllá, to take charge of preparing our faculty for remote instruction. Anne and her colleagues led what I can only call a remarkable rally for our faculty: a series of intensive workshops about (and via!) Zoom and other digital teaching tools, open online discussions about best practices in remote pedagogy complemented by an important and thoughtful series devoted to faculty and student self-care during quarantine all followed during and after spring break.

Before I turn to the challenges of what happened next, allow me a brief excursus on Zoom as our new mode of synchronous interaction. Prior to the pandemic, I had never used this application. I was familiar with other videoconferencing tools but had only used them for one-off events. I would download the software, participate in the teleconference, then never open the app again. But as we all know, Zoom quickly became our instructional, administrative and even social habitus. "You're on mute!" became a popular refrain as we all fumbled our way through this strange, disembodied work life in which we suddenly found ourselves. We all became familiar with the virtues, as well as the shortcomings, of this mode of communication.

As a teacher of German as a foreign language for over twenty years, and someone who spends a lot of my waking hours thinking about language and communication, I was particularly attentive to the communicative disruptions and disjunctions that seemed to haunt my interactions over Zoom. At which point in the conversation it was appropriate for me to offer a conversational gambit became harder to discern. Zoom made me feel self-conscious about using humor and irony, especially in larger groups. Numerous articles have been written about Zoom fatigue, and many share with me a sense that we're all working harder these days trying to read those all-important non-verbal cues from others. Zoom scrambles the psycholinguistic picture for all of us, I think, and it has been mentally and emotionally exhausting for many people. This absolutely includes students. My colleague in French, Dr. Catherine Schmitz, really noticed the way that Zoom classes seem to challenge students by making them hyper-aware of the performative nature of foreign language learning. "Being on camera for an entire class period," she wrote,

> makes us all self-conscious of our looks and our speech patterns. This is even more true for language learners as they see how they look and speak when trying to speak a second language. During our face-to-face regular classes, a student looks at me, the teacher, and doesn't see himself or herself, and doesn't see how his or her peers react to their performance. (C. Schmitz, personal communication, June 12, 2020)

Faculty Perspective

In order to frame my thoughts for this piece, I spoke to several faculty colleagues in foreign languages who were teaching daily during the unexpected pandemic. They were quick to note the sort of toll the sudden shift to Zoom, and to remote learning in general, has been taking on students. It made these colleagues conscious, in a new way, of how the residential, liberal arts experience masks socioeconomic inequities among students. Dr. Amanda Matousek, Assistant Professor of Spanish at Wofford College, described it to me this way:

> This Zoom process also laid bare the class and economic differences among students. The classroom really can be a place of equity when we are all together subtracted from our privileged/underprivileged spaces. I believe that some did not want to be on camera as to not share their living spaces. Others used the camera or not to indicate their level of participation that day. It was a way of signaling that they may not have read or did not want to fully participate. I respected this distance that some needed, recognizing that with everything going on, sometimes all they could do was listen that day. (A. Matousek, personal communication, June 4, 2020)

Both students and faculty felt the classroom dynamic shift palpably when suddenly everyone was appearing live from home on our computer screens. On our campus, everyone lives in fairly standard student housing, eats in the same dining halls and has roughly the same access to technology. But remote learning zoomed us for the first time into the private lives and spaces of our students—places that many would have only revealed reluctantly—in ways that startled us.

What struck me as Provost was the way in which the pandemic crisis brought out so much empathy and creative problem-solving in our faculty and staff. Nowhere was that special combination better on display than in our modern language faculty's response to the needs of their students. Throughout my career I have seen my foreign language colleagues take readily to new pedagogies and new teaching technologies, and this moment was no exception. Zoom and Flipgrid were suddenly on everyone's tongues, and by the end of the spring semester the Modern Languages faculty had logged the most hours on Zoom of all the academic departments at our institution. I have heard many critiques of Zoom over the past few months, but there were also colleagues at my institution who found that the technology to which they were suddenly forced to adapt brought with it some unanticipated advantages.

One of the Wofford faculty members in German, Dr. Maria Hofmann, spoke to me about some of these advantages. She highlighted the way some of the technology she used proved helpful in giving students some needed space and a platform to process the strange life circumstances brought about by the pandemic, while also creating a sense of community in her classes:

> I used Flipgrid, an educational platform that makes sharing videos within in a class easy, where students would respond to a task (e.g., "What do you miss most during the pandemic?" or "What advice do you have for self-care practices?"), and then respond to each other with videos. I got the impression that it helped students talk about current issues they might be having while also fostering a sense of community that can be difficult to achieve in an online format. (M. Hofmann, personal communication, June 1, 2020)

For Maria, as for all of her modern language colleagues, creativity, compassion and flexibility were the watchwords guiding her approach to teaching during a pandemic. "These are extraordinary circumstances," she said, "and I made it my goal to get my students through the semester with as much mental and emotional health intact [as possible]."

Concerns about Equity

As it happens, some of my fears about how well prepared we were as a college to make a sudden shift to remote teaching and learning turned out to be justified. Our college sent students home on March 16th, began spring break a week early and shifted to remote instruction when classes resumed late that same month. Those of us who spend time working closely with our most vulnerable students (for example, Pell-eligible, DACA-protected, or from unstable home environments) immediately worried that many of them might not have access at home to the technology needed to be successful in remote learning. To discover how many students might have difficulty when classes resumed, we sent a confidential survey to the student body asking about their access at home to WiFi, computer hardware, and the Internet. This helped us identify a number of students who needed help, and we were able to designate some emergency funds for purchasing laptop computers, WiFi hot spots and software licenses for a number of students.

As remote instruction began, it became clear that there were many more students who had not initially self-identified as needing help. For some there was a functioning computer in their home, but they had to share it with multiple siblings who were also engaged in remote learning. For others, WiFi and Internet access existed, but turned out to be unreliable. We learned that others were experiencing food insecurity at home or caring for younger siblings and elderly family members. Still, other students suffered increased anxiety and deepened depression as they found themselves isolated from their college friends, professors and beloved staff members. Despite all our best efforts—and it was truly an exemplary team support effort by faculty and staff who pulled together to identify and assist students in need—anxiety and worry remained

present and real for everyone.

As gratifying as it was to see the college rise to the challenge of the pandemic, I also know that we are not yet out of the woods. As I write this, cases of COVID-19 are surging in the state of South Carolina following the early reopening of businesses in the state and region. This makes the fall semester much more uncertain than we had hoped it would be. Our college, like so many others, operates according to a budget that assumes we will be able to collect a slim margin of revenue from tuition, fees, room and board. When we refunded half the room and board fees this past spring, that slim margin disappeared and created a deficit—despite the federal aid the college received from the CARES Act. We will not likely be able to weather a sudden loss like that again without making some extremely difficult budgetary decisions. For that reason, we are intent on resuming face-to-face instruction this fall, provided it can be done safely.

What Did We Learn?

So, what lessons did we learn this past spring that will help us be more successful in the fall, whether we teach face-to-face, as we hope we can, remotely for part of the semester, or in a hybrid format? To my mind, one of the most important and indelible takeaways from this past spring is that a crisis like the one we experienced makes the most vulnerable more vulnerable. The unwavering focus institutions like mine have on equity and inclusion work trains our attention on the positive gains we are striving to make, and makes it a little easier to forget that students who are living day to day close to the margin of not being able to afford a private, liberal arts experience, only do so by maintaining a fragile balance. Students with high economic need have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, and even though the college was well prepared in advance with a pandemic response plan, it did not prepare us as well as it might have to respond quickly to the struggles of high-need students. We did respond, however, and will be better prepared to do so more quickly in the future.

On the positive side, the pandemic crisis taught us all how creative and resourceful we can be. As a chief academic officer, I sometimes have to confront faculty attitudes about curriculum and pedagogy that can be rather rigid. The sudden need to shift to remote teaching certainly demonstrated that our courses can be taught differently than we have always done it. I have joked that the pandemic has caused me to learn so many great things that I hope to forget as soon as possible, but I have also heard many anecdotes from my colleagues about new applications they have discovered that they will happily continue to use when the pandemic has subsided. The crisis also gave us all an important reminder about the value of compassion, especially for those in need and for people of color in our historically white institution. COVID-19 forced us to interrogate our assumptions about who our students are, and about how level the playing field we have worked so hard to construct really is. We have reflected on these things, and we are aware that there is much work to do.

Looking Ahead

In the future, I hope that as a college we will remain more mobile and self-sufficient than we have been in the past. Even though our faculty on the whole are already deeply interested in creative pedagogy, we must admit that we have almost all accepted the spatial limitation of the traditional classroom and laboratory as our default mode, along with the traditional three-credit, three-meetings-per-week course standard. Remote teaching and learning have proven that asynchronous instruction affords us possibilities that, in many disciplines, both break up the monotony of a fourteen-week semester while opening up exciting possibilities for new kinds of learning activities.

My other hope is that our response to the pandemic will pay long-term dividends for accessibility. By moving their courses online, without realizing it, many faculty moved what they do one step closer to universal design. Students with physical challenges certainly may find courses delivered via remote learning more accessible. We now understand better than we did before that asynchronous learning has both advantages and disadvantages for students with learning disabilities; if we retain the beneficial

practices learned through remote teaching, we have the chance to create some pedagogically refined, blended learning opportunities for our students that are more universally accessible than ever before. That would be a tremendous step forward.

So, returning to my initial question—yes, we certainly can do this. My college proved that. And what's more, we have emerged better prepared and even more compassionate than we were before. That knowledge reassures me that, no matter what difficulties may lie ahead, we will meet them head on with those valuable qualities.

About the Author

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