




The dark clouds of COVID-19 (and the unexpected silver linings)

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Introduction

It has been said that working through a crisis reveals the strengths and weaknesses of an institutional structure, and the havoc wreaked on our spring semester by the COVID-19 crisis is no exception. I dare say it has also revealed the strengths and weaknesses of my own leadership as department chair, as I reflect on what we have done, what we could have done, and what we will do. Precisely because this crisis is one that has affected every aspect of our lives, it is hard to find a logical structure for an essay such as this one. I am approaching it by considering our classrooms, my department, and life beyond academia, starting first with an account of what we did, and then looking to the (admittedly uncertain) future.

What We Did

In the Classroom

My institution has an early spring break, so we were already back when discussions about moving all classes online began around the country. We were told on a Wednesday afternoon that all courses would need to be taught remotely beginning the following Monday. I expected utter chaos, ranging from colleagues who have always claimed that online instruction could never work for languages; to reticence or flat-out refusal from the colleagues set in their ways, or perhaps intimidated by technology. I got neither. In fact, I was amazed and heartened by the way my department, a sometimes recalcitrant bunch, came together to follow the mandate. Faculty and graduate instructors shared resources, helped each other, offered insights and generally jumped to the task at hand. I was prouder of my colleagues than I had ever been.

That's not to say there weren't hiccups, of course there were. We had instructors with unreliable internet. We had inequities in the resources made available; for example, while faculty enjoyed a free-flow of information, graduate student instructors did not receive the same level of support. We had instructors without sufficient equipment at home to carry out the synchronous components of their courses. Luckily, in an uncharacteristic but fortunate prescient moment, I had already ordered a dozen webcams and headsets (before Amazon ran out!), and even though they were delivered after everyone was working remotely, I was able to get them to the people who needed them by doing home deliveries. So I am confident that, in spite of a few slips here and there, we finished that semester strong and should hold our heads up high. A silver lining amidst all those storm clouds.

My own class required even more creative solutions, but taught me valuable lessons. I was co-teaching a course called Chemistry in the Cocina Latina, which combines culinary science with chemistry, culture, and language, and met alternately in a regular classroom, a chemistry lab, and the campus test kitchen.

It's a great class and the height of experiential learning, so my colleague and I were unsure how to proceed. So much had to change... I realized that while I could maintain student attention during a classroom based two-hour discussion, I couldn't in Zoom. I replaced the informational lecture with scavenger hunt, asking students to work from breakout rooms to find online information on certain topics, and then come back to class to share. It worked well, and made me wonder why I wasn't doing that all along! We worked harder to maintain our student community, and I think at the end we felt closer than we had in the classroom. We obviously couldn't have our remaining regular chemistry lab session, but we modified it to be simpler, and something they could replicate in their own homes. And for the weeks we would have been in the kitchen, we had students cook the assigned dishes at home and report back to us. We missed the group experience, but it was a new and rewarding one to see students sharing their cooking, and what they learned about the culture and the science, with their families. That's an outcome we could not have achieved under normal circumstances. Another silver lining, for both us and them.

In fact, a trend we saw university-wide was surprisingly high student evaluations in all our courses. I think students appreciated the efforts they saw their instructors making, and recognized the fact that everyone was in this together, and working together to achieve our common goals.

In the Department

It was by no means simple to move our courses to remote delivery, but it was to some extent expected, and it was relatively straightforward. What I found almost more challenging was moving everything else online.

We had to figure out quickly how to carry out meetings remotely, not to mention determining whether the meetings were necessary or if they could wait. I felt torn on this one. I knew my colleagues were feeling overwhelmed and burdened and barely able to keep afloat just with their teaching, and I wanted to spare them unnecessary time commitments. But at the same time, I felt it was more important than ever to maintain our person-to-person contact, to humanize our work lives as much as possible. There was a lot of information coming at us quickly—we chairs are meeting frequently with the deans now—which I felt a responsibility to share with my department, and to make myself available for their questions. I handled this by compromising: I held those meetings that were necessary according to our bylaws or our departmental needs (e.g., junior faculty evaluation), replaced what I could with long detailed emails, and postponed or otherwise found solutions for the rest. Admittedly, those solutions invariably ended up requiring more work for me, and I have also been having drop-in-if-you-have-a-question office hour type meetings. I miss my colleagues, but I also think they view fewer meetings as a silver lining!

So many aspects of our departmental life were upended. We had to rethink and redesign our internships to accommodate virtual delivery. Our Spanish conversation table has gone online. We held MA oral exams and dissertation defenses on Zoom. We created a virtual awards ceremony. We have congratulated our graduating students through bits and bytes instead of hugs and handshakes. I have said my farewells to two colleagues retiring after decades in our department. What a crazy last semester this was for them. Even I, optimist that I am, cannot find a silver lining here.

Beyond the University

The biggest challenge for many of us has been finding the balance between the work and the personal—something that is difficult at any time, but especially so now.

I have three children, one each in high school, middle school, and elementary school. Trying to manage the assignments and meetings from over a dozen different teachers, on top of maintaining work and meetings for two full time jobs (my husband holds an elected position in local government), has been intense and tense, without even considering the logistical complications of limited bandwidth and number of suitable computing devices. I can't say I have consistently handled all this, and all the family togetherness time, with grace and patience. But I know more about my daughters' schoolwork and their teachers, and even their friends, than I did before. And I have spent more time with them than I could

have before. That definitely goes in the silver lining column; having lost both my parents very recently, I'm even more cognizant of the importance of this time together.

The temptation to now be always on, all the time, is very real and very exhausting. I confess to having never been good at setting boundaries, but I have made an increased effort to establish and observe them during these months. I promised my colleagues I would try to only send work-related emails during work-day hours, to help them disconnect too. While I have mostly failed at maintaining that, I keep trying. I have given myself a "downtime curfew" to force me to step away from the computer, regardless of how much more still needs to be done. I have made the effort to reconnect with family and friends near and far, and even though this is often computer-based too, I am enjoying the silver lining of increased human connection, if not contact.

Moving Forward

Although we all want desperately to go back to normal, we are nowhere close to done with this. Until now, I found comfort in using the past tense, confidently narrating what has already happened. But the past tense can only take us so far. There are still more unknowns than knowns. Moving forward means facing all those question marks.

In the Classroom

While many universities, mine included, have publicly stated that we are "open for business" in the fall, we still have little concrete information on how exactly that will work. We have been encouraged to teach remotely those courses that "can" be taught remotely. What does that "can" mean? If it means "we will do our best because it's what's best for everyone, but we prefer and believe we can accomplish our objectives better face-to-face," then yes, we're all in. But if it means "we can, and so moving forward we want to put all our courses online forever and reduce our teaching staff," then no, I don't want to start down that slippery slope. That may be my paranoia speaking, but in today's higher education climate, we have to be wary. We intend to be all online, mostly with some synchronous meetings, and I am confident we will do it well. But in doing so, are we setting ourselves up for a precarious future?

We will continue to learn what works and what doesn't in an online setting. Will students be as understanding of our inevitable foibles as they were in the spring? Will enrollments decline when students realize most of their classes will not be in person? Will there be football? Will student clubs and organization exist? How will students achieve that out-of-class socialization that is such a crucial part of college life? When will study abroad programs resume?

We regularly admit graduate students from all over the world. Will our new admits be able to travel to the United States? If not, will they be able to work remotely? Will they get visas in time to do so? What does a remote online graduate student teaching orientation session even look like? These students, teaching for the first time, will have an entirely different experience of what academia is. Will they be okay with that, or will it cause them to seek other career paths?

In the Department

My primary concern with my department is for my colleagues. How will we maintain our sense of community? How can I continue to earn their trust and confidence when I can't meet with them face to face? We were fortunate enough to hire four new colleagues last year, and as they finish their first year as part of our faculty, what are they thinking? How are they coping? (I'm in regular conversation with them about some things, but I'm thinking more of the intangibles, and how all these dark storm clouds have necessarily affected their perceptions of me, our department, our profession.) We were in the middle of two additional searches when everything came screeching to a halt; one we were able to finish successfully, but the other we weren't. For the former, what will her life as a new faculty member be like in the fall? For the latter, will we be able to re-initiate the other search in the coming year? And without that position, will we be able to maintain our curricular plans?

We have graduate students who were mid-job-search at the time. Most of those searches have been cancelled. What will happen to these students who have worked so hard, and now are caught in limbo? This is especially pressing for our international students, who were depending on a job to maintain their eligibility to stay in the country. What will they do now?

Junior faculty at my institution were automatically granted an additional year in their probationary period, and the faculty union has been advocating for enhanced understanding and consideration when it comes to faculty evaluation of teaching and research. But we know they're even more worried than usual about the tenure process, in light of the current—and likely ongoing—disruption. How will they cope?

The biggest question hanging over everyone's heads is the fiscal one. What will our budget be like? My institution depends heavily on state sales tax for our university budget, so we are certain we can expect significant cuts (Disney is closed, after all!). The uncertainties are where, when, how much. Will there be furloughs? Layoffs? If not, and I hope not, where will those cuts come from? What will have to change in terms of how we run the department, and how we teach our classes? (If I can't hire additional instructors to replace graduate students who can't make it into the country, for example, how can I teach those classes—which are already full?) Will we have funds to cover conference travel? Will there even be conferences to travel to?

Beyond the University

The overarching uncertainty underlying all these questions is, of course, when this will all end. My state is proudly “opening back up” in spite of a complete lack of medical or scientific data to support that decision, so we can probably expect worse times ahead. When will public school resume? Will my husband keep working from home? When will I get to go back to using the wonderful standing desk I bought for my office last year?

I have been department chair for a decade and had already decided that this coming year would be my last. This is not how I imagined winding down my tenure in this position or celebrating that milestone. I wanted to step down leaving a legacy of curricular enhancements, improved collegial relations, and strategic planning. Instead, I will be spending the next twelve months contemplating budget cuts, exploring new ways to accomplish our educational goals and support my faculty, and seeking unique paths to foster growth and curiosity in our students. My hope now is that I too can continue to grow, so that I can find and model the creativity and improvisation that will allow us to achieve our goals and stay true to ourselves, in spite of all these challenges. I know the dark storm clouds will continue to roll through, but I will choose to optimistically continue seeking out our silver linings, as well.

About the Author

Gillian Lord is Professor of Spanish Linguistics and Chair of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese Studies at University of Florida. Her work focuses on various aspects of instructed second language acquisition. Dr. Lord has held leadership positions in various organizations, including CALICO, AAUSC, and the ADFL Executive Committee.

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