Faculty Observations of the Spring 2020 Transition to Remote Teaching and Learning  
April 24, 2020

On April 17, Department Chairs, School Directors, and Area Coordinators were asked to report their observations and experiences with the University’s transition to remote teaching and learning. Although asked for informal input, many chairs and directors more directly queried their faculty, some with formal surveys. The aggregate comments total approximately 30 standard pages. Following is a loosely categorized synopsis of the responses.

About Students

- Many have been overwhelmed.
  - Family demands have increased, including homeschooling their siblings.
  - Employment changes or losses impose financial hardships.
  - Sense of lost connections with University friends and groups.
  - Many have struggled with online modalities and IT issues; balancing getting used to them with other demands; learning different platforms used by different faculty.
  - A few noted to be outright resistant to online learning.

- But most have met the challenges head-on, positively and successfully.
  - Many indicate they have enjoyed learning new modalities.
  - Most have been patient, understanding, and accommodating of faculty making the change.
  - They view the current situation as one requiring some sacrifices; they value the priority of managing the health crisis.
  - They look forward to returning to campus and face-to-face instruction.
  - Some indicate a greater willingness to take online classes than before.

About Teaching and Learning

- The transition to remote teaching a challenge to many but most have met the challenges well.
- Faculty have relaxed otherwise strict participation requirements, accommodating differences in students’ schedule and demands.
- Regular (e.g., weekly) advance postings of upcoming content and activities appreciated by students.
- Blackboard reminders and announcements seem to be better accessed and preferred by students over email.
- Making assignments due at end-of-day instead of end-of-period increases completion rates.
- Open-book or open-note exams are frequently mentioned as supportive and meaningful.
- Smoother transitions and progress seem to appear where a single or predominant platform is used in a department or across a college.
- Video recording of synchronous teaching presentations and demonstrations very appreciated by students for later access and review.
- Platforms providing “breakout rooms” are proving most useful for small-group discussion and active learning.
- Larger lecture courses may be better served with online presentations and lectures than small, seminar type classes where discussion is hampered by distance (suggests an approach to consider when classes resume on campus).
• A number of students report that instructors have “left us to fend for ourselves,” have reduced assignments and activity to a point “we’re not sure we’re learning anything,” and said in response to students’ expressing technology issues, “figure it out.”
• The utility and value of e-books and OER has never been more apparent.
• Serious challenges with meeting objectives and learning outcomes involving hands-on, performative, and service-learning activities.
• Important for faculty to consistently follow-up with students, even if students don’t respond directly.

About Faculty
• With their devotion to students and dedication to facilitation of learning, the vast majority have been excellent in adopting and adapting new methods, changes to schedules, and modified expectations for the semester.
• Faculty flexibility, empathy, and productivity have been particularly noteworthy.
• Many who had not or seldom taught remotely express a sense of achievement in learning something new and that the modality is better than they thought it would be.
• Although many report that it’s gone smoothly, none report that it’s been easy. The time requirements and frequent adjustments needed have been exhausting.
• Many faculty report facing similar work-from-home challenges reported by students – caring for children or elders, sharing limited technology, homeschooling their children, and lacking “think-space.”
• Keeping students engaged at a distance, compared to what’s doable F2F, a frequent challenge.
• Many compliments paid to eLearning, the TLPDC, and IT for their prompt and supportive provision of resources.
• It is critical to communicate early, broadly, and often about student services that are available.
• Where available, unit level training on Blackboard, Teams or other remote teaching platforms is very helpful.
• Frequent updates from chairs and colleges to faculty very encouraging and helpful.

“We will make it through all of this and come out better ... because teachers know how to teach, they care about teaching, they are the best at adapting to almost any circumstances, and of course, God is watching.”  (A Department Chair)

Implications
• More faculty are interested and ready for online teaching than earlier realized.
• Face-to-face remains highly valued and the predominantly preferred modality.
• Students are incredibly adaptable, responsive, and patient.
• The more that can be done face-to-face the better, but considering all that can be done online is also of great pragmatic value.
• Faculty must regularly engage with students in remote teaching.
• Expectations for both students and faculty must be early stated and continually assessed for fulfillment.
• Training and support for different modalities must be readily and widely available.
• Every academic program needs to develop and keep at hand an operational continuity plan.