

New York Medical College School of Health Sciences and Practice's Response to COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION TO NEW YORK MEDICAL COLLEGE

New York Medical College (NYMC) is located in Valhalla, New York (approximately 20 miles north of New York City). NYMC houses the School of Health Sciences and Practice (SHSP), which offers a Master of Public Health (MPH) with concentrations in Environmental Health, Epidemiology, Health Policy and Management, and Health Behavior and Community Health. The MPH is delivered in face-to-face (F2F) and remote online (OL) platforms. NYMC also offers a F2F Master of Science in Biostatistics and a F2F Doctor of Public Health (DrPH) in Health Policy and Management. In addition, the Public Health program at the College offers various certificate programs (global health, emergency management, environmental health, health administration, industrial hygiene, children with special healthcare needs, public health, pediatric dysphagia, health education), which can be taken as stand-alone programs or as part of the MPH. The College also offers a Master of Science in Speech Language Pathology (SLP) and a Doctorate in Physical Therapy (DPT).

The average age of the students obtaining their MPH is 33.0. There were 291 (Spring 2020) and 297 (Fall 2020) students in the MPH program at NYMC (60% were classified as OL students). Two-thirds of all MPH students in the Spring 2020 semester were female. The DrPH program currently has 23 students, with an average age of 38.2 (75% are females).

SPRING 2020

On March 18, 2020, due to the circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, NYMC decided that all traditional F2F courses would transition to a remote OL platform for the remainder of the Spring semester. All F2F courses continued synchronously using Zoom video conferencing during their regularly scheduled class periods. All traditional OL courses were obviously unaffected by this transition and continued to be delivered asynchronously.

SHSP has a special cohort of MPH students from Saudi Arabia who were living on campus at the time. There were 58 students in this program. They lived in campus housing and continued to do so for the remainder of the semester. Saudi Arabia, however, recalled most of these students to return home in late April and early May 2020.

SUMMER 2020

Due to the rapidly evolving COVID-19 outbreaks nationwide and especially in New York City and the surrounding areas, a decision was made to offer all Summer semester classes OL asynchronously. This unprecedented event pressed the Saudi Arabian Cultural Ministry to allow Saudi students to take their classes in an asynchronous OL format for the duration of the crisis.

FALL 2020

By mid-June, NYMC decided that all public health courses for the Fall 2020 semester would be offered OL synchronously and asynchronously. The synchronous OL courses were taught at their regularly scheduled times and dates through Zoom video conferencing. These courses were designated as hybrid courses to allow international students, especially Saudi Arabian students, to qualify for U.S. Department of Education F2F requirements. The requirement was dropped after several major universities filed a federal lawsuit to waive the F2F requisite. Due to the regulations and the classification of the courses as hybrid, the students in the Saudi Arabian cohort were allowed to maintain their higher education enrollment status even if they were not physically in the U.S.

Decisions have yet to be made for the Spring 2021 semester, but NYMC is leaning toward the OL course delivery. The change to an OL platform apparently had little impact on student enrollments: Public Health enrollment for the Summer and Fall 2020 semesters were at their highest levels since 2012. In addition to Public Health, the Speech Language Pathology and Physical Therapy programs also taught their courses OL. However, they held their clinical skills practicum in-person on campus with social distancing, personal protection equipment, and other precautions to prevent COVID-19 transmission.

Unlike many other colleges and universities, NYMC did not offer a pass/fail grade option in lieu of the traditional letter grade in either Spring 2020, Summer 2020, or Fall 2020. All normal grading procedures were maintained throughout the crisis.

The Public Health program was fortunate in that the curriculum does not have any clinical laboratory courses that would have presented significant delivery problems. The curriculum does, however, require a practicum. The good news was that director of the Public Health practicum was able to work with the local public health officials to allow much of the course to be done via a virtual format.

Overall, since the F2F-OL course transition started in the Spring 2020 semester, there was clearly a new normal when it came to traditional end-of-year events such as graduation ceremonies for the SHSP and its programs. All scheduled extracurricular events at SHSP were cancelled for the Spring 2020 and Summer 2020 semesters. NYMC SHSP held a virtual graduation on May 19. Since mid-March, all campus events for the Summer and Fall semesters were held on virtual platforms.

One of the major concerns with the transition into remote OL learning was to keep faculty, staff, and students informed of the decisions that were being made. Since transitioning into remote

learning, NYMC has had regular town hall meetings at which the school's senior leadership, including the chancellor, president, deans, and vice presidents, provided policy updates, and answered questions from faculty, staff, and students. As of this writing, these town hall meetings have occurred every two weeks since April. All town hall meetings were held via Zoom.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The abrupt transition from F2F to OL teaching and learning on March 18, 2020, certainly provided challenging moments for both students and faculty who had limited or no OL teaching and learning experience. In addition to technological obstacles to overcome, there were also pedagogical changes that needed to be addressed. It was also very important to note that many students' personal lives were disrupted by economic strains, and there were also childcare issues as primary and secondary schools were shut down. Students who were parents needed to balance school and work life with their parenting life. One of the big advantages that the Public Health faculty had was the fact that they had been delivering OL courses since 2008. However, the concept of delivering traditional F2F classes virtually via Zoom was a new challenge.

TECHNICAL ASPECTS

At NYMC, Canvas is used as the learning management system (LMS). During this pandemic, faculty and students needed to quickly learn how to use Canvas in addition to incorporating Zoom into course activities. The eLearning and Information Technology departments certainly went above and beyond in creating tutorials and additional help sessions for students, faculty, and staff. There was certainly a learning curve that was closely monitored by the senior leadership in order to assist all parties involved for the smoothest transition possible.

LIMITED PUSHBACK FROM STUDENTS, STAFF, AND FACULTY

The past few semesters were certainly challenging but also a testament to the dedication and commitment of the staff at the NYMC School of Health Science and Practice. Routine "update" emails from the leadership were important in maintaining the communication as open as possible. Anxiety was high and many people had myriad questions. The difficulties ranged from not having internet access at home to faculty and students not being familiar with the various learning strategies available for remote learning. The learning curve was certainly visible especially during the abrupt transition from F2F to OL course delivery.

Unlike many institutions, few students had problems due to lack of appropriate equipment or internet access. Since many of the students were taking both F2F and OL classes, they had the necessary equipment. In addition, all classes have been required to use our LMS, Canvas. Obviously, those F2F classes did not have to use as many of the tools within Canvas as those teaching OL, but they did include the assignment, grades, and announcement applications.

PERCEIVED OR REAL CONCERNS FOR THE FALL 2020 & SPRING 2021 SEMESTERS?

There were certainly specific concerns for how the educational process would continue especially for the Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 semester. Specifically, one area of concern was how to navigate the special cohort of students from Saudi Arabia as they had very strict requirements to attend F2F courses. That issue was eventually resolved which allowed for students to continue in the program from their homeland and given permission by the Saudi government to be allowed to sign up for either F2F (virtual via Zoom) or OL courses. The other major concern was how to meet clinical requirements for those in Speech Language and Physical Therapy at a time where many clinical sites were not allowing students to continue their experiences, especially for those in the last semester during the Spring and Summer semesters. Both programs have worked closely with campus officials to ensure that all federal guidelines were met while students were working on their clinical skills.

As educators who have taught both F2F and OL courses, the authors witnessed the different areas of concerns during the transition. For those instructors who have not taught OL, it can certainly be overwhelming to learn the nuances of how remote learning works. Synchronous learning is probably a little less difficult to transition as long as technological issues are addressed and resolved. Asynchronous learning can be more challenging as student-faculty interactions become more independent. One of the important aspects of using remote learning, especially asynchronous learning, is the ability to integrate the remote learning into people's busy lives. Time management for both students and faculty become of utmost importance in remote learning.

LOOKING FORWARD

We look forward to this “new normal” in academia. We hope that as time passes, everyone including students, faculty, and staff become a little more comfortable with the advances in technology and its many advantages if we continue in this mode well into 2021.