

COVID-19 Pandemic: Reflections of Monmouth University's Department of Criminal Justice

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MONMOUTH UNIVERSITY AND COVID

COVID-19 touched every aspect of our lives. Terms such as “social distancing,” “N-95 masks,” “essential workers,” “quarantine,” “contact tracing,” and “Zoom” were added to our lexicon. Alongside all but essential services, colleges and universities vacated their campuses and moved the vast majority of their services to online (OL) platforms. On March 8, 2020, Monmouth University’s newly installed President Patrick Leahy announced the suspension of all classes and extracurricular activities for one week (March 8–14), followed by the traditional Spring break (March 15–21), and the temporary OL delivery of all classes for two weeks (March 22–April 4) out of an “abundance of caution.” Above all else, the health and safety of the University community was paramount. The vast majority of students, faculty, and staff left campus immediately. University staff provided for at least 60 out-of-state and foreign students who remained in dorms and off-campus housing. By mid-April, the campus was a ghost town.

Monmouth University, a private institution located in a suburban setting in West Long Branch, New Jersey, activated its Crisis Team, a cohort of senior administrators to plan for all possible contingencies: *How might COVID-19 unfold? How should the University respond in the short-, mid-, and long-term?* While this essay focuses on the University’s Department of Criminal Justice, which houses both its homeland security and criminal justice programs, by necessity the essay will examine the University as a whole.

One of the first courses of action taken was to identify students participating in programs abroad and in other parts of the U.S. All concerned students were contacted and returned home safely. All future semester-abroad programs and sports travel were suspended. Next, all professors were instructed to deliver their traditional face-to-face (F2F) courses OL. They were to avail themselves of University resources including the Center for Teaching and Learning (CETL) and Information Management (IM) to make this transition. Next, the University surveyed its community to identify issues, needs, and concerns of students, faculty, and staff. We found that many were grappling with the uncertainty inherent to the crises and some were struggling with isolation, inconveniences, and stress. Some students lacked regular access to a laptop/desktop computer, Wi-Fi, and necessary software, and were beginning to feel and report a sense of unease. Some faculty had never taught OL or had little experience with the University’s learning management system (LMS), eCampus. Staff were overwhelmed by requests for services that ranged from IT and LMS support to adjustments to financial aid to additional maintenance and custodial requests.

The University took a whole-of-campus community approach in meeting its members' needs. University administrators worked with faculty and staff unions to identify and address pressing needs as well as long-term issues such as unemployment compensation and tenure-track and service obligations. All students, faculty, and staff were advised to identify and request any reasonable accommodations that they might need. The Office of Counseling and Psychological Services offered all of its services to students via video and telephone conferencing. Faculty and staff were referred to their respective health care providers and unions for counseling and psychological services. Faculty-to-faculty mentoring and just-in-time OL training assuaged most immediate concerns, at least for the time-being.

PIVOT TO REMOTE INSTRUCTION

COVID-19 proved to be unrelenting, and the Northeast region of the U.S. was particularly hard hit. On March 16, 2020, New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy issued Executive Order 104 that suspended all in-person instruction at institutions of higher education to combat COVID-19 and to reduce the rate of community spread (Office of the Governor, 2020).

Additional guidance provided by New Jersey and Monmouth County public officials and the New Jersey Council of College Presidents led to the March 30 decision to cancel all F2F course delivery for the remainder of the Spring 2020 semester.

The University's priorities pivoted to maintaining student engagement and mental health and successfully completing the semester. Identified concerns included off-campus programs such as internships, field trips, and the administration of final examinations. CETL and IM provided faculty with the tools needed in delivering material via state-of-the-art technology to its student customers. In making this new transition to remote learning, the faculty learned how to utilize video conference platforms including eCampus' Virtual Classroom, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom. Instructors learned to record lessons in voice-over and stand-alone Microsoft Power Point, eCampus' video app, and YouTube videos of lectures and to upload these platforms to eCampus.

To assess knowledge acquisition and student engagement, many instructors administered weekly quizzes. The University's learning management system, eCampus' "Class Progress" dashboard, provided up-to-date student engagement metrics, which helped instructors identify student needs. In addition, the University's early warning system, Monmouth University Early Warning System (MEWS), allowed instructors to alert academic advisors of students of concern who provided and/or referred those students to the appropriate resources such as tutorials, the writing center, and counseling.

THEORY INTO PRACTICE

As of December 7, 2020, more than 67 million people worldwide have contracted COVID-19 and at least 1.5 million of the victims have succumbed to the disease. The U.S. has reported over 14 million cases and 282,000 fatalities (John Hopkins University of Medicine, 2020). As the COVID-19 pandemic evolved, instructors incorporated current events into many of their lesson

plans. Students were introduced to public health threats through the prism of the all-hazards approach to homeland security. Historical public health events including the Spanish flu pandemic (1918–1920), the H1N1 pandemic (2009), and the Ebola (2014–2016) and Zika (2015–2016) epidemics were compared to the current COVID-19 pandemic. Publicly available World Health Organization, Center for Disease Control, and State-level COVID-19 policy and guidance facilitated classroom discussions and course assignments.

In keeping momentum with current course delivery practices, several homeland security instructors chose to structure the topic of the ongoing pandemic from theory to practice. At the beginning of the semester, homeland security undergraduate students learned various mid-range theories by explaining disaster events and associated human behavior. One such theory studied was contagion theory developed by French socialist Gustave Le Bon in 1895, which asserts that the structure of a crowd itself has a powerful influence on the behavior of its members (Le Bon, 1960). In an effort to connect theory to this real-world event, students had the opportunity to view the film *Contagion* (Soderbergh, 2011). The film depicts the spread of a notional virus that leads to a loss of social control during a global pandemic (Rogers, 2020). Film as a pedagogical technique has proven to be effective in homeland security and emergency management undergraduate programs (Kendra et al., 2018). Topical issues including overlapping federal and state public authorities and responsibilities, privacy, and the economic implications that manifest in *Contagion* provided cogent comparisons and lessons learned for the COVID-19 pandemic. Subsequently, a shift from theory-based education to experiential-supported theoretical education took shape (Kapucu & Knox, 2013). Instructors used carefully crafted experiential and reflective assignments such as internship analyses and reflection papers to permit students to connect theory, policies, and life experiences while broadening their knowledge within the fields they were studying.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS AND FEEDBACK

On March 24, Monmouth University President Leahy made two announcements. First, a revised grading option would be in place for the Spring 2020 semester. Students had the option to maintain some or all of their standard grades (A–F) or to opt for some or all of their courses to be graded as Pass/Fail (P/F) with a P-grade having no impact on their grade point average. Students responded favorably to this option and reported that the P/F option reduced their stress and anxiety levels. Second, the Spring 2020 graduation ceremony was postponed until New Jersey public health officials authorized large public gatherings. President Leahy promised “we will have a ceremony” at the earliest possible opportunity.

Students expressed mixed feelings about OL and synchronous and asynchronous learning. Preliminary analysis suggests that most Monmouth University Department of Criminal Justice undergraduate and graduate students favor F2F instruction over OL instruction. Many students complained that they missed the social aspects and the ready availability of the instructors that F2F instruction offered, and that they were often distracted during OL class sessions. A smaller number of students reported that they had taken on additional family obligations, such as caring for vulnerable family members. In addition, students offered differing views on synchronous and

asynchronous OL instruction. While many students appreciated the flexibility and repeat access afforded by asynchronous instruction, others expressed fondness and the need for the regimentation inherent to synchronous learning. Nearly all students, however, commented that the availability of PowerPoints and other instructor-created resources were extremely useful means for the final examination preparations.

SUMMER 2020: GEORGE FLOYD, SUMMER ACADEMY, AND COMMENCEMENT

The COVID-19 pandemic raged on throughout the Summer 2020 semester. All Summer 2020 classes were delivered OL, all internships classes and student research programs were modified, and all semester abroad classes were cancelled. Other crises and especially the police killing of an unarmed Black man, George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in May and the mass protests and civil disorder that followed exacerbated an already dire situation. On May 30, the University released the “Monmouth University Stands in Solidarity” statement that addressed the death of Mr. Floyd and other controversial police use of force incidents declaring emphatically that the University “stands in solidarity for racial equality and equity.” The University recommitted itself to developing a diverse and inclusive community. At this time multiple existing and new University initiatives and programs are exploring means to address all issues related to racism, genderism, and classism and related topics. In addition, students were reminded that the services of the Office of Counseling and Psychological Services were available for all students struggling with these and other issues (Monmouth University, 2020a).

Department of Criminal Justice instructors met during the summer and decided to include in their classes, to the extent possible, COVID-19, the protests and civil unrest in the aftermath of the controversial in-police custody death of George Floyd and public calls for criminal justice reform, as well as the contentious 2020 election cycle. The material would be through the prism of the all-hazards approach to homeland security. Topical issues included pandemics, policing, diversity (racial, gender, and class), and election security. Student-faculty research programs continued as scheduled but met entirely OL. All summer internship programs were modified. Since students could not perform the work that they typically do in the field, the virtual experience brought the field to the students in the form of guest speakers via Zoom. Typical assignments included in-depth interviews of practicing professionals.

In June, CETL invited all faculty to participate in a Summer 2020 OL Teaching Academy, a comprehensive course in OL teaching that focused on student engagement and included learning management systems, video delivery (Zoom, Microsoft Teams, eCampus), teaching, PowerPoints, Google docs, as well as myriad off-the-shelf resources. Faculty was rewarded with a stipend for successful completion of the course. The Academy was well received by faculty and continues to provide support through self-directed resources that can be retrieved from the eCampus OL Teaching Toolkit.

On August 27, 28, and 29, Monmouth University welcomed graduates to staggered in-person ceremonies on campus. To maintain social distancing, individual Schools held separate ceremonies in Kessler Stadium. The separate ceremonies and the size of the stadium allowed each student to be called to the stage for individual recognition. The final comments of Dr.

Pedram Daneshgar (the recipient of the 2020 Distinguished Teacher Award) were telling: “there is no question that the Class of 2020 has seen adversity unlike any other. It has made you stronger. I, and the rest of your Monmouth Hawk family, look forward to seeing great things from you in the future” (Monmouth University, 2020c).

FALL 2020: RETURN, RETURN, RETURN TO CAMPUS

On July 28, Monmouth University announced that it would reopen its campus for F2F instruction and most other activities, including the opening of the student dorms. A Campus Safety Plan was developed to ensure the health and safety of all members of the University community. However, concerns over a spike in COVID-19 cases in New Jersey and the Northeast led to a change of plans. On August 10, the University announced that all Fall 2020 classes would be held OL. This too changed after an August 15 New Jersey Executive Order authorized F2F course instruction for institutions of higher education contingent on compliance with social distancing and other public health guidance. On August 17, the University announced that some courses would be held on campus F2F with the remaining classes being held OL. The Safety Plan included protocols for personal protective equipment, screening, tracking, and tracing, quarantining, travel, and training. Beginning on August 24, the University maintained a COVID-19 dashboard that provided updated information on cumulative campus cases (Monmouth University, 2020b).

Faculty were given the option to deliver their classes F2F, hybrid (F2F and OL), or entirely OL. Approximately 40% of courses were offered F2F (entirely F2F or hybrid). Faculty and staff returning to campus were required to complete a COVID-19 training program that addressed issues concerning public health guidance for cleaning protocols, personal health checks, physical distancing, and other elements that address travel guidelines, routine screening, and personal health self-reporting via the Campus Clear app.

Students too were required to complete a COVID-19 informational program that outlined the University’s COVID-19 protocols and were required to self-report personal health information on the Campus Clear app. On September 7, the University opened its dorms to over 1,000 students and classes commenced on Tuesday September 8. Three weeks in and so far, so good. As of September 21, Monmouth University has reported a total of five students and one staff member who have tested positive for Covid-19, all of whom were asymptomatic.

CONCLUSION

Monmouth University’s COVID-19 experiences thus far are remarkable. Together, the University Community rose to the occasion. Administrators sought guidance from State public health and government officials and made tough decisions that shifted all services to virtual platforms while providing rigorous instruction, and when appropriate began a staged return to F2F course delivery. Students, faculty, and staff adjusted to a new norm. Lessons learned thus far include constant community outreach and engagement and identifying and addressing concerns and diligent follow-up. The long-term implications, however, are unknown and challenges remain.

Early lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic provide colleges and universities with a window to the future. For better or worse, more and more of academia is being virtualized, digitized, mass marketed, and outsourced. At the same time, the need for highly qualified college graduates to meet the challenges of the 21st century has never been more pressing. Institutions of higher learning should identify and assess their preparations and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic: *What worked? What did not work? Why and how did it work?*

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