

We Did It! Adapting to COVID-19: Troy University, Division of Criminal Justice

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The COVID-19 pandemic changed everything for higher education. The following is a synopsis of the still-emerging COVID-19 situation at Troy University with a focus on the School of Arts and Sciences, Division of Criminal Justice.

Located in southeast Alabama, Troy University is a public institution and is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Total enrollment exceeds 16,000 students. Known as Alabama's International University, approximately eight percent of the student body are international students representing over 70 countries. The University has four campuses in the State of Alabama and its National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I team—the Trojans—is part of the Sun Belt Conference. The University offers 225 undergraduate programs and three doctoral programs (Nursing Practitioner, Sports Management, Global Leadership). Notably, in 2007 the Confucius Institute at Troy University was established. The Institute is affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education and is charged with bringing to the people of Alabama knowledge of China that will serve the State in areas of business, education, cultural and public interest.

At the start of the Spring 2020 semester, the Division of Criminal Justice (CJ) had approximately 600 undergraduate and 300 graduate students. The CJ undergraduate program offers minors in homeland security, intelligence, emergency management, digital forensics, legal studies, and fire science. In addition, eligible undergraduate students may complete their senior year at one of three law schools: Cumberland School of Law (Birmingham, Alabama), Thomas Goode Jones School of Law (Montgomery, Alabama) and Mississippi College of Law (Jackson, Mississippi). The CJ graduate program offers a concentration in security studies.

On Friday March 6, 2020, Troy University students began departing campus for the traditional Spring break (March 9-13). For many of the Chinese students, this meant returning home to China (original epicenter of the COVID-19 crisis). On March 12, the University announced that all classes would be delivered via “alternate platforms” until further notice. On March 31, students were notified that all remaining Spring 2020 and all Summer 2020 classes would be held online (OL). The last day to withdraw from Spring classes was extended to April 25 and the final examination period was extended to April 20–23. A combined Spring 2020 and Summer 2020 graduation ceremony was scheduled for July 24. These decisions were, largely, supported by the student body. By March 18, nineteen Troy University students tested positive for COVID-19.

Administrators, staff, and instructors had a mere week to make the necessary transition to OL teaching. University officials stressed that the campus was not closed and that students were not required to leave campus or vacate their dorm rooms. Administrators, faculty, staff, and graduate assistants continued to work from their offices, but were required to practice safe social distancing. Work-study students worked remotely. Many of our sister institutions across the state were doing many of the same things. However, one institution, Samford University, a private Baptist university in nearby Birmingham, closed its dorms and sent students home for the remainder of the semester.

As with many institutions of higher education across the country, we did not know how long the pandemic would last. As might be imagined, we had more questions than answers:

- How would we transition all of your face-to-face (F2F) courses to OL platforms?
- How would we conduct laboratory courses?
- How would we train faculty, some of whom had little OL/learning management system experience?
- What are the protocols for students, faculty, and staff who are exposed to, test positive, and/or are show symptoms/are COVID-19 ill?
- How long would the crisis last?

The College of Arts and Sciences offered OL teaching webinars via Microsoft Office Teams and the University's instructional designers as well as faculty with OL teaching experience helped less-experienced faculty transition to remote teaching platforms. In addition, faculty and staff reached out to all students to identify and remedy OL learning and course content problems as well as personal issues related to the COVID-19 crisis.

University administrators and staff also adapted to a virtual work environment. By April 1, all but essential staff were working remotely. The University's Internet Technology (IT) department facilitated this transition by working with and furnishing staff with laptops, software, and ancillary equipment as well as training as appropriate. Staff were scheduled to work remotely until June 1. The State of Alabama began its reopening on May 11, with more businesses set to open on May 18 and prospects of a full reopening by June 1. Troy University, the University of Alabama, and Auburn University, announced that they would be fully operational beginning August 1. The first day of the Fall 2020 semester was scheduled for August 12.

The Division of Criminal Justice approach to the Spring 2020 transition included a cookie-cutter adaption of their F2F courses to synchronous OL Zoom meetings and a variety of asynchronous activities including discussion boards, chat rooms, flipped classrooms, student-teacher videoconferences, student-to-student mentoring, and assorted Canvas applications as well as myriad social media applications. This ad hoc approach seemed to work well and will likely be followed in the upcoming FA 2020 semester.

CJ faculty had a distinct advantage over many of our colleagues from different departments. All of our undergraduate and graduate programs had an OL component for the last 10 years and the vast majority of our faculty had taught OL and were familiar with Canvas, our learning

management system. One issue that we did have was the residency requirement of the Alabama Law Enforcement Command and Staff College (ALECSC) program. The program allowed actively serving police officials to take college courses at a discounted rate alongside traditional students. ALECSC criteria, however, had a F2F residency requirement. As a workaround, CJ allowed students to complete the course with the submission of issue papers that identified, describe, and offered a solution to a criminal justice problem.

Currently, University administrators are preparing for the Fall 2020 semester and are conferring with the Alabama Department of Public Health. Community safety is paramount. Class scheduling, housing, shelter in place, quarantining, social distancing, contact tracing, campus hygiene, as well as the impacts of these policies on Health Insurance Portability and Protection Act (HIPPA), Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), the NCAA, and other laws and policies are in development.

Thus far, faculty have been encouraged to transition their F2F classes to hybrid (F2F and OL) courses to facilitate an easy transition to OL delivery of their classes should the need arise (COVID-19 spike). Some faculty are front-loading their classes (lab and significant projects are completed early) to ensure that critical components of the classes are completed. In addition, faculty have been asked to have a “strong Canvas presence” (actively engage and respond to students in a timely fashion). Additionally, faculty members have been asked to identify classes that they are qualified to teach in the event that other faculty members were to become unavailable (test positive/become ill) due to the pandemic.

At this time, the NCAA will move forward with the traditional Fall football season, albeit in a modified form, if colleges conduct Fall 2020 classes. Troy University’s football coach has said that we need a full month of summer practice to be ready. This equates to a June opening for Fall college football.

Experts from all fields agree that the post-COVID-19 world will be a world transformed with new rules and new norms. As was the case of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the pandemic found the Nation ill-prepared for the challenges and profound consequences. The impacts on higher education were devastating though not fatalistic. Colleges must think anew. They must adapt to the new norm. Faculty, staff, and students must embrace OL and remote teaching and learning as a significant part of our future lives may well reside in virtual spaces.

Criminal justice, homeland security, and emergency management academics are uniquely positioned to lead the way. Let us leverage the hard-earned lessons of teaching and learning during COVID-19 to prepare future policy makers and practitioners for the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.