The University of Alaska Fairbanks Adapts to COVID-19

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA FAIRBANKS AND ITS RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Like all other higher education programs throughout the nation, the Homeland Security and Emergency Management (HSEM) program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) adapted to the novel circumstances driven by the COVID-19 pandemic.

UAF serves as the University of Alaska's (UA) flagship campus and is the only Carnegie-rated research institute in the state. Current enrollment is ~8,000 students and 550 faculty members (University of Alaska Fairbanks [UAF], 2019). During Spring break 2020, the UA administration enacted public health policies that effectively closed all campuses to teaching and subsequently triggered the transition from face-to-face (F2F) to online (OL) course delivery.

For UAF, the magnitude of the transition was significant, with over 1,000 courses converted to OL platforms in just over 10 days. Although the HSEM program faced many challenges during the COVID-19 teaching transition, two are particularly important to explore: the shift to 100% OL instruction and the integration of teachable real-world content (COVID-19). As a program that has both an in-residence F2F and OL presence, adapting to remote teaching still presented difficulties, some of which were turned into opportunities. For crisis-related content, students in HSEM courses demonstrated a preference to discuss the COVID-19 phenomenon as it evolved. In some cases, consideration of the crisis within the context of courses was possible, even novel. Yet, to do so appropriately within academia required significant adjustments and critical analysis—a somewhat unnerving exercise amid the massive uncertainty and chaos as well as the absence of data and empirical research. To that end, this essay provides valuable adaptation insights through a description of OL teaching challenges and the integration crisis phenomena in near real-time.

REMOTE ONLINE LEARNING

COVID-19 forced most higher education institutes to adopt the practice of OL course delivery of all classes. The practice is far from new, yet it seemed that years of continuing resistance to OL teaching quickly revealed significant gaps in distance education capabilities (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011; International Association of Universities, 2020). Notably, many college students spoke up against the perceived impacts on quality learning, some even demanding refunds (Anderson, 2020). The HSEM program transitioned to OL course delivery with little difficulty, largely as a result of UAF and faculty support. Ensuring quality delivery of the impacted courses became the top priority as faculty and leadership focused efforts to finish the Spring semester strong and to allow students to graduate as planned.

Although the HSEM program benefited from enduring OL advancements, difficulties emerged during the crisis. For example, the registration policies for UAF continue to conflict with OL options. Currently, UAF offers two registration modes for courses: F2F and OL. This causes issues when trying to leverage the opportunities to maximize effectiveness for OL learning through a synchronous versus an asynchronous approach (Hrastinski, 2008). Students who register for OL sections are not expected or required to attend virtual class sessions synchronously. Our HSEM students have already been using OL delivery platforms via our learning management system, Blackboard (Bb), for both F2F and OL courses because many live a great distance from campus and are therefore unable to physically attend class even if they wanted to. For financial aid and education benefits, registration matters, especially for military veterans because it factors into the amount of a monthly housing stipend (Basic Allowance for Housing [BAH]) eligible veterans receive. Administrators and faculty often must find creative ways to accommodate students while keeping expectations manageable and equitable. Some of these difficulties that were apparent pre-COVID-19 became all the more salient during the semester as awareness developed as to the residency constraints that may limit/exclude some students from continuing in an OL-only format within the program.

Another challenge with the mass movement OL involves is how to effectively transition a significant number of students from F2F to OL (synchronous/asynchronous) course delivery. The program's prerequisite introduction course, Principles of Emergency Management & Homeland Security (HSEM F301) reaches maximum enrollment every semester, and OL students are invited to join F2F sessions virtually. However, managing large amounts of students OL requires forethought and organization to provide for classroom management and to ensure that the material is covered effectively.

Teaching assistants help instructors focus on pedagogy/andragogy and content by assuming administrative as well as student outreach, counseling, and miscellaneous duties. Creative use of available technology extends the means from which to deliver quality instruction that effectively leverages teaching philosophies and cognitive learning processes (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). Such tools provide confidence in the ability to deliver quality and dynamic learning. However, the burden on instructors increases significantly when the demands of development and delivery of a multifaceted course combining OL synchronous and asynchronous teaching occur, which is not effectively represented on workload contracts. With the onset of COVID-19–driven changes, this lack of awareness or appreciation has improved somewhat given the sudden and total immersion into OL teaching. Finally, another interesting pandemic byproduct in the HSEM program has manifested in the form of increased student attendance and interaction for synchronous learning and virtual class sessions. Initial indications are that students greatly benefit and yearn for increased opportunity for OL interaction (student-to-student and student-to-instructor engagement).

INTEGRATING CRISIS-RELATED CONTENT

Students in the HSEM program understandably desired to discuss the rapidly evolving COVID-19 pandemic, as it was often highly relevant to their coursework. The need to use the crisis as

part of teachable moments was also quite relevant to leveraging real-world events rather than a case study or past event to derive a learning outcome. However, incorporating a real-world event, as it unfolds, into the allotted class time, in the middle of a semester, presents challenges. First, the course syllabus and schedule had long been set with the approved learning objectives and requirements. Deviating from previously developed course content has the potential to adversely impact student ability to complete required assignments and future course work as many courses underpin the HSEM's research and capstone courses. However, the crisis event is too important not to consider, and waiting for published textbooks and articles for lesson-plan development seemed rather disingenuous to the discipline. Homeland security and emergency management policy makers and practitioners must act in the "now."

As a result, several courses throughout the HSEM curriculum at both the undergraduate and graduate levels took advantage of this learning opportunity, including Principles of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, Comparative Homeland Security, and Leadership in Dangerous Situations (300/400-level undergraduate courses), as well as Disaster Policy and Politics (600-level graduate course).

The rationale for modifying course content to leverage the COVID-19 outbreak as a pedagogical and andragogical opportunity centered on the desire to use this situation to understand the dynamic analysis and decision-making processes required in the management of evolving and long-term events. The opportunity to impart appreciation and awareness for the exceptional difficulties under such circumstances was quite meaningful. For the comparative analysis course, discussion of the pandemic clearly and easily fit the course objectives. There was more than enough available raw data from which to compare endless aspects of the crisis. To that point, HSEM 603 students were given an assignment to compare the State of Alaska to another U.S. state to discover similarities and/or differences in pandemic policy effectiveness. The most important part of the assignment involved students understanding how and why to select certain factors (i.e., independent and dependent variables) for their analysis. The learning outcomes were excellent and even resulted in an appreciative Twitter message from the state's Chief Medical Officer when informed about the outstanding effectiveness of the Alaska's COVID-19 information website. For the graduate course, discussing and analyzing how elected and appointed officials managed their circumstances and locations provided ample material directly relevant to the course.

MAINTAINIG QUALITY INSTRUCTION

Faculty and students alike were surprised by the sudden development of the COVID-19 outbreak, and the unanticipated changes that added significance to our course material. Preparing faculty to teach within an OL environment is a key component of faculty development and is essential to their ability to prepare and deliver quality instruction (Frass & Washington, 2017). Beyond the not-so-simple process of transitioning courses to an OL environment, we are also faced with the ever-present challenge of how to integrate technology into instructional delivery. Given that interaction has been found to be a significant determinant for student success in an OL environment (Arbaugh & Benbunan-Fich, 2007), driving interaction becomes all the more

important for providing quality instruction. UAF has proven to be the focal point for not only the integration of F2F and OL instruction but also the go-to organization here on campus for faculty-development efforts associated with OL instruction. An in-house capability to support faculty members with dedicated instructional designers, iTeach faculty development opportunities, and a staff to support use of the learning management system proved to be crucial to UAF's ability to manage such a large-scale transition in such a short period of time.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of UAF and the HSEM program are not unique. The COVID-19 pandemic shocked everyone and has served to provide both challenges and opportunities to the continuation of academic instruction and research. Currently, UAF is deliberating "how" it will reopen in the upcoming Fall semester. Numerous challenges will be encountered as we face the difficult task of providing in-residence F2F instruction for Fall and, to that end, the school continues to work toward safeguarding students and faculty and staff who will be returning to campus come August. Realizing that this event is far from over, numerous lessons learned have been developed at the campus level, where UAF continues to support the training and use of various technology platforms such as Zoom, Blackboard, Slack, and Microsoft Teams to support OL learning. Other parts of the campus community, such as the HSEM program, look at this current crisis as a learning opportunity to benefit students who either are, or shortly will be, working within the wider context of the homeland security and emergency management enterprise. Given our program's past capitalization on the training opportunities afforded it by our eCampus and the wealth of knowledge and experience gained from offering instruction OL for years, we anticipate very little, if any, adverse impact to our program this Fall semester.

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