

The COVID-19 Pandemic Response at the University of Mississippi

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OLE MISS

This paper captures the University of Mississippi's (UM) Department of Criminal Justice and Legal Studies' response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Affectionately known by alumni, students, and friends as *Ole Miss*, UM is known for its National College Athletic Association Division I sports, Carnegie R-I designation, and its 15 academic divisions including a prominent medical school. Total student enrollment for the Fall 2019/Spring 2020 academic year was 22,273 students, 17,296 of whom lived near the main campus in Oxford, Mississippi, and resided in the Lafayette-Oxford University community (LOU). Of this community, a mere 411 were online (OL) students prior to COVID-19. UM students residing in LOU constitute a major component of the local community and its economy. The Department of Criminal Justice and Legal Studies serves approximately 600 undergraduate and 40 graduate UM students (University of Mississippi, 2020a, 2020b).

As of September 30, 2020, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has reported over 7.1 million confirmed COVID-19 cases, with deaths mounting to over 200,000 fatalities in the United States and more than 97,000 cases and 2,700 fatalities in the state of Mississippi (Centers for Disease Control, 2020). In the United States, businesses, schools, and places of worship were ordered to close, and its citizens were told to lock down, self-quarantine, socially distance, don face masks, and to stay at home. The challenges UM faced during the COVID-19 pandemic thus far have been monumental.

To fully appreciate the challenges that UM faced during the COVID-19 crisis, it is important to understand the political and governance context of higher education in Mississippi. UM is constitutionally bound and governed by Mississippi State's Institutions of Higher Learning's (IHL) Board of Trustees. The Board manages and controls the governance, legal, and fiscal policies of all eight of the State's public universities and appoints University chancellors and presidents. The Board's purview includes the management of disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Mississippi Board of Trustees of State Institutions of Higher Learning, 2020). In the event of a pandemic, UM's Chancellor will assemble an Incident Response team and will act in accordance with the University's Pandemic Plan (University of Mississippi, n.d). The IHL Board appointed Dr. Glenn Boyce UM's Chancellor on October 13, 2019.

COVID-19 STRIKES OLE MISS

On January 29, 2020, UM began to post critical coronavirus information on the University's official message board. The January 29 message cited a coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China, as well as South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, Macau, Hong Kong, and the United States. The

message noted that the CDC and the World Health Organization (WHO) were gravely concerned and were monitoring the evolving crisis. On January 29, in accordance with as U.S. Department of State advisory, UM cancelled all University travel to and study abroad programs in China (Wilkin, 2020)

On February 28, UM established a “COVID-19 Update webpage that evolved to include updated news, confirmed cases, resources, travel restrictions, frequently asked questions, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act), social distancing, quarantining, personal protection equipment, and UM contact and tracing software (Everbridge) information.

On March 6, UM commissioned the Academic Continuity Planning Committee to identify and make recommendations for all matters relating to COVID-19 and UM. In addition to a plethora of student, faculty, and staff matters, the Committee recommended that faculty prepare for potential impacts on classroom instruction and provided guidance on creating class contingency plans, communicating with students, adjusting course teaching approaches and priorities, shifting face-to-face (F2F) content OL synchronously/asynchronously, laboratory protocols, collecting assignments, and course and program assessments (University of Mississippi, 2020c).

On March 12, the IHL announced that they were extending Spring break for all eight of Mississippi’s universities by one week to last through March 23 due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The purpose of the extended break was to give faculty a week to transform their traditional F2F courses to remote OL platforms and for administrators and staff to attend to myriad ancillary matters. In addition, students were instructed to vacate their dorms and to return to their homes until further notice. On March 19, UM Chancellor Boyce announced that OL course delivery and the closing of campus dorms were extended for the remainder of the Spring 2020 semester. This was later extended to the entire Summer 2020 semester.

Adapting to COVID-19

Asked what his priorities were for the COVID-19 crisis, Dr. Wesley Jennings, Chair of the Department of Criminal Justice and Legal Studies, replied “my greatest concern and priority is the health and safety of my faculty, staff, and students” adding that “as there was no manual for this kind of response, it had to be done on the fly” (W. Jennings, personal communication, May 6, 2020). Asked the same question, Assistant Provost for the Regional Centers, Dr. Rick Gregory said, “in a period of about one-week, we had to pivot and move from face-to-face delivery of education and support services to purely online course delivery” (R. Gregory, personal communication May 8, 2020). Essentially there were three overarching issues at hand for the UM and by implication, the Department of Criminal Justice and Legal Studies. First, was the safety of UM’s community. Second, how to effectively deliver traditional F2F classes to students on OL platforms. Third, was gauging the duration of the crisis so as to plan accordingly.

Safety

The UM ensured the safety of all members of the University community by transitioning all of its F2F courses to OL platforms; cancelling unnecessary travel and person to person contact;

promulgating and enforcing social distancing, quarantining, and personal protection equipment guidance; and conducting the vast majority of course instruction remotely.

Effective and Equitable Delivery of Online Courses and Programs

Effective and equitable course delivery includes ensuring that all students have adequate access to OL and learning management system (LMS) training, Wi-Fi, personal computers and required software, and fair and secure OL testing platforms. Moreover, students with disabilities must be accommodated appropriately. UM's Office of Information Technology (IT) provided students with laptops, computer cameras, and software as needed, and the Center for Teaching and Learning (CETL), IT, and qualified faculty provided faculty and students with Blackboard (UM's LMS), Zoom, and other OL training. In addition, IT supported the delivery of remote advising, tutoring, medical and psychological services, internships, and other academic and extracurricular activities. UM's newly established Keep Teaching: Academic Continuity webpage provided additional guidance and resources for OL teaching including planning, communicating, engagement, assessment, internships, Wi-Fi and information technology issues, and grading.

In addition, UM administered many of its examinations with Proctorio, an on-demand OL proctoring service during the crisis. UM had used the proctoring service prior to COVID-19 to administer make-up examinations and in other special cases. Proctorio uses multiple means of identity verification including facial recognition and behavioral algorithms. UM's Director of Testing Services, Jinny Hurdle, noted that 34,118 tests were administered to 7,286 students for 1,182 exams from 338 courses from March 3–July 8, 2020 (J. Hurdle, personal communication, July 8, 2020).

Finally, UM instituted a revised grading system, the P/Z Grade System. Students were given the option to maintain their traditional A-F grades or the P/Z system wherein a P equals a pass with credit and Z equals a failing grade with no credit, neither of which would impact a student's cumulative grade point average (GPA).

Resilience

From the onset of the crisis, UM acknowledged that COVID-19 was both devastating and rife with uncertainty. Accordingly, all planning, policies, and practices would evolve as circumstances dictated. On June 30, UM announced the Fall 2020 semester plan, Campus Ready. The plan outlined the return to campus, academics, health and safety protocols, a revised academic calendar, UM health services, campus dining and transportation, athletics, and student services and was guided by four principles: prevent the spread of the virus to safeguard our community by following the guidance of public health officials and agencies; resume F2F course delivery and a residential and working environment that prioritizes the safety and well-being of the campus population; fulfill our core mission of education, research, and service; and enable our students to maintain academic progress toward earning their degrees.

The Campus Ready plan noted that classes would be delivered F2F and OL in the upcoming Fall semester and that more details would follow (University of Mississippi, 2020c). On July 2, Chancellor Boyce announced that Fall courses would include F2F classes, using guidelines from the CDC, Office of the Governor of Mississippi, the American College Health Association, the Mississippi Department of Health, the City of Oxford's Health Department, and the IHL.

All the while, applicable Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPPA), National College Athletic Association (NCAA), and Veterans Administration (VA) laws and guidelines were considered.

Fiscal Woes

Among the challenges of dealing with a pandemic are fiscal realities. On July 23, Chancellor Boyce announced cuts to UM's fiscal year (FY) 2021 budget. State appropriations to the institution would be reduced by 2.5%, which was a total of 10.6% since FY2016. As a result, he directed the vice-chancellors to prepare plans for a 4.95–7.5% cut in permanent funds. Noting that Fall 2020 enrollment numbers were not yet known and that traditional prediction models were not as reliable in the midst of a pandemic, further adjustments to UM's core operating budget were likely, Boyce added that this news came on the heels of declines in college and university enrollment nationally since 2010 and that UM has seen a decline in enrollment in each of the last three academic years (Boyce, 2020).

Moreover, as noted by Assistant Provost for Regional Education in Outreach Rick Gregory, in addition to the losses in state aid, UM faced significant losses from revenue-generating events and was encumbered with significant unanticipated costs that include teleconferencing, remote examination proctoring, and facilities maintenance (R. Gregory, personal communication, May 8, 2020). Also related to UM's fiscal woes were declining sales, tourism, and Oxford Stadium tax revenues of the City of Oxford due to COVID-19. As noted at the beginning of this article, the LOU community houses over 17,000 UM students. As reported by the *Oxford Eagle* the sales tax, stadium tax, and tourism tax revenue declined over \$200,000, \$150,000, and \$30,000, respectively for April 2020 as compared to April 2019. As a result, Oxford's Board of Alderman voted to furlough 135 municipal employees and to suspend some city services (Thompson, 2020a, 2020b).

UM and the nation's institutions of higher education must prepare themselves for decreased federal and state aid and lower enrollments with the ensuing and the commensurate loss of income. Moreover, local governments such as Oxford as well as related businesses that depend on institutions of higher education as sources of revenue must consider the implications from temporary long-term closings as well as the closings of those institutions.

CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic directly impacted every member of the UM community. As did every institution of higher education in the United States, UM monitored and responded to the

unprecedented crisis as it rapidly emerged and evolved into a pandemic. UM adapted to the new norm.

UM's Incident Response Team's and newly formed Future Planning Task Force built upon UM's pre-COVID-19 Pandemic Plan to address all matters including academic planning and experiences, athletics, financial planning/implications, parameters and protocols, public education and awareness, and student services and support. As evidenced by COVID-19's economic impacts on the City of Oxford, Mississippi, colleges and universities are an integral and vital component of local communities. The long-term impacts on UM, higher education, and society writ large are yet to be known.

It must be asked whether or not the pandemic awoke a sleeping giant. To what extent might the transition to OL teaching impact the future of traditional F2F course delivery? What is to become of colleges in a post-COVID-19 world? UM's new OL Master of Criminal Justice Leadership and Masters of Homeland Security and Emergency Management was created just prior to the current crisis and may provide insights (University of Mississippi, 2020e). Designed to facilitate the work schedules of in-service practitioners, the entirely OL programs may challenge existing F2F programs for prominence in student choice. On a positive note, the pandemic may have had the effect of forcing colleges and universities to become more accessible and affordable.

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