

Adapting to COVID-19: Pierce College Homeland Security-Emergency Management

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HOMELAND SECURITY-EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

This essay provides insights into Pierce College's Homeland Security Emergency Management (HSEM) Program's COVID-19 experiences. The essay provides critical institutional demographics and the College's initial exposure to the pandemic. What follows is a synopsis of HSEM's transition from traditional face-to-face (F2F) classes to online (OL) classes, impacts on student's Veterans Administration benefits, COVID-19-focused internships, special topics classes, the suspension of the Tribal HSEM program, and impacts on the Running Start program.

Located in Pierce County, Washington, Pierce College serves approximately 10,000 students. The College maintains two campuses at Ft. Steilacoom and Ft. Puyallup and a satellite campus at Joint Base Lewis-McChord. Pierce College offers five Bachelor of Applied Science (BAS) degrees: BAS in Dental Hygiene, BAS in P-3 Teaching, BAS in Homeland Security Emergency Management, BAS in Applied Business Management, and BAS in Fire Services Leadership and Management (Pierce College, 2020a).

In 2019, Pierce College Fort Steilacoom was honored by the Aspen Institute as a "Rising Star" for exceptional levels of student improvement. The Rising Star prize recognizes community colleges with exceptional achievements in four areas: student learning, certificate and degree completion after transferring to a four-year institution, employment and earning ratings after graduation, and access for students of color and low-income students (Pierce College, 2019). The Rising Star designation placed the College in the top five community colleges in the U.S. In addition, the HSEM program is the only one of its kind in the state of Washington. The program includes an undergraduate certificate, an associate degree, and a bachelors HSEM degree, as well as the newly launched Tribal HSEM certificate.

COVID-19-TRANSITION TO REMOTE TEACHING AND LEARNING

The Puget Sound region was the initial COVID-19 epicenter in the U.S. On February 29, 2020 Governor Jay Inslee issued Emergency Proclamation 20-05 declaring a state of emergency in response to a spike in new COVID-19 cases. The proclamation directed all Washington State agencies to use all available resources to prepare for and contain the outbreak (State of Washington, 2020). On March 6 Pierce College activated its Policy Advisory Group to assess all matters related to the emerging COVID-19 crisis. On March 16, the College announced that they would be transitioning all F2F classes OL as a temporary measure. Subsequently, all Winter 2020 classes were held OL and all but essential college activities moved OL or were cancelled (Pierce College, 2020b).

ONLINE COURSE DELIVERY AND VETERANS' BENEFITS

A significant percentage of the College's HSEM students are current and former members of the U.S. military and are, therefore, entitled to Veteran's Administration (VA) and other educational benefits. To meet certain VA educational benefits, all/part of classes must be taught F2F, and to meet this residential requirement, Pierce College offers hybrid classes (F2F and OL). The pandemic-induced transition to OL course delivery did not meet the VA criteria. The VA benefits in question, Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH), are substantial (Puget Sound BAH can amount to \$3,000+ monthly) and is a significant determinant of military student enrollment. Members of the HSEM faculty and the College Veteran's Services joined efforts to seek waivers for the residency requirement during the COVID-19 crisis, and to the relief of the students and College's administrators, the requirement was waived.

HSEM VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS

The HSEM Program requires internships for students in both the associate- and bachelor-degree programs. The HSEM 240 (Work Based Learning I) and HSEM 450 (Work Based Learning II) internship courses are the culminating requirements of the associate and bachelor degrees, respectively. The College is uniquely situated in the Puget Sound region in the state of Washington, which is known for its robust employment market. This allows for internship opportunities primarily within four realms: federal, state, local, and tribal governments; the military; the private sector; and nongovernmental organizations with emergency management and related programs. As a consequence of Emergency Proclamation 20-05, all HSEM internships were suspended/cancelled as the hosts were focused on the emerging crisis and would soon implement social distancing policies. The HSEM 240 and HSEM 450 Internships were scheduled to begin on April 6.

Pierce College administrators met with the HSEM faculty to identify potential alternatives to the HSEM 240 and HSEM 450 internship classes, including offering a potential waiver. Surprisingly, it was determined that COVID-19 presented a unique opportunity for internships and that the best option was to proceed virtually, utilizing existing faculty, staff, partners, and other stakeholders. A significant strength of Pierce College's HSEM program has been its inclusion of numerous HSEM pracademics. The pracademics proved invaluable in modifying the internships amid the crisis. At the time, three faculty members were actively serving with health/medical organizations, and the remaining members of the faculty either work or have worked with state or local government organizations involved in responding to COVID-19.

HSEM faculty and College administrators agreed to modify the internship courses. The courses would be delivered virtually and would include faculty-guided discussions about the challenges of the then-rapidly evolving COVID-19 crisis. The courses were designed to enhance students' professional experiences while building their research skills—a significant need in the evolving emergency management community. In some cases, baccalaureate students mentored and teamed up with students from the associate class. Students were tasked to research and argue for/against pandemic laws and policies including executive orders, public health law, social distancing, stay-at-home and quarantine orders, personal protection equipment (PPE), and mandatory vaccines.

Additional assignments included researching the supply-chain processes that had led to PPE shortages nationwide and particularly in the Pacific Northwest. Students were required to assess the supply-chain process and to propose solutions to improve the process. In addition, students were required to compare the roles and responsibilities of emergency management and public health officials and the policies that guide their authorities. One of the culminating assignments tasked students with examining multiple emergency declarations from the White House and state governors and whether and how those declarations converged/conflicted during a national-level event.

HSEM 190 SPECIAL TOPICS COURSE: COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 crisis also provided an opportunity for a special topics class: Pandemic Planning and Response. The course exposed HSEM as well as non-HSEM students to risk communications, crisis counseling, cultural and societal changes, executive powers, the psychology of a pandemic, and supply-chain management. The course was designed to balance students' educational and professional needs as well as the need to understand the pandemic and its many impacts on a personal level.

COVID-19'S NEGATIVE IMPACT ON THE TRIBAL HSEM PROGRAM

Beginning in 2016, Pierce College engaged members of National Tribal Emergency Management Council and the North American Tribal Association to increase awareness of emergency management challenges and to offer opportunities for members of Native American Tribes and other stakeholders to learn and apply U.S. emergency management and homeland security policies and practices. In 2019, the National Tribal Emergency Management Council and Pierce College HSEM teamed up to develop a Tribal HSEM Certificate. HSEM faculty successfully shepherded the Certificate proposal through the College's internal accreditation process.

In the Fall 2019 quarter, the first two of the eight courses that comprise the Tribal HSEM Certificate ran successfully, and the Certificate students were scheduled to continue into the Winter and Spring quarters to complete the program as a cohort. However, Tribes in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska were especially hard hit by COVID-19. Consequently, the HSEM Certificate program was suspended to allow the Tribes to deal with the immediate crisis.

HSEM faculty and its key tribal partners agreed to restart the program when the COVID-19 crisis subsides.

RUNNING START HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

An area of unexpected increase in student enrollment in HSEM classes occurred in HSEM 102: Introduction to Emergency Management (5 quarter credits). The College's robust "Running Start" program offers qualified high school seniors the opportunity to attend college classes while still in high school. As COVID-19 increased, high schools and colleges began to close F2F courses. For Running Start students, F2F foundational classes at Pierce College (e.g., English

Composition, College Algebra) rapidly became unavailable due to high demand forcing students to examine other options. In the case of HSEM 102 in Spring 2020, 50% of all students held Running Start students. This significant increase in both enrollment and percentage was a direct result of the impacts of COVID-19. Although the composition of the class at times proved challenging, it offered the HSEM program an opportunity to expose non-HSEM students to the field of emergency management and the underpinnings of pandemic policies and practices.

LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS

In some ways, COVID-19 enhanced Pierce College's HSEM program. HSEM and non-HSME students were exposed to real-world applications of homeland security, emergency management, and public health policies and practices. First, internship classes immersed students into the day-to-day and long-term decision-making processes inherent to disasters and catastrophes. Second, special topics classes examined and applied legacy and new homeland security, emergency management, and public health laws and policies to a rapidly emerging crisis. Third, Tribal HSEM programs, though temporarily suspended, promise to deliver critical HSEM knowledge and competencies to Tribal government and stakeholders. Finally, nontraditional HSEM students were exposed to the emerging fields of homeland security, emergency management, and public health.

Pierce College met the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic head on. We protected our students, faculty, and staff by moving our F2F classes OL. At the same time, we leveraged the circumstances of the COVID-19 crisis to prepare our students for the challenges of future crises. Homeland security and emergency management higher education programs should consider the larger role that public health will surely play in their respective fields.

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