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Evaluating Academia During a Pandemic

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EVALUATING ACADEMIA DURING A PANDEMIC:
LESSONS LEARNED FROM COVID-19

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PROJECT ABSTRACT

COVID-19 disrupted established instruction and evaluation methods and forced a rapid transition to remote learning and testing modes of operation at VCU. Faculty on both the Monroe Park campus and MCV campus quickly adopted various platforms for remote learning; however, the students' perception of the efficacy and adequacy of the remote methods remains unclear. Educational best practices suggest curriculum delivery transformation be based on student feedback to ensure alignment with their needs and expectations. As remote learning modes and methods continue to evolve, it is important to identify perceptions from students as well as faculty. Our project aims to identify potential enhancements for remote teaching and learning techniques to inform future improvements.

RESPONSE TO COVID-19:

This project provides recommendations on current and future needs to sustain and improve virtual learning. Virtual learning will likely continue through the fall 2020 and spring 2021 semesters. In addition, the need for a virtual learning alternative in the time of crisis is not unprecedented — universities have used these tactics for prior crises, such as response to Hurricane Katrina and the H1N1 virus outbreak (Meyer & Wilson, 2011). Our findings demonstrate a need to define virtual learning crisis response, including surveys of students and tools.

PROJECT GOALS
1. Identify gaps in current surveys.
2. Identify issues that have arisen.
3. Analyze best practices for surveys.
4. Analyze best practices for online learning.

PROJECT STRATEGIES

The team worked to identify surveys that were completed by faculty, staff, and students to evaluate the rapid transition to online learning during the coronavirus outbreak in the spring semester of 2020. Each member of the team reached out to academic affairs and communications departments for each school and unit across the university to obtain information about the surveys that were conducted. Additionally, we used the collected survey data to perform a comprehensive analysis of the VCU community's feelings towards the transition to remote learning in a time of crisis. The team sought to identify gaps in surveys distributed and identify issues during the transition to online teaching and learning. This process allowed the team to provide feedback on the best practices for creating surveys and make suggestions to improve the practice of remote teaching and learning.

ACTION STEPS

In order to research the transition to remote education, the team took the following steps:

- Emailed each school and internal stakeholders to gather data.

Box 1. Divisions, schools and colleges contacted	
ALT Lab	School of Dentistry
College of Engineering	School of Education
College of Health Professions	School of Medicine
College of Humanities & Sciences	School of Nursing
Honors College	School of Pharmacy
Inclusive Excellence	School of Social Work
L. Douglas Wilder School of	University College
Government and Public Affairs	VCU Life Sciences
Office of the Provost	Wright Center
School of the Arts	
School of Business	

- Collected survey responses.
- Identified themes, issues, population differences, and successes from survey responses.
- Formulated best practices for surveys and online teaching and learning.

OUTCOMES

Of the 16 schools and colleges as well as academic units we contacted such as VCU Life Sciences, University College, the Honors College, and the Wright Center, five schools/colleges (Arts, Business, Dentistry, Health Professions, Pharmacy) and one department (Political Science) surveyed at least one group of stakeholders (trainees, faculty, staff) across the unit on COVID-19 related issues. Of these, only the School of Dentistry and the College of Allied Health Professions surveyed all stakeholder groups. The School of Pharmacy surveyed faculty and students. We acknowledge other departments might have sent out surveys to their stakeholders but we did not communicate at a departmental level unless the school directed us to a particular department such as Political Science. Political Science performed three surveys of their students over time. In addition, the Division for Inclusive Excellence sent out climate surveys during the COVID-19 closure, the Office of the Provost sent out surveys on faculty learning and the ALT Lab surveyed faculty who took their online teaching module. Surveys could be divided into those that focused on the pivot to online teaching and learning (Administration, Arts, Business, Health Professions, Pharmacy, Political Science) or return to campus (Dentistry and Political Science) though there were questions pertaining to both topics in some surveys.

Highlights from Survey Findings

- Five major themes emerged about online teaching and learning across all disciplines surveyed. These were: 1) concerns in technology use, reliability, and access; 2) changes in pedagogy; 3) difficulty in student assessment; 4) less student engagement; and 5) additional barriers to learning.

- The effectiveness of online learning seems to be discipline dependent. In the School of the Arts, 98% of students say online learning is not as effective as in-person learning, 54% had technology issues, and 64% reported it affected their creativity whereas 68% of pharmacy students thought their academic activities were just as effective when delivered online and dentistry students were more positive (68/100 points where 100 is excellent) than negative to the transition. This could be due, in part, to the hands-on instruction that is so important to physical skill-based instruction versus areas where traditional lecture and non-laboratory methods are prevalent. This is supported by the School of Dentistry's

survey of first and second-year students being more favorable (72.5/100 points) than 3rd and 4th year students (66/100 points) for whom later training is more clinically focused.

- More first-generation and Pell Grant eligible students had technology concerns than the general student population.

- Students did not think the faculty did a good job in communicating specific expectations for their courses. It should also be noted that faculty also experienced sudden change and may not have fully been able to process what changes in expectations existed.

- Students highlighted issues that the faculty did not:
    - importance of uploading lecture videos in a timely manner;
    - importance of social interaction of the students with their peers, especially in disciplines where communal learning activities are essential (music, theatre, dance);
    - lack of self-discipline in learning remotely;
    - wondered if they were going to get refunds due to pivoting to online courses;
    - stress as to how this pivot would affect their time to graduation.

- There were positive outcomes in the quick pivot to online learning:
    - better attendance in some courses;
    - more time for students to study due to the elimination of the need for commuting;
    - the incorporation of online learning success after returning to campus such as the use of Zoom office hours for more accessibility, as well as the use of more supplemental videos and recording of lectures of student's later use;
    - faculty being more open to online teaching;
    - the record-breaking enrollment of online summer courses.

SUSTAINABILITY

Historical disasters set precedence for needing a more robust disaster recovery/transition to online learning (e.g., Katrina, H1N1) and a plan should be developed. Upon reflection of the lessons learned from VCU's COVID response, Box 2 represents positions that could direct their respective areas to ensure that appropriate contingency plans are updated to reflect the need to move to a virtual learning system in response to a crisis or disaster.

Box 2. Responsibility to ensure appropriate contingency plans
Associate Vice President for Strategic Enrollment Management
Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs
Senior Vice President for Health Sciences and CEO of the VCU Health System
Vice President of Administration
President, VCU and VCU Health Systems

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations should be more prescriptive and consistent across colleges/schools:

Best Practices for Surveys
- Surveying multiple stakeholders including faculty and students is important. Faculty may be unaware of student concerns or have different interpretations of the issues.
- Surveying multiple disciplines is important. Results can vary significantly between disciplines.
- Timing of surveys is important. As observed in the Department of Political Science, student concerns in the first survey did not persist in the two subsequent surveys. This lack of

persistence may have been due to the level of uncertainty present at the beginning of the transition or possibly survey fatigue.
- Capturing supplemental demographic information in addition to gender or year in school is essential. Demographic details such as first-generation student or Pell Grant eligible student as collected by Inclusive Excellence highlights unique needs of students with different backgrounds.
- Looking forward is helpful. The School of Business asked the faculty will they use after their COVID transition experience and how open the faculty would be to online teaching.

Best Practices for Online Teaching
- Recorded lectures must be uploaded for students in a timely manner.
- Clear communication about course expectations must be practiced by faculty.
- Faculty should examine the specific learning outcomes desired in each of their courses frequently and be prepared to modify them as necessary.
- Online quizzes and assignments need to be allotted more time in a virtual format.

Best Practices for Return to Campus
- Focus on returning students whose disciplines are more likely affected by online learning such as clinical disciplines and students in the arts.

Recommendations for Disaster Readiness
- Take lessons learned and build out online learning transition and recovery plans.
- Focus on consolidation of learning platforms which ensures a more consistent learning experience and consolidates support for IT and other resources such as the ALT Lab.
- Review and recommend technology requirements for students on an annual basis.

FINAL PITCH

When entities are able to meet the challenges during crises, there can be a great deal learned but only if information is gathered in the aftermath to understand if concerns of the stakeholders have been adequately addressed. Surveying all stakeholders across many disciplines is ideal to ensure the implementation of best practices for the University to be better prepared for future emergencies.

REFERENCES

Greeno, N. (2020, March 10). Prepare to move online (in a hurry). Inside Higher Ed. https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/03/10/prepare-move-online-continuity-planning-coronavirus-and-beyond-opinion

Meyer, K., & Wilson, J. (2011). The role of online learning in the emergency plans of flagship institutions. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration 4*(1). Retrieved August 25, 2020, from https://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/spring141/meyer_wilson141.html

Evaluating Academia During a Pandemic

Lessons Learned from COVID-19
Presented by Team Gap Busters

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Quest 2025 Alignment

Success

Prominence

Transformation

Diversity

Theme 1: Student Success

Goal/Metric: Enhance the university culture supporting student success, including improved retention and graduation rates
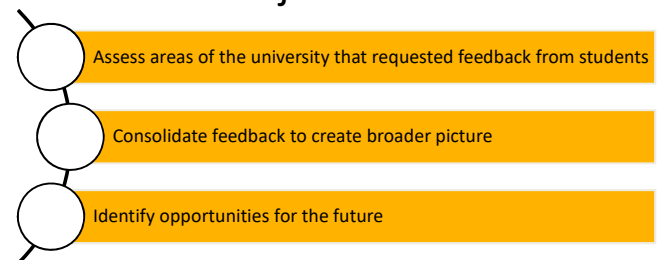
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This Project Seeks to Understand:

- How did students feel during COVID-19?
- Did the university support their success?
- What impacts were felt?

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Project Goals

Assess areas of the university that requested feedback from students

Consolidate feedback to create broader picture
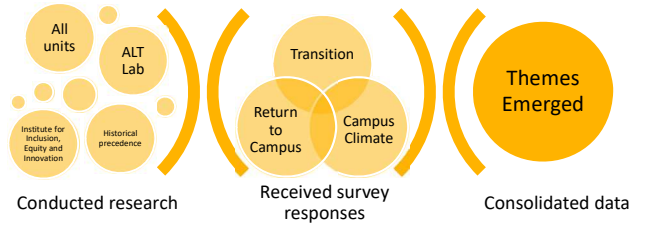
Identify opportunities for the future

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Impacts were felt quickly

On campus activities ceased

In person interactions prohibited

Instantaneous pivot to remote learning

Communication took new shape, form

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Project Methods

All units

ALT Lab

Institute for Inclusion, Equity and Innovation

Historical precedence

Transition

Return to Campus

Campus Climate

Themes Emerged

Conducted research   Received survey responses   Consolidated data

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Collected and Assessed Data from Across the University

- Academic Learning Transformation Lab (ALT Lab)
- College of Health Professions
- Department of Political Science
- Division of Administration
- Division for Inclusive Excellence

- School of the Arts
- School of Business
- School of Dentistry
- School of Pharmacy

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Examples of Survey Questions

Open-ended
- What challenges did you have teaching virtually?
- Feel free to comments on the affects of the pandemic

Likert-scale statements
- Since the transition online, our professor has clearly communicated any changes to the syllabus and/or calendar. [strongly disagree – strongly agree]

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Spring Timeline

March
- Spring Break Extended
- Academic Continuity Committee formed
- Keep on Teaching launched ALT Lab worked with 300 faculty; 300+ more used their online resources
- Changes announced
- First case on campus
- Mandated telework
- Refunds announced
- Political Science student survey
- College of Health Professions surveys

April
- All online summer school announced
- Political Science student survey
- School of the Arts student survey
- Institutional Equity, Effectiveness & Success student survey

May
- Virtual commencement announced
- Hiring freeze announced
- Tuition freeze announced
- School of Business faculty survey
- Institutional Equity, Effectiveness & Success student survey

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Summer Timeline

June
- Over 10,000 enrolled in summer courses
- Phase reopening began
- Change to start of fall semester date announced
- Political Science student survey
- Dentistry surveys
- Pharmacy surveys

July
- Back to school kits distributed
- Daily screenings began

August
- Classes began
- COVID dashboard launched

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JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY.
JMU NEWS

A temporary transition to online learning

Chico State becomes first California university to close dorms after students move in

Illinois university quarantines entire student body due to coronavirus outbreak

SEPTEMBER 5, 2020 | 7:34 AM | KRQE-AP

Sep 03, 6:55 am

Over 800 students positive at University of Georgia

The University of Georgia reported that more than 800 people on campus have tested positive for COVID-19. Data released Wednesday showed that 798 students, 19 staff members and four faculty members tested positive following the first week of classes.

The University of Alabama reports over 500 Covid-19 cases less than a week after classes started
By Scottie Andrew and Tina Burnside, CNN
Updated 9:55 AM ET, Tue August 25, 2020

Gettysburg College sending majority of students home as COVID-19 cases rise
Ron Musselman York Dispatch
Published 11:07 a.m. ET Sep. 5, 2020 | Updated 11:28 a.m. ET

30 of 40 Greek houses now under quarantine at Indiana University-Bloomington
Lydia Gerike Indianapolis Star
Published 7:45 a.m. ET Sep. 2, 2020

News @ ODU

West Virginia University becomes the latest school to backtrack on in-person classes after a spike in Covid-19 cases
By Christina Zdanowicz, CNN
Updated 6:02 PM ET, Thu Sept

WILLIAM & MARY

Start of Classes for Fall Semester Moved to Aug. 29
July 30, 2020

William & Mary is preparing for an early opening and an in-person semester in fall 2020. W&M will offer three semesters – fall, spring and summer – to provide maximum flexibility for students. The fall 2020 semester will include a condensed schedule that begins a week early and ends before Thanksgiving. There will be no in-person instruction until after Labor Day. We will have no fall break. William & Mary is taking a phased approach to decision-making, and will continue to update the community as more information and details become available.

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Survey and Population Summary

By	Faculty	Staff	Residents	Students	
Administration	T & R	R			T = Transition
Arts				T	
Business	T				
Dentistry	R	R	T & R	R	R = Return to Campus
Health Professions	T	T		T	
Inclusive Excellence				R	
Pharmacy				T	
Political Science	T			T & R	

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5 Themes of Concern

Technology use, reliability, and access	Changes in pedagogy	Difficulty in student assessment	Less student engagement	Additional barriers to learning

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Challenges

Faculty
- Mental health issues
- Financial stress
- Technology issues (e.g., Kaltura links are slow)
- Academic integrity

"I was having trouble connecting with the students virtually. It was difficult to get the level of participation we had in person. (It) was very difficult to keep students motivated; class participation was very low."

Students
- Self-discipline challenges
- Peer social interaction
- Clear expectations
- Timely uploading of lecture videos

"Cognitive disconnect was my biggest struggle individually. I also had financial stress and family issues due to the pandemic. I was disappointed that there were little accommodations in terms of grading during these stressful times."
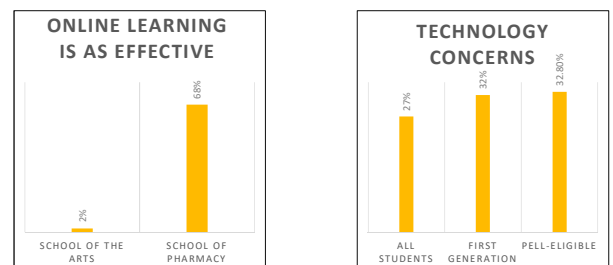
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Positive Outcomes

Faculty
- Better attendance
- Videos reinforced learning
- Faculty more open to online classes
- Summer enrollment record
- ALT-Lab courses invaluable

"I will keep lecture videos as a permanent part of my course, as a repository where students can go back and see anything they missed."

Students
- No commute
- Hybrid classes popular
- Zoom and Google platforms were best

"The greatest advantages to remote learning was not needing to walk to campus everyday, which saved even more time and allowed me to have more free time to study, even if it was an extra 45 minutes…."

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Variations Between Populations

ONLINE LEARNING IS AS EFFECTIVE

- SCHOOL OF THE ARTS: 2%
- SCHOOL OF PHARMACY: 68%

TECHNOLOGY CONCERNS

- ALL STUDENTS: 27%
- FIRST GENERATION: 32%
- PELL-ELIGIBLE: 32.80%

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Actions for the Future – Surveys

Consistent questions among schools and units	Timely distribution
Include all impacted stakeholders	Request detailed demographic information

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Actions for the Future – Online Ed

Crisis Response Plan
- Updated plan to reflect decision criteria to transition to online
- Standard platform for use across schools, units
- Updated communication plan based on lessons learned

Best Practices for Online Education
- Upload recorded lectures in a timely manner
- Clear communications about any changes to course expectations
- Flexibility and adaptability as circumstances change
- Online quizzes and assignments need more time

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What We Learned

- Tuckman's stages of team development
- Adapt and overcome
- Stick to a plan but don't be afraid to revise that plan!

KEEP CALM AND RAM ON

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Special Thanks

- ALT Lab
- College of Health Professions
- Department of Political Science
- Division of Administration
- Division for Inclusive Excellence
- School of the Arts
- School of Business
- School of Dentistry
- School of Pharmacy

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