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## Transitioning to online learning

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### Faculty, staff band together to move 860 courses to online format

As students, faculty and staff at St. Scholastica looked forward to spring break 2020, no one could have predicted how profoundly their work would change within just a few weeks.

The COVID-19 outbreak rendered in-person education an impossibility, and moving classes online an imperative. St. Scholastica's leaders extended the March spring break by a week to give faculty time to prepare to move their 860-some classes online.

An openness to pursuing innovative, imaginative distance learning methods stood the College in good stead. Almost one-third of faculty members already had some experience teaching online. For others there was a steep learning curve, and many tough questions. How would the College support faculty who had never taught online before? How would hands-on courses such as science labs and music classes translate to an online format? And how could St. Scholastica continue to fulfill its mission, with a focus on individualized instruction, from behind a computer screen?

The transition presented challenges, but overall was characterized by teamwork, collaboration and a positive attitude.

"The transformation our faculty and staff achieved in a very compressed time frame is heroic," said Dr. Diane Vertin, interim vice president for Academic Affairs. "Our professors have worked hard to maintain the quality of the St. Scholastica educational experience while accomplishing a fundamental change in how the learning environment works. In 30 years of working in higher education, I have never seen anything more inspiring. We are very proud of our faculty and staff — during this difficult time, they have all exhibited our Benedictine values."

### Springing into action

As soon as the decision was made to move classes online, a team of experts from several departments came together to gather resources, build webpages and design and schedule trainings.

"There was only one week of preparation before we had one week for training and migration," said Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs Ryan Sandefer, PhD. He headed up the Keep Teaching Team, made up of representatives from Information Technology, Instructional Design, the Center for Teaching and Learning, Assessment, the Center for Equal Access and the Library.

"It's a very interdisciplinary, cross-divisional team that has been remarkable," Sandefer said. "I can't give enough props to the folks who are on this team. I'm blown away at the work that's been done."

Over 30 faculty members with previous online teaching experience volunteered to mentor their peers. Neil Witikko, EdD, Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning, said it was an inspiring example of the Saints community coming together.

"It was overpowering to see how many people said, 'I can give someone a lesson,'" he said.

Video lectures online Zoom, a type of video software commonly used for meetings, became an important tool.

"Not all faculty members had a familiarity with Zoom," Witikko said, "so we targeted those kinds of high-needs resources and put a plan in action." That included putting together several workshops about Zoom.

Witikko emphasized that, whether classes are taught in person or online, the learning objectives matter the most.

"We really encourage faculty members to look at the objectives of the class," he said. "How else can students show competence in those standards? You may need to change what your assessments look like."

Sandefer said the shift to online instruction provides a chance for faculty and students to think creatively about teaching and learning. The Keep Teaching Team encourages faculty to be flexible and consider using a combination of live lectures, recorded lectures, online discussion boards and other methods to ensure students have plenty of options.

"This experience is changing the way we operate and teach, and the way students learn," he said. "Some students are learning that they need more of this asynchronous work; faculty are learning different ways of teaching. Having that flexibility and those options for students is a really good thing."

Having options is especially important because internet access has proven to be a challenge.

## Accessibility issues

"This is showcasing the digital divide in our country," said Chief Information Officer Ben Adams, PhD. "It's something that's really clear in my mind that we need to be more conscious of. When students leave the classroom, we can't assume that they have equal access."

Student Affairs staff members have worked diligently with the IT Department to find individualized solutions for students with internet access issues, Adams said.

"We're providing hot spots for employees, and working with students to make sure they have access," Sandefer said. "I think Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, and IT have done a really good job of identifying and working with students, faculty and staff who have had access issues."

But even for households that already had reliable high-speed internet connections, students must compete with family members for bandwidth. Their parents are working from home and their siblings are also taking classes online. That's why it's so important to offer asynchronous class options, Witikko said.

"We have to be immensely flexible. We just can't know what's going on in the lives of our students," he said.

## Supporting faculty

Another challenge, Sandefer said, is anticipating the needs of busy faculty members.

"They are so immersed in the work that they're doing with their students that they don't even have time to tell us what they need," he said. "It's this 'Minnesota Nice' thing. They don't want to be a burden. Burden us, please!"

Some classes proved more difficult to move online than others. Science faculty, for instance, have suddenly been forced to spend hours creating lab videos to replace in-person, hands-on experiments.

"Some things are difficult to do remotely," Sandefer said.

## Virtual science labs

When Chemistry Professor Jen Maki, PhD, found out that the second half of the spring semester would be taught virtually, she rushed to the lab to perform the experiments that the students would have done over the next seven weeks. She completed them in three and a half days, gathering data and photos that she's now sharing digitally.

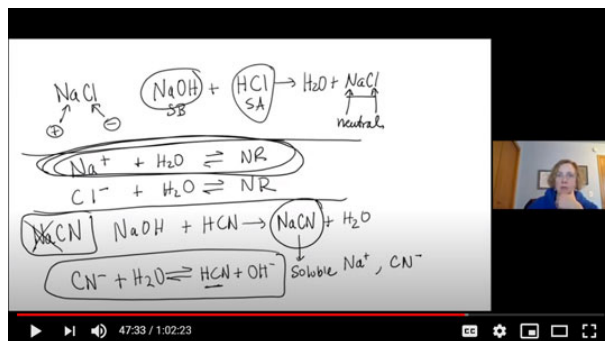
Maki had never attempted online instruction because there's no substitute for the rich engagement and hands-on learning of in-person lab work — her "favorite thing in the world." But she's making the best of the situation, and learning what works and what doesn't.

For instance, she recognizes that many students will have difficulty attending live lectures, whether it's because of internet capabilities, family demands or other scheduling issues. But she feeds off of the energy of an audience, so she is still offering live lectures that she records for anyone who can't attend in real time.

"I think it's a lot more fun to watch a class that has people in it."

She's also found plenty of online resources to supplement her lectures, with help from St. Scholastica Library staff.

"The librarians have been huge. They set us up with STEM education videos."



Assessment Director and Associate Professor of Biology Anne Kruchten, PhD, faces similar difficulties in the molecular biology course she teaches. She and her students were looking forward to wrapping up a study about how bacteria found in snow differs based on where the snow falls. The students had collected snow samples during the first half of the semester. Like Maki, Kruchten found herself in the lab over spring break, quickly completing DNA extractions to make a series of instructional videos. During her class sessions on Zoom, she and her students evaluate her lab work — bloopers and all.

"They'll watch and analyze. It's a really good opportunity to see how research really works."

She uses Zoom's breakout rooms to create smaller discussion groups. She's been able to find creative solutions to technical issues — for instance, when her internet connection cut out during an important lesson on Excel spreadsheets that the students will need to analyze their data, she recorded a video of herself using Excel and sent it to the students.

## Performing arts online

Faculty members in the performing arts have also had to adapt quickly.

Assistant Music Professor Nick Susi, DMA, experienced unexpected challenges.

"I have been surprised by aspects that are easier than I initially thought and aspects that are more difficult than I thought," he said. As a piano teacher, his main hurdle was figuring out how to accommodate students who didn't have instruments at home.

"During our extended Spring Break and the first week back to classes, I was scrambling to do everything I could to connect students with instruments," Susi said.

The College was able to loan out some keyboards to students who expressed a desire to keep practicing. In the end, only one of his students has no keyboard at home. Susi has created a special lesson plan to allow that student to continue working through the course.

He said that in-person piano lessons translate surprisingly well into an online format.

"I feel comfortable guiding students in technical and musical ways even from a distance, and students have already mentioned that they feel similar."

## 'I catch every nuance'



Assistant English Professor Kevin Quarmby, PhD, is no stranger to online instruction — he's been doing it since 2011, when he worked remotely from London as an instructor in the United States. Given his experience and class format, it was easy to make the move to online instruction.

"I've merely moved all my existing classes into the online platform without really changing anything at all," he said.

There are advantages, he says — namely, he can see every student's face.

"They can't hide. I catch every nuance, every facial expression. It's like every single person is sitting at the front of the classroom."

His subject matter this semester, which includes John Milton's "Paradise Lost" and the works of Susan Sontag, who wrote about the aesthetics of destruction against the backdrop of the Cold War, offers perspective for the COVID-19 pandemic. The material is resonating with his students.

"I observe an excitement about reading something that for the first time in their academic or intellectual lives, they are suddenly seeing the relationship of the record of the past being directly appropriate to their experience of the present."

"I am excited to see young people see these connections. It's very fulfilling for me, and I hope it's fulfilling for them."

## Challenging circumstances

Student body president-elect Chanty Armijo-Cruz, a junior, said she's heard from classmates that the new environment is a challenging one.

"The change from in-person to online has added work for students, such as discussion boards, extra quizzes, and Zoom meetings," she said. "Students are spending more time on assignments than before."

Everyone is trying to adjust to the new circumstances as well as they can, she said.

"In my personal experience, my professors have been very flexible with due dates and understanding of the unique circumstances each student is in, which has been helpful," she said.

## Lessons learned

The transition to online classes is still a work in progress. Still, it's never too early to begin to draw some lessons from what's already been accomplished. For one thing, Adams has concluded that every employee should be issued a laptop computer instead of a desktop, and that everyone at the College should know how to run a Zoom session.

"IT needs to provide leadership and training in certain fundamental activities," he said.

Sandefter said professors are gaining powerful new teaching tools at an accelerated rate.

"I don't think the College is ever going to look the same," he said. "Every faculty member now has some experience teaching in a distance-based format. In the long run this is going to be a good thing. We're building up the proficiency of all of our employees to use tools to do work from wherever."

Witikko concurs.

"This has allowed faculty members to see the power of virtual learning," he said. "They might use it in their teaching even when we get through this."

Adams is glad to see that even in trying times, student outcomes remain the top priority for everyone at St. Scholastica.

"The administration, staff and all the faculty have been really focused on: how do we make sure that the students are successful in this environment? It's opened up possibilities for new technology and new ways of exploring."

Despite the pressure and tight time frame, he's pleased with how well the College shifted to working and learning remotely.

"From what we're hearing, we made this transition so much more smoothly than lots of other places. Part of that was decisive leadership at the very beginning," he said, also offering credit to his IT department. "I am humbled and honored to be part of this team because they've been so amazing during this process."

Sandefter, too, is heartened by the commitment he's seen.

"It's hard to describe how proud I am of the faculty. I'm proud of this institution. People have been buckling down, burning the candle at both ends. Everyone at the College has learned something about themselves through this. How they teach, how they could teach differently, what they'd never give up.

"We've all learned something."

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