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Sacred Heart Faculty Adapt Courses to Changing Times

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Altered curricula teaches students how pandemic impacts business, health care, teaching and more.

As Sacred Heart University professors fully absorbed the reality of the pandemic and what it meant for their students and classrooms, they came to an important decision: “teach the virus.”

These words originated with Michael Frechette, assistant dean and assistant professor in the Jack Welch College of Business & Technology (WCBT), when he spoke with faculty about a week after the University moved to online learning (a decision made earlier than most of SHU’s peer institutions). Understanding the pandemic’s severity, Frechette and his colleagues knew they had to find opportunities within this crisis to continue their students’ education. Faculty quickly overhauled their courses to include the pandemic in their teachings throughout the spring semester and revamped summer courses.

“We want students to absorb the reality,” Frechette said. “We are their guides on this journey. We want them to come out the other end of this as experts in managing a crisis.”

Frechette said he was studying for his MBA during the 2008 financial crisis. He recalls his professors incorporating real-time studies and research in their lessons.

“I want students to have those same experiences and benefit as much as possible from this crisis,” he said. “We [faculty] are best suited to do this, to change the curriculum. Any good instructor can craft their curriculum around a current event.”

Grace Guo, associate dean and associate professor of management, changed her final exam, asking her seniors to answer pandemic-related

questions. Students showed great interest in the assignment, Guo said, and their research and conclusions were impressive.

“The final papers showed great care and interest,” she said. “They were such good quality papers; their arguments were sharp and insightful.”

While the world is changing, Guo said, she and her colleagues “want to keep our education relevant, and I think students appreciate this opportunity. We know there’s a lot of disappointment, but we’re trying to stay positive.”

When thinking about this summer’s MBA courses, such as corporate finance, leading and influencing with integrity and managing change, Nadene Koliopoulos, director of graduate programs, and Guo started brainstorming. “The pandemic won’t take over each course, but it’s an added, much-needed component,” Koliopoulos said.

Nursing

Faculty in the Dr. Susan L. Davis, R.N., and Richard J. Henley College of Nursing already adapted courses for the fall semester. Every course will incorporate discussions on how nurses emerged as leaders during the pandemic, and have such a vital role.

Like the WCBT, nursing professors also altered classes during the spring semester to focus on the crisis while being sensitive to students’ busy schedules. Many nursing students are working full shifts in health-care facilities as they were taking classes.

Rebecca Jones, clinical assistant professor, started teaching two eight-week online courses for graduate nursing students in March. Since the majority of her students were acute care nurses, almost all of them worked in hospitals that were quickly converted to COVID-19 units.

“Given the rapidly evolving situation, I had to adjust the course and clinical activities quickly,” Jones said. “First, I relaxed due dates and removed or altered several discussion assignments.”

What students told her about their work experiences was “heart-wrenching,” she said. “They were able to express extremely harrowing experiences, especially the feelings of helplessness about their patients’ deaths and anxiety about lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), which is very traumatic.”

Jones also created alternative learning experiences for students whose clinical sites had closed. The American Nurses Association recommended “just-in-time” COVID-19 training, she said, so instead of shadowing their overwhelmed infection-control colleagues, students attended online continuing education courses that became available.

Students wrote in reflective journals about how much they appreciated the flexibility, support and training during the course. “They wrote about the comradery of their health-care team or those ‘in the trenches’ with them,” Jones said. “When these students discussed their colleagues, it felt like they are referring to old war buddies.”

By providing support, resources, understanding and encouragement for her students, Jones believes she’s done a great service for front-line health-care workers.

“I feel so strongly that lessons of self-care and self-compassion need to be taught to my nursing students that I’m looking for a way to revise my courses to include content on healing from secondary trauma and empathic distress,” she said. “I want them to go from being the ‘walking wounded’ to ‘wounded healers’.”

Anna Goddard, assistant professor, and Dorothea Esposito, clinical assistant professor, were teaching epidemiology and population health for the doctor of nursing practice (DNP) program in the midst of the pandemic. They changed their course mid-semester to include objectives and competencies around emergency preparedness, disease transmission, the epidemiological triangle and other related topics. As with Jones, most of their students were nurses on the front line fighting the coronavirus in March and April, and the professors are planning accordingly. For the fall semester, Goddard’s class on strategic leadership and collaboration in health care will include reflection on leadership during the pandemic.

Corinne Lee, clinical assistant professor, is teaching the human journey in nursing for the RN-to-BSN program—a course that has been adapted in the

past to include relevant current events. Her students are also working in hospitals.

“This course, developed by Dr. Linda Strong many years ago, has transcended unprecedented events such as 9/11, the Sandy Hook and Columbine shootings, and now the pandemic,” Lee said. “While we have a planned curriculum for each of our courses in the Davis & Henley College of Nursing, I have told my students that the content and online discussion over the next eight weeks will have the flexibility of being somewhat fluid.”

The course covers what COVID-19 patients are experiencing, Lee said. She wants students to see the type of reciprocal relationship that exists between their clinical practice and reflective opportunity in the classroom.

Health professions

Classes changed mid-semester in the College of Health Professions, and work is underway to adapt the summer and fall’s curriculum. COVID-19 dramatically impacted the college, as faculty dealt with changing on-site clinical courses to simulation and telehealth. Telehealth provides patients and health professionals the ability to continue interaction, despite an inability to meet in person. Course revisions were extensive to include simulation and telehealth approaches in teaching. Faculty worked hard to guarantee students’ education was not compromised.

The occupational therapy (OT) faculty made a seamless shift with the spring semester content from in-class, experiential learning to virtual teaching and learning, said Sharon McCloskey, interim chair and director of the graduate OT program. OT students were immersed in learning skills and interventions. Professors Lola Halperin, Morgan Villano and McCloskey delivered skills classes synchronously via WebEx and Zoom. Students learned how to become facilitators of therapeutic groups and designed and implemented virtual mental health group experiences for each other.

With the realities of COVID-19 and lockdown situations at home, these group experiences addressing mental health and wellness were tremendously successful for all participants, McCloskey said.

OT students also learned about the use of telehealth in occupational therapy. Ellen Martino, clinical assistant professor, redesigned the interprofessional Monday Night social program (an ongoing social skills program for community individuals with intellectual disabilities), and transitioned this group from in-person social events to virtual social events twice weekly. OT students were able to complete the last nine days of their 12-week fieldwork education by participating in telehealth visits. These took place under their clinical educators' supervision and provided assessment and intervention to school-based or outpatient-based pediatric OT clients.

Jaimee Hegge, a clinical assistant professor, redesigned the summer semester OT content over three modules. Students now learn about COVID-19, with instruction provided by local front-line OT practitioners who have already been engaged in post-COVID rehabilitation. Students are also developing skills such as effective use of PPE, and the safe delivery of interventions to people with the virus.

"I am so delighted that SHU's College of Health Professions is so progressive in teaching students all the newest techniques and strategies in dealing with clients with coronavirus," said Lou Elmo, an adjunct faculty member. "They will be totally ahead of the game as future rehab professionals."

Professors molded their curriculum to fit with the pandemic. James Bartley, a health management adjunct instructor, had his students present how health information technology — such as telehealth and medical apps — can assist physicians and health-care providers in adapting to the current pandemic environment.

While some students learned about telehealth and simulation, other students used these in place of in-person clinicals.

Christina Pino, a clinical assistant speech-language pathology (SLP) professor, said her first and second-year clinical practicum students were not permitted to remain in their practicum placements at health-care facilities due to the pandemic. They transitioned to continue clinical training through computer-based simulation using Simucase. In addition, problem-based learning tutorial classes, and clinical seminar courses, switched over to on-line via synchronous and asynchronous coursework, incorporating small group discussion via WebEx and video reflections.

Graduate students in SLP will deliver audiologic counseling and hearing aid programming services via telehealth during the summer for Jamie Marotto, clinical assistant professor.

The physician assistant (PA) program shifted its entire curriculum online, and used innovative strategies to teach traditional hands-on skills through online platforms. Lectures continued through synchronous online learning to keep students on schedule and allow progression through the program, said Adam Olsen, director of the PA program.

In addition to adapting its classes, the doctorate of physical therapy (PT) program held a panel discussion with 25 alumni on the impact of COVID-19 on PT. Students engaged in discussion with PT alumni who have taken on a range of roles since the pandemic. Alumni shared their experiences, and the impact the virus had on them from personal, professional and societal perspectives. “The experience was wonderful with alumni, students and faculty sharing joys, challenges and concerns related to the crisis,” said Chris Petrosino, chair of the PT and human movement program.

As a way to engage the incoming class of OT students for the fall, Jody Bortone, associate dean and chair of the OT program, said the class was divided up into advisement groups. The groups were assigned a faculty adviser to assist them through the two-year program. She said groups will meet week via video as a way to keep in touch.

A new fall elective, introduction to public health emergency preparedness, is offered to all health science concentrations. The course will provide education on the evolution of public health preparedness and response, including concepts at the local, state and federal levels. Students will also learn about related policies, coordination, types of incidents, as well as the National Incident Management System, and the mechanisms through which public health agencies prepare for incidents. The course will include discussions and lessons learned from the pandemic.

Educating tomorrow’s teachers

Michael Alfano, dean of the Isabelle Farrington College of Education, said the faculty is working hard to adjust to the current situation. “We are assessing all our curricula in light of the pandemic, from our graduate educational

leadership programs addressing leadership challenges, to incorporating current events in curriculum, to a complete overhaul of how we're preparing new teachers to provide teaching and educational opportunities through distance learning," said Alfano.

Aspiring principals and superintendents are using the crisis as a type of "real-time" lab to actively participate in organizing, leading and managing public education during a crisis, Alfano said. Additionally, faculty members with experience in instructional technology have retooled coursework for student teachers, covering distance learning pedagogy at a much greater level than ever before.

"Like they say, 'In every crisis, there lies opportunity.' Public schooling has fundamentally changed in our country. Our faculty realizes this and feels responsible to ensure that the beginning educators and leaders we're preparing are well-equipped to meet the challenges and opportunities associated with the 'new normal' head-on," Alfano said.

Teachers-in-training will be prepared to be proactive, rather than reactive, when addressing the challenges and opportunities associated with post-pandemic public schooling, he added.

These quick decisions and adaptations from faculty illustrate commitment to students and the teaching profession. "Our faculty members are experienced teacher-scholars and appreciate how dynamic teaching and learning is in our country's public schools," Alfano said. "They feel an ethical obligation to ensure that our graduates are as well prepared as possible to do the very important work of educating our children." **Timely courses offered**

In the College of Arts & Sciences, faculty members quickly altered courses during the spring semester. Now they are looking ahead to the fall and considering how to adapt and add pandemic-related curriculum. Biology faculty will offer a course on virology (usually an upper-level biology elective). Mark Beekey, professor and chair of the biology department, said the course has been around for quite a while, but with everything going on, it seemed appropriate for fall. The course explores the nature of bacterial, animal and plant viruses, and it covers viral absorption-penetration, replication, release, viral infection and pathology.