

Voices of Alfred University: Students, faculty tell their stories of an extraordinary year

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Top row: Joe Brady, Sarah Cote, Liz Schumacher; second row: Gary Ostrower, Mandy Skeet, Mary McInnes

ENews began reaching out to the Alfred University community this week, asking faculty members to send us personal narratives describing their transitions to on-line teaching, while at the same we interviewed students over the phone, gathering their stories in back-and-forth conversations.

We look forward to sharing these narratives through ENews during the following weeks, providing an opportunity for all us to realize the full breadth of our resiliency and inventiveness as we explore ways to deal with a challenge none of us has ever faced before.

We also look forward to gathering more of your stories. If you have a personal narrative to share with us, or if you would enjoy a personal interview over the phone, please send an email to pricer@alfred.edu.

Joe Brady, student

"I like to draw," says Joe Brady, a first-year Alfred University art student in the middle of his Foundations curriculum. And he is finding the sudden jump from drawing in an art studio to an on-line education pretty smooth so far.

“The teachers have made sure their priority was that everyone could participate in every way they could,” he says. “They’ve been really inclusive to students who don’t have internet access or space to work. Classes have even been relaxing.”

Brady, who lives in Homer, NY, is working on a drawing assignment that his Foundation professors distributed as Alfred University shifted to on-line classes in response to the outbreak of COVID-19 cases.

“Our assignment is to pick items around our house that build a narrative of who we are. Things that hold significance for us. We pick twelve items and draw them. We upload to a blog we created at the beginning of the fall. We add some text to explain the significance of the items. The teachers said we can take this project as far as we want, as long as we complete it.”

Basically, he says, all he needs is a pencil and paper.

“I don’t hate being home,” he adds. “I’m enjoying it. I’m living the easy life.”

Sarah Cote, Instructor of English

I am an English faculty member and a parent of a seven- and four-year-old. In this brave new world, I am homeschooling my kids, so all countertops and desks are flooded with worksheets and crayons, not to mention my textbook, my notes, and the essay rubrics I never got to hand-deliver to my students.

I am 100 percent there for my AU students, but I recognize their own struggles with balance because I am living them myself. I know that many of them are caring for siblings; some are essential personnel at jobs that called them in (e.g., working long hours at their local Wegmans).

I am teaching Writing II seminars this semester, and the best part of this class is always the conversation: the ideas that turn into essays. Essays, per the root, are trials, attempts, ideas that venture out into the world. All of that starts with discussion. I miss my students dearly. I am not requiring live classes because some of my students live in different time zones and, as said before, have family responsibilities. I hope they trust that this teaching modality is not forever.

Liz Schumacher, student

First-year student Liz Schumacher says, “I’ve always loved writing, and I’ve always loved English.”

Her First Year Experience class was in creative writing, and she’s now taking English 102, which introduces students to critical/analytical writing about literature. She says she loves English classes, even though the on-line platform doesn’t permit the kind of give-and-take exchanges that in-class discussion allows.

“For classwork, we’re using what Alfred University uses for most courses, Canvas,” she says. “Our instructor puts up a discussion post, asks questions, and asks us to respond any way we can. We can read each other students’ responses, and our instructor responds to each student as well. She’s fantastic.”

A resident of Pennsylvania’s Bradford County, Liz says internet reception in her rural area is poor, making a video-based education platform almost inconceivable. “It’s hard to get Netflix and YouTube to work. Video conferencing would be difficult for me as a student.”

Fortunately, her English class is reading literary works she has thoroughly enjoyed. “We’ve been reading short stories and also “The Hate U Give” (Angie Thomas) and Katey Schultz’s “Still Come Home.”

“The reading is phenomenal,” she says. “So the whole year has been a great experience.”

She’s not sugar-coating the downside of a viral pandemic. Moving out of her freshman dorm “felt surreal...very sad. I was upset.”

And living at home now means suddenly being separated from her Alfred University friends. “I can look on social media platforms to see what my friends are doing. But we’re trying to get work done too, and it’s just a lot of stress.”

Gary Ostrower, Professor of History

“Having never taught an online course until now, I can safely say that my own are works in progress. I’ve been videotaping each lecture rather than providing more conventional online assignments. Being so photogenic and with such a mellifluous voice (some of my colleagues compare my voice to that of Walter Cronkite, others to Donald Duck), I am confident of keeping my students glued to their computer monitors or their iPhones for hours each day, NOT. My assignment response has been around 70 percent. That’s pretty good, but only pretty good. Give me the classroom any day.”

Mandy Skeet, student

A fourth-year psychology and education major, Mandy Skeet says her classes have made the transition to on-line learning platforms with reasonable success – a few bumps in the road, but all in all the work is proceeding.

The main issue on her mind is her hoped-for graduation ceremony. “It feels like we had a loss. For me personally, ... I’m not getting the closure on this section of my life.”

Alfred University will postpone the spring 2020 ceremony to December. For Mandy and other students in the class of ’20, that sense of a formal closure will have to wait. But in the meantime, the academic side of her senior year is progressing.

“For the most part it’s pretty good,” she says. Her Psychology professor, Danielle Gagne, is adept with the technology of a virtual classroom. “She kind of came on knowing exactly what she was doing. She figured out technical glitches right away. She’s recording the lectures, so they stay 14 days after. We can get back onto Canvas and watch the lecture again.”

She’s looking forward to the chance to say goodbye to the friends she has made at Alfred University over the years, and that means a graduation service, even if she has to wait an extra half-year.

“All of us are like, that’s the only thing we’re holding onto now.... Sometime if not in May. We don’t even care when.”

Mary McInnes, Professor of Art History

Last week I was tested with learning new software programs, finding new assignments, and recording new lectures. At the same time, I was hearing from students that they were anxious about the new situation: about getting online access, about managing their research, and anxious about finishing the semester. My experience was shared by my colleagues in Art History.

But, this week—what a difference! I looked at one online discussion board and “heard” my students debating the

concept of “postproduction,” arguing over the boundaries of artistic appropriation, and questioning what constituted originality in the 21st century. FANTASTIC.

And, along the way, I have kept in touch with soothing updates, positive comments, and videos of penguins roaming around Chicago’s aquarium. We are surviving—and, dare I say it, thriving.

Many thanks to all on our digital campus for their support, especially: Dan Hausman for his amazing generosity in helping me with software platforms; John Hosford and the rest of the Scholes Library team for their unfailing support in getting class materials to me and my students; Dr. Meghan Jones for her continued communications and advocacy; Dan Napolitano for his care of all our art students.