

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

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Tessa Beaulieu, Student

A renewable energy student in the Inamori School of Engineering, Tessa is taking a “super awesome” Fundamentals of Dance class this semester, along with classes in circuit theory and other subjects related to her major. She and her younger brother are sharing their Brockport home with their mother and father. “My Dad works in my parents’ room, I work in my room, and my mother and brother do their work downstairs.”

There are a lot of distractions in a household full of family members trying to get their own work done.

“Being at school means having that little bit of stress factor,” Tessa says. “You have to go to class, whereas now I’m at home. It’s a time management thing. Plus, we’re all separated, but it’s easy to go downstairs and talk.”

The work continues, including the terrific dance class she is taking with Assistant Professor of Dance Colleen Wahl. Part of the classwork involves non-mandatory Zoom meetings. “It’s just a follow-along with her,” Tessa says. There are also different assignment every week. “We’re assigned a video to watch. Then you can write a paper or videotape yourself dancing.”

Recently, she videotaped herself dancing alone in her room. Then she sent the file to her professor. No one else has seen the video so far. She says she's going to keep it that way for now.

Overall, the transition from classroom to online education has been successful, "but it's a little challenging to keep up. All my professors are being great about being available. It's just a different experience that I've never had before. It's going as well as it could be."

Maureen Weiss, Associate Professor, Performance Design

Greetings, I have two anecdotes that I have written regarding getting my classes up on-line, and the new culture shock.

"Tomorrow I begin teaching on-line. I have no idea what this world will look like or feel like. I am so used to working in a room with immediate faces of recognition or disdain. Forging ahead... And with that in mind, I have to think of how to teach in a more enveloping way - I also have to do that with two kids who are out of school. The stage is therefore set. I will be conferencing into a world with virtual students while behind me are two kids who are touchable but I certainly hope they will remain on silent mode as I try to communicate with the world through a screen. I suppose I should mention that I am teaching Postmodern Theatre.

"Here are discoveries that I have found after three weeks of teaching in this new world. If I thought I needed to re-evaluate my teaching techniques every semester before the pandemic, I now need to re-evaluate my techniques every five minutes. By Sunday night, I have decided on a very interesting course of action, and come Monday morning, that course of action is no longer relevant. The joy I get out of seeing my students faces on Zoom is pretty extreme. The exhaustion that Zoom takes on my body is equally extreme. I miss the hallways, I miss my colleagues, and mostly I seem to be missing nuance. It was something I relished, and I thought I was pretty good at paying attention to. So now, I am trying to make sure that I am listening very hard to the student who cannot seem to get their microphone to work.

Alane Flores, Student

A fourth-year Alfred University Business student, Alane is hunkered down in her family's home in Brooklyn, trying to stay safe and finishing her last semester at the University through a variety of digital media including Zoom and Google Slides.

"The transition from being at school to being at home 24/7 and having to do homework was pretty hard," she says. "And the fact I'm in the City, where the pandemic is huge...I can walk outside and walk past someone who has the virus. I've got to be safe and stay in the house. I like to stay in the house anyway, but I like to go out and walk around too."

Alane's second semester classes include Business Ethics, in which students are studying business practices at a variety of companies including Disney, Apple and Amazon. She likes the focus on the individual companies. "We shop at these companies regularly, but we never know the inside workings, so it's really cool to research and learn."

She adds she is "thankful" her class began working with on-line platforms, such as Google Docs, at the beginning of the semester. The early communicating and sharing of work with other students through on-line apps has made her recent transition to on-line classrooms less difficult. Recently, her classes has been using Google Slides, which allows students to develop presentations while communicating at a distance. She expects the class to begin using Zoom for on-line face-to-face communicating.

Alane says there's an upside to Alfred University's shift to on-line instruction: "This is helping us, because when we

get into the corporate world, we're going to have to do these business meetings online also."

And entering that world isn't so far off in the distance. "I'm looking for jobs as we speak," she says.

Erin Jurkowski, Student

Erin started out as an engineering student in her first year at Alfred University. Now she's a double major in English and Math. She also performs occasionally as a stand-up comic for campus events. She lives in Erie County, south of Buffalo.

"You can't see other houses from my parents' home," she says. "I am an extrovert, so with social distancing, I'm feeling the stress. On the Alfred campus, I walk to class, meet people, talk to people. It's a kind of regimented social activity, but it's great."

Her thoughts have been turning to the issue of solitary confinement in state and federal prisons, several of which aren't far from her home. Social distancing "is reaffirming my opinion that isolation in prison is a form of cruelty."

Her classes include Advanced Calculus, which has lost some of the fun now that classes are online and students meet through a video app. "Before spring break, we worked on individual problems in groups, but we can't do that online," she says. "You still have to engage, but it's definitely not the collaborative and hands-on experience we were enjoying."

Her English classes lend themselves more smoothly to online learning. She's taking a survey course in 19th century American Literature and another course in Jane Austen. Students are asked to share their reactions to the reading material with written online posts.

Reading the literature is a pleasure, although responding online requires more effort than speaking out in a classroom. "You get the same discussions as you would in class," Erin says, "but the workload is tough. I really like Jane Austen, though."

Colleen Wahl, Visiting Assistant Professor of Dance

Quite bluntly, having to switch to teaching dance online this semester has been difficult, because dance is about being with each other and moving in a community. Dance at Alfred University holds a unique place in the lives of many students – the studios are stunning and live music invigorates the body. Students cherish the time and space to take risks, explore subtlety, and dance exuberantly. Now, as we dance at a distance each email exchange holds the mourning of the time we used to share engaged in the art of dancing –together. Alas, there are ways to make it work: living room dances, Youtube videos, movement mantras, written reflections. Through each of these, dance brings us into the present and connects us to ourselves and, even if we do not know it, to the many millions of others now, before, and after who bring dance into the world to make it a better place.

Anthony Tsekrekas, Student

Anthony Tsekrekas, a third-year engineering student, has been hunkered down in his family home in Derry, NH, since Alfred University initiated online classes last month. With a focus on glass science, his classes in the Inamori School of Engineering include circuit theory and a glass laboratory, plus Quantum Mechanics in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. His professors have been using a variety of online teaching methods, including pre-recorded PowerPoint

lecture slides with voice-overs.

“It hasn’t been so bad,” he says.

One exception to the PowerPoint classes: His quantum Mechanics class, in which Physics Professor Roger Loucks has been using Zoom as the online medium for lectures. The Zoom lectures “are my preferred option, Anthony says. The class begins at 8:20 am, and the conversational give-and-take possible with Zoom requires some alertness on a student’s part.

It’s a good way to wake up, Anthony says.. Listening to a PowerPoint presentation at 8:30 am -- that might be a little tough.

Living in his family’s home with his parents and younger brother, a high school freshman, Anthony says everyone is managing to abide by social distancing rules when they step outside. Derry is a fairly small community, and it’s possible to go out for safe walks.

But he is looking forward to returning to the Alfred University campus.

“I love being home,” he says. “but it’s very difficult for learning.”

Cecilia Beach, Professor of French

In Rwanda, where I have been teaching yoga for the past two years, we had been relatively sheltered from the crisis until mid-March when the government proactively began to take containment steps even before the first confirmed case (cancelling concerts, conferences and large sports events for example). While some expats started to fly home around this time, I decided I was safer here than travelling. Less than a week after the first confirmed case on March 14, the government announced that the airport would be closed to all commercial flights for at least a month. That was a shock and a bit scary. It’s different choosing to stay and not having the option to leave. Still, I decided to stay rather than join the rush to evacuate. I’m glad I did. The following week, when the number of confirmed cases jumped to about 40 we went on strict lock-down with police controls in the streets. The vast majority (abt 90%) of cases here are still people who flew in just before the airport closed and were put in quarantine immediately. There are only a few cases of local contagion so far, mostly within a family, and we’ve seen no deaths. May it stay that way!

After about a week of peaceful retreat, I decided that I needed to join the rest of the teaching community and start giving online classes. I’m now leading one or two free classes in yoga, meditation, and mindfulness every day and it has been wonderful in spite of occasional technological glitches. In addition to my students from Kigali, I have students joining my classes from around the world, notably friends from Alfred and former expats from Kigali who are back in their home countries. Rather than feeling isolated, I now feel more connected to my international community.

I worry though about the elderly genocide survivors we had been working with for the past six months. Our work together had helped to relieve many of their symptoms of PTSD, but now we are unable to serve them either in person or online since they have no computers or smart phones. With this new crisis, in addition to the fact that the commemoration of the genocide is quickly approaching, I fear they may suffer a lot.

I was scheduled to return to the States on May 1. It now seems likely that my departure will be delayed. In the meantime, rendezvous on Zoom!

NOTE: We continue 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.

