

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

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ENews has been reaching out to Alfred University faculty and students asking for personal descriptions of transitions to on-line teaching. This is the third week we've had the pleasure of sharing these narratives with the ENews community.

Michele Hluchy, Professor

There are so many stories of hardships that our students are facing as they try to be full-time, online students. I have a student who is not at home; rather, she is living with her brother and sister-in-law and taking care of their children while her brother and sister-in-law go to work each day. And trying to be a full-time student at the same time.

Other students have told me that they have had to get jobs to help support their family because a parent is out of work. And trying to be full-time students at the same time. Another student says the entire family has to share one computer, so she must share with younger siblings and a parent working from home. And I have yet another student who is caring for his mother, who has Covid-19, at home. I'm sure there are many other variations of these stories, making it very difficult for our students to remain students during this difficult time.

Maria Voss, Student

Maria Voss, a second-year ceramic engineering student, is living at home in Palmyra, juggling her own work schedule

with the schedules of her mother and father and her sister and brother. “I’m happy to be with them,” she says. At the same time, people bump up against each other; life can be frustrating.

“My brother ate raspberries with his lunch, and he left the raspberry container out on the counter, instead of putting it back in fridge. It’s annoying.”

Her classes employ a variety of on-line apps and teaching models. “We’re using Microsoft Teams, and most of my professors are posting videos to Canvas. ...There’s a lot of emailing.” She also is involved in a do-it-yourself project, which has become much less complicated than the on-campus version. Instead of an actual project, “we’re watching a PowerPoint demonstration and answering questions over it.”

After four weeks of on-line classes, she has become skeptical of the positive values of technology. “Our reliance on technology is leaving us vulnerable to its faults. I’ll suddenly lose my wi-fi, or my printer won’t work. That becomes a big problem. Also, I have so much more screen time and sitting time while I’m working at home, so I feel very inactive.”

To clear her head, she goes for runs with her mother or father, and she started a craft project for some healthy mental relief. “I made a macramé owl. I gave it to my aunt. She lives on a farm, and she’s got plenty of animals for company. So I’m not super uncomfortable with all of this alone time. But I do definitely miss my friends.”

Nick Schlegel, Professor

While we mourn the temporary loss of face-to-face teaching in the physical classroom, It should be noted that had this pandemic occurred a mere twenty years ago this mass mobilization to online instruction would have been impossible. So I am very grateful that the current state of technology is up to the task of accommodating virtual learning on a global scale.

Fortunately, my transition to teaching remotely was smooth. My courses have strong online components built into them and I am a regular user of Canvas' functionality. So, we all do the best we can. In truth, though, it's the students that have really risen to the challenge. Even given the current hardships, the quality of their work continues to impress and inspire!

As a teacher of mass media, the most common question I am asked is: what have you been watching/binging? Some friends have recommended The Last Ship, the Michael Bay-produced TNT series about a virus that wipes out half of the world's population. Uhm, no thanks. Instead, if you are looking for something dramatic, I recommend HBO's outstanding Show Me a Hero (I just re-watched this) or for sheer belly ache inducing laughter, it's hard to beat FX's vampire mockumentary series What We Do in the Shadows which (thankfully) just started its second season.

Mostly, like everyone, I just miss being around the students, staff, and faculty.

Carissa Dopman, Student

Carissa Dopman earned her BFA at Alfred University in 2019 and now is working on her BS, majoring in glass engineering. She says her professors are using a combination of apps for online classes: Zoom, BigBlueButton and Canvas. “Everything seems to be working pretty good,” she says. “The first two weeks were kind of chaotic, and some students are still trying to catch up. ... I think everybody’s making it work pretty well.”

But online classwork is difficult. “I’m on wi-fi with my mom and my brother, so wi-fi is becoming spotty. Sometimes it takes forever to load.” Timed tests and quizzes can be problematic. “Sometimes a lot of buffer time is necessary.

And, she adds, living at home is not always supportive of studying. “There are a lot of distractions at home. I’m constantly hearing my mom on the phone. I know of students who went back home and who don’t have desks in their room.... I’m already struggling. It’s not normal. Humans by nature don’t do well by change.”

She finds studying at home can also be a grind without the breaks and distractions of a typical day on campus. “It’s exhausting staring at a computer screen all day. I find I do better if I work a bit, then take a break.... I work up to midnight.”

Amidst all the challenge, there is an upside. “I think it’s a good test for people. It’s a good kind of reality check.”

Desmond Wallace, Professor

There are multiple things a new faculty member must prepare so their first year is a success. Things such as prepping new courses, trying to find time to complete research, and becoming acclimated to the community. Transitioning from in-person classes to online classes during a global pandemic is usually not one of them. As other colleges and universities were moving online, I began asking myself what steps I would have to take if Alfred University followed suit and transitioned online. Also, I wondered what resources myself and my students would have at their disposal to make the transition as smooth as possible.

Luckily for me, the transition to online was seamless. I think transitioning to an asynchronous format supplies needed flexibility for students to complete their work. Especially for students finding themselves taking on extra responsibilities to help their families.

This is one academic year I will never forget.

Sara Johnson, Student

Sara Johnson, now in the final month of her fourth year, got married a year-and-a-half ago on Christmas Eve. Her husband was serving in the U.S. Navy and continues his service; Sara stayed in Alfred to finish her last year, until the coronavirus outbreak interrupted the spring semester and she moved to Charleston, SC to be with her husband.

The couple were in Charleston for five days, then received orders to move to Norfolk, Va. Sara is finishing her coursework while she also adapts to married life in their new (small) apartment in Norfolk.

“It’s been an adjustment definitely,” she says. “We did a 180-degree from a long-distance marriage. Now we’re both here driving each other nuts.”

Fortunately, there are the novels of Jane Austen. An English major, Sara is studying Austen in a seminar with Professor Allen Grove. “I thought it would be a perfect end to my senior year.”

The switch from a seminar to online classes has been very smooth. The class continues to meet three times a week via Zoom, which allows students to discuss Austen’s novels while also seeing each other’s faces. For individual presentations, Grove can tweak the Zoom settings to make the student-presenter host of the Zoom session. The teleconferenced sessions in no way have distracted Sara from her fondness for Austen’s work.

“I love that she uses ordinary people and their ordinary lives to explain or show something about what it is to be human,” she says. “She uses these mundane daily experiences to communicate to readers what is not mundane.”

Jeff Sluyter-Beltrao, Professor

Professor Michele Hluchy (Geology/Environmental Studies) and I recently had a wonderful Zoom class experience with actor Bill Pullman and West Virginia lawyer Harry Deitzler. Michele and I had long planned to join our “Hydrology” and “Environment, Politics and Society” classes together for a home-cooked dinner along with a joint viewing of the recent movie *Dark Waters*, which powerfully portrays the legal struggle to make the DuPont corporation pay for its knowing use of dangerous chemicals that directly threatened the lives of tens of thousands of people in an impoverished region of West Virginia.

When the coronavirus pandemic put a crimp in those dinner plans, Michele did not give up. After looking for ways to arrange for students to get free access to the film on-line, the good offices of folks like President Zupan opened the door to a class meeting unlike anything Michele and I had been imagining. Bill Pullman, an AU Trustee and supporting actor in the film, suggested that he, along with Harry Deitzler, whom he plays in the film, might visit with our classes for a joint Zoom discussion session. Students spent an hour asking probing questions of both Bill Pullman and Harry Deitzler – exchanges that provided our students with extraordinary access to insider views of both the legal process and the making of the film.

It was a great experience for both students AND professors!!

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.