

The Transition to Remote Scenario Opens a New Era in Higher Education

Provost Christine Mangino
Office of Academic Affairs

I am not sure words can do justice to describe Spring 2020, a semester that began as many others but quickly became unrecognizable. During the first week of March, I took two days off work to spend an extended weekend in Iceland, knowing there were some concerns about COVID, but for the most part, everything was business as usual. Once I returned to work on March 9th, it was a very different situation, with fears heightened and calls to shut down the city. On March 17th, I learned of a positive case on campus and knew we would be shutting down the college within hours and rather than return to campus, we would most likely move to complete the semester with remote teaching and work. I had a few hours to put plans in place. Our first priorities were updating all of the division's websites and staff voicemails with instructions about how to contact people, getting computers and VPNs into the hands of those who needed them, scanning eighteen faculty portfolios so they could still be considered for promotion, and supporting faculty and staff in gaining access to everything they would need to work remotely. During the period just before New York Pause was announced, and the weeks afterward, there were unrelenting daily changes, the work required to implement each of those changes, in addition to the regular spring workload that did not disappear. In addition to all of this were the emotions and stresses, both personal and professional, associated with being in the middle of a pandemic.

The subsequent weeks were focused on making sure that information regarding CUNY's decisions and policies related to the pandem-

ic flowed to everyone involved, strategizing solutions to hold CW P & B meetings and department elections, participating in ongoing meetings with CUNY Central administration, meeting with the chairs, coordinators and directors to share information, answer questions, learn about their issues, and keeping up with the onslaught of emails. One of the hardest parts was remaining upbeat when on call after call with people who were rightfully fearful, depressed, and generally stressed. I needed to be able to support them through this and be the rock they could lean on for guidance and reassurance. The hardest part was not being surrounded by my OAA team. Virtually, they are still there and working hard to keep everything going and supporting me, but it is not the same as being in person. Now getting a quick question answered or debated involves scheduling a meeting or a phone call. I am definitely a face-to-face conversationalist and oh, how I miss that experience. Through all of this, I am still keeping up with our usual work, including conducting a site visit (albeit virtual) as a Middle States peer evaluator for another institution, meeting with our faculty who were scheduled for their pre-tenure reviews, meeting with all the committees I am involved with, and answering the hundreds of emails each day mixed in with lots of phone and video calls. Now that the spring semester has ended, the focus is on preparing for the fall semester to be almost completely online and making sure the faculty are better supported and ready this time.

Through all of this, self-care has been so important to keep my head in the game, my stress

levels down, and my stamina up. I have been running most mornings for the past several years, but that was not enough. I signed up for some of the Working Advantage free exercise classes and now do yoga or Pilates every weekday and there are days I start with mindful meditation when I feel my stress-levels are too high. I also am a strong believer in finding the joy in each day and, despite the challenges of this last semester, I am grateful for the unexpected opportunity to spend much more time with my partner and son, who is home from college.

The time together with family has allowed for deep and meaningful conversations about what it means to me to be an educator during this solemn period of protest and creation. The Black Lives Matter movement has inspired an international dialogue regarding the gross inequities and injustices many in our Hostos community face everyday. It is imperative that this dialogue continues and leads to real systemic changes. I am eager to partner with faculty, staff and students in the coming weeks and months as we reflect upon our mission and plan for ways we as a community can deepen our work addressing the needs of our beloved Hostos community.

Prof. Diana Macri
Allied Health Sciences

Spring 2020 is a semester none of us will ever forget. The anxiety, angst and fear we experienced as a result of COVID19 changed our lives so dramatically and powerfully, that most of us are still coping with the repercussions. Bearing such a burden is easier when you are surrounded by an empathetic and trusting community. I am grateful for all those in the Hostos community who sought to ease the trauma by keeping us together, even though we were forced apart. Such was the case when I was invited to join Prof. Nunez-Rodriguez in an

episode of "Teaching Tidbits" in mid-May. It's not often that we are asked to share our thoughts, at least not for me, so it was a bit intimidating for me. But once we started, I realized I was among friends and forgot my fears. Our episode ran for about 40 minutes and, while I'm not sure if it helped anyone else at Hostos feel better, or if it shared any valuable tips or resources for the viewers (I hope it did!), but it made **me** feel valued... and supported... and grateful to working in a place where such things matter.

Prof. Nelson Nuñez-Rodriguez
Natural Sciences

The Teaching Tidbits Live Series from the Hostos Center for Teaching and Learning has been an opportunity to share our current pedagogical landscape: a remote teaching and learning scenario crafted in a short period of time. Without a doubt, the current outbreak opens a new era in Higher Education. As instructor and unit coordinator, I focused on simplicity: *do less and focus more*. During the *re-calibration* transition week, I helped instructors who had dissimilar experience with online teaching platforms and more importantly, I created a series of faculty healing sessions to humanize the sudden transition to remote teaching. Faculty shared their concerns and discoveries as they began navigating the new teaching scenario and had to deal with students', and their own, grief and uncertainty. Some of them learned new technological tools, others opened themselves to change and exploration. I recommended that faculty not hold similar standards used in *face-to-face* instruction modality and, instead, to implement simplicity. I recalled the use of a weekly syllabus, suggested by Prof. DiSanto, as we were able to plan for just the following week while we navigated a *wait-and-see* scenario. Overall, the sudden transition exposed instructors to several technological tools and, more importantly, appraised our capaci-

ty TO CHANGE. There is a new era in Higher Education. It requires (more than ever) humanizing our pedagogy and to refashion our teaching repertoire. It is my hope that we capitalize upon this opportunity to reinvigorate our face-to-face teaching tools and value the effectiveness of online teaching opportunities. Definitely, this exercise will make us better teachers

Working from home during a Pandemic

Prof. Ernest Ialongo
Behavioral & Social Sciences

In a recent interview on *Teaching Tidbits* I was asked what strategies I employed to remain productive and healthy (mentally and physically) while working from home during the college's lockdown. Here are some thoughts I shared, which I was then asked to commit to this virtual paper. Clearly, these are strategies that work for me, and I don't presume to speak for others. But maybe they could be of help to some of you.

First, establish a routine. Our days have a built-in structure or routine when we go to work, or the gym, see friends, drop kids off at school, etc. Having life concentrated into one geographic space, your home, and maybe its immediate environs, it is easy for one day to bleed into the next, without a sense of accomplishment, or the clear end of one task and the beginning of another. Setting up a routine for yourself gives the days some structure and makes you feel you have some control over your environment. For instance, begin work at roughly the same time, take lunch at the same time, a coffee break at the same time, and end the work day at about the same time. If you like to exercise, make it a part of your routine. Go running or walking at set days and times during the week, or maybe stretching and yoga at home at set days and times. Set a regular evening aside

and dedicate it to reaching out to family and friends on Zoom. If you live with a partner, and have kids, make sure to set aside a set time to just spend time together. Most importantly, make sure you set a regular time aside to do something for yourself.

Once that routine has been established, however, and you have some order in the midst of all the activity now going on at home, try and add a little variety within the routine so it does not get onerous. Run/walk a different route, take turns on who does what with regards to chores at home, try cooking something completely out of your comfort zone.

Second, and just as important, you have to be good to yourself. The lockdown, working from home, taking care and educating your kids at home, if you have them, without all the in-person support networks we depend on (family, friends, your religious community, etc.) is incredibly taxing. It is only natural in the midst of these challenges to criticize yourself and demand more from yourself, to be better. This is only making a difficult situation even worse. Try and focus on all that you have already accomplished, and recalibrate what you can reasonably get done. In short, go easy on yourself, and don't set yourself up to fail. You've probably already done more than you ever thought was possible. Celebrate that for a moment before moving on.

Finally, be honest with yourself and the people around you about what you need to get through this period of high anxiety. And, of course, listen to those around you. Anxiety and enforced proximity is a dangerous mixture, and you don't want to exacerbate tension in your home where you already have so much to balance.

I hope this is of some help. These are tough times, but we make it work, day by day. Stay strong.

Dr Damaris-Lois Y Lang Natural Sciences

Transitioning to remote learning during the pandemic has been challenging. For most instructors, it has been about discovering technology and innovative ways to teach remotely. For others, it has been more about juggling personal demands, such as home-schooling dependents and work. For some, it has been both an emotional and physical drain. I have personally experienced a little bit of each part. For a lucky few, they have experienced a rather relaxing time coupled with healthy self-reflection exercises. In my capacity as a faculty, I have aimed to barrel through and provide full support to uphold excellence in helping my students achieve their academic goals. In this article of reflection, I intend to share inputs and responses to questions that, hopefully, will give helpful insight we all continue to work through this together.

How do you communicate regularly with your students?

Currently, I communicate to my students via email, telephone and video chat, and text (at one point, communication via text got blocked by the platform I was using because I was sending out too many text messages all at once). I connected with my students via the class SI leader, my research students, and Starfish. The most successful ways of effectively connecting with my students were via the class SI leader and Starfish. I intend to improve by employing targeted correspondence that will employ a need-based approach, meeting the specific needs of students, step by step.

How have you set realistic expectations?

Currently, the approach I use is to get to the bottom line of helping my students

learn productively, with the tools available to them. Some things I have implemented include setting two levels of deadlines for work submissions (a soft deadline and a hard deadline). Additionally, I had to improvise work submissions as students did not have printers and scanners to print and upload work. Areas of improvement may be to find ways to get adequate instruction to students with minimum reliance on technology

How have you kept your students engaged in these times?

I actively track attendance, before, during, and at the end of class during online live instruction sessions. I keep track of work submissions and intersect quizzes during class sessions. As an improvement, I intend to include incentivized participation as a way of rewarding those who are fully engaged in the remote learning activity and platform and can display skills in learning and skill development in the subject area.

What challenges have you faced/are you facing in this transition?

Effective communication lost to the cloud of everything else that is happening around us was the main challenge. Mobilizing students to be able to help them effectively has remained quite challenging. I have worked on centralizing pertinent information to make it available and more accessible to students. However, there is always room for improvement. As a suggestion, we can be operating from our 35-Program entry level in collaboration with the student's coaches/advisement administrative units to reach out to our students with the relevant help needed by each student as and when it is required. This approach could probably be a great way to centralize the information and provide specificity to communication channels.