

On a gorgeous April afternoon, a thousand crimson dianthus bloom brightly on Van Vleet Oval, as if waiting for someone to take notice. But despite the warm weather and blue sky, the bike lanes and sidewalks are empty. Missing are the hordes of students, bantering and jostling at the crosswalks on Lindsey Street, as they make their way to class at the University of Oklahoma. The only thing in motion this sunny afternoon is the news ticker on Gaylord Hall playing an endless loop of COVID-19 headlines from around the world.

Since mid-March, OU's three campuses have been closed to all but essential personnel due to the coronavirus. What you can't see in this seemingly deserted landscape is the OU community fighting back from virtual trenches—stubbornly refusing to let a pandemic preempt a semester's worth of education.

“When crisis hits, you have certain types of training that prepare you to respond to different elements simultaneously,” says OU Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students David Surratt. “But I think this pandemic has created an additional layer when it comes to managing both a public health crisis and everything that it impacts at a university.”

The top priority of OU Interim President Joe Harroz is the safety of students, staff and faculty. One of his first actions was to call home all students who were studying abroad.

“We started getting people home from Italy by the first week of March and, on March 10, that country closed its borders,” recalls Surratt. “After that, things escalated quickly.”

OU administration had looked to spring break, March 14 to 22, for time to develop a strategy for the rest of the semester and prepare faculty for the probability of classroom instruction moving online to curtail the spread of the respiratory virus.

A full week before it had planned, OU leadership realized it no longer had the luxury of waiting until spring break. Adam Croom, director of the Office of Digital Learning and a faculty member in the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication, began assembling tutorial materials on two websites: ou.edu/teachanywhere for faculty and ou.edu/learnanywhere for students. Two types of distance learning would be available—pre-recorded video lectures by faculty that students could access at any time, and the live option of videoconferencing.

continued

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

Although on-campus classes are suspended, the learning continues thanks to Sooners who still believe that knowledge is a frontier worth striving for.

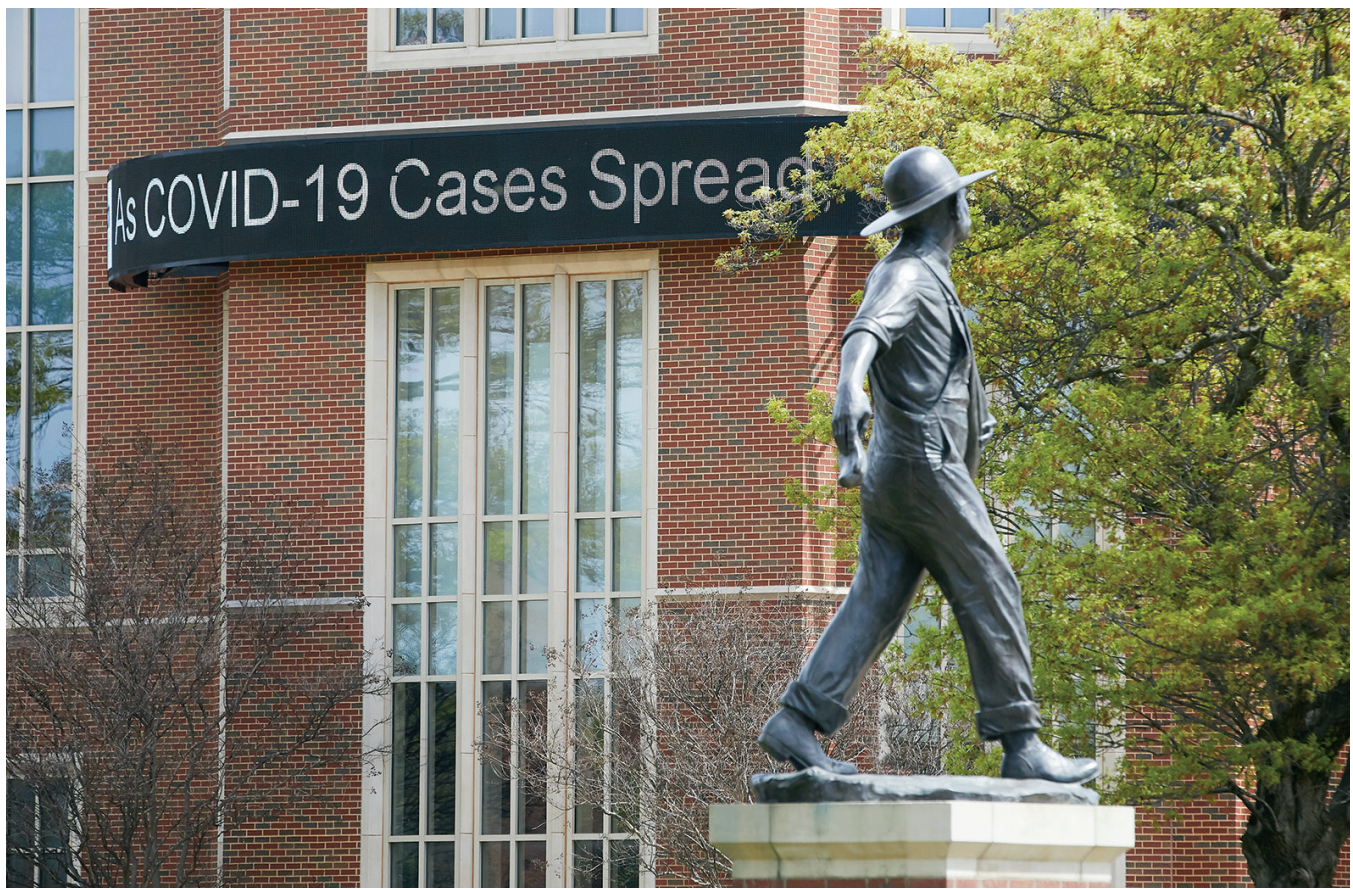
COLLEGE IN THE TIME OF



Adam Croom, director of the Office of Digital Learning and a faculty member in Gaylord College, has moved his Contemporary Problems in Advertising class to Zoom. Dogs are welcome, too.

CORONAVIRUS





Travis Caperton

The Seed Sower continues his mission on OU's Norman campus, while the news ticker on Gaylord Hall displays the latest headlines about the coronavirus pandemic.

“We started building it on Sunday, March 8. It was published Tuesday and the call was made on Thursday to go online,” says Croom. “It was a very quick turnaround.”

As students prepared to leave for break, Interim President Harroz sent a campus-wide e-mail advising everyone to take any instructional materials and devices with them. It turned out to be a wise call.

On March 15, a member of the OU community tested positive for the virus. Three days later, Harroz announced that classes would go online for the rest of the semester. Most of student housing would close and graduation was postponed until August.

“The change was a dramatic shift for faculty and students alike,” says Surratt. “We instituted a pass/no pass option when students became worried about what the impact of so much uncertainty would have on their GPAs.”

Mark Morvant, vice provost for Instruction and Student Success, says that even though today's students are perceived as being more technologically savvy than previous generations, their K-12 experience was not taught online either, so both students and faculty had to adapt.

While OU has offered distance learning for decades, additional investments in online instruction began in 2013, when it launched the popular Janux learning platform. Morvant, an associate professor of chemistry and the former director of the OU Center for Faculty Excellence, still holds the record for the most popular class on Janux: “The Chemistry of Beer,” which used the beer-brewing process to teach the complexities of organic and biochemistry.

“OU already had tools in place,” says Morvant. “We were already using Canvas, a course-management system for stu-

dents and faculty, and Zoom, a cloud platform for video and audio conferencing, that made it very easy for the Norman campus to move online.”

Morvant says that even five years ago the switch to an all-virtual campus would have been problematic. “Luckily, we made IT decisions over the past five years that made this move easier for our campus, much easier than what some of our peers are dealing with right now.”

Going forward, Croom says he and his staff will be offering more online resources to enhance the academic virtual experience. “Everything for spring was fairly crisis-driven. Our goal for the spring was to transfer classes online, but for the summer our goal is to transform classes for online.”

In late April, Harroz announced that OU hopes to welcome students back on all three of its campuses for the fall semester with smaller class sizes and staggered class times to maintain responsible social distancing during the transition. Certain online classes will remain an option for those who choose.

Croom says his office will be ready to help in any event. “Our instructional designers are experts in how to design and develop an online course,” he says. “The faculty member is the expert on subject matter. What we can share are best practices that faculty can use to achieve their learning objectives. They're ready for that next step.”

Morvant agrees. “Faculty have done an amazing job switching to total online instruction at this point in the semester,” he says. “Some are more comfortable than others, but they're taking care of the safety and health of our community first and

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doing what they need to do to continue with each student’s education. I’m really proud of our faculty, staff and students.”

To accommodate social distancing, staff at Sarkeys Fitness Center are offering online workouts and doctors at Goddard Health Center are seeing many patients through teleconferencing. Still, there are other OU employees, like those in central mail, on the custodial staff and in housing and food services, whose jobs leave no option for working from home or online.

“I don’t think you can say thanks enough to the people who have maintained their work schedule in the face of this crisis,” says Surratt. “They continue to do their work and do it bravely. I’m proud of OU’s response to this crisis across the board. Everyone is doing their best to adapt and keep going, even though it is not easy.”

Katie Southwick, a senior majoring in social work, was already taking two online classes when the campus-wide transition occurred. Her latest class to adopt Zoom was a three-hour seminar, part of her capstone, along with an off-campus practicum.

“The hard part with social work is that it’s so hands on. I was doing my second semester of practicum at the Norman Veterans’ Center working with geriatrics,” says Southwick. “But that terminated once we were not allowed to visit. There’s really not a lot you can do with distance learning in terms of visiting the residents.”

In addition to having her practicum terminated, Southwick says she was saddened she could no longer see fellow students and friends in class.

“Every week, I would go to seminar and catch up with my classmates about what they were up to and how they were doing. So, going from that to just seeing everybody on a screen was really hard. The first week felt so weird, even our professor got a little teary. She just cares about us so much.”

Southwick’s instructor, Sue Durrett, is not easily prone to tears. After 30 years at the Oklahoma Department of Human Services, she became a Community Faculty Member at the OU Zarrow School of Social Work and recently joined the Field Education Unit as a faculty liaison. During her tenure at DHS, she worked closely with children and families, helping to develop and implement the Citizens Advisory Board of Cleveland County Child Welfare Unit Inc., a nonprofit specifically for children caught up in the child welfare system.

“As a social worker, I have seen a lot,” says Durrett. “But the first day we met online, the students just seemed so deflated, it broke my heart. They’ve worked so hard and I felt their disappointment. But I also admire their strength and their determination.

“So, we talked about the disappointment. We all agreed it was not ideal, but I said, ‘Now, let’s flip it. What experience

have you gained from this? So many times, social work is crisis work. So, this experience itself is going to be a strength you can carry with you throughout your career.”

Katie’s plans after graduation are temporarily on hold. She had applied for a government job as an English teaching assistant in Spain, but with the travel ban, she doesn’t know if she will be allowed into the country. Still, she is proud of her accomplishments and happy with her last semester, even though it was not what she expected.

“The whole staff at Zarrow College worked so hard over spring break making sure our hours were all going to be met and calling each and every one of us just to make sure we were OK. I am very grateful for my professors,” Southwick adds. “Sue gave us her personal phone number. She has made herself very much available to her class. I’d say I’m one of the lucky ones.”

Southwick’s friend Faith Morgan, a senior in creative media production in Gaylord College, says she was disappointed that she wouldn’t be able to walk across the stage during Commencement, but that doesn’t mean she won’t be taking part. Morgan is one of seven students in the media production class working on a video for the virtual graduation ceremony.

“We have really bonded in that class because of its small size,” says Morgan. “The class is taught by Scott Hodgson, who is head of Gaylord Hall Productions. Because of him, we have worked with clients all over the U.S. It has been really great to get those opportunities as a student.”

Morgan says the class knew at the start of the semester that they would be creating the video for Commencement, but they did not expect it to be such a large part of the ceremony. Although the class had taken most of the footage already, she says it’s difficult now because there is no one on campus and no way to capture the Class of 2020’s final weeks at the university.

“We’ll have a recap of video taken over the past four years to pull everything together for the seniors,” adds Morgan. “Hopefully it will say, ‘We’re going through a hard time now, but look at the memories we’ve made over the past four years and everything you got to be a part of.’ It’s a way of bringing everyone together electronically.”

At 7 p.m. on May 8, the Class of 2020 will make history as the first OU graduates to attend Commencement from all parts of the United States and around the world. But some things will stay the same. Degrees will be conferred, mortar boards will be tossed and parental tears will be shed. And when these bright graduates, resplendent in crimson and cream, take their ambitions and step into the sunlight, the whole world will sit up and take notice.

