

### The Mind's Eye: Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Many of the major colleges and universities debate on exactly how to reopen their doors for students in the fall quarter<sup>1</sup>; one college, Walla Walla Community College (WWCC), is applying the COVID-19 recommendations and getting solid results. Adhering to social distancing recommendations, sterilizing equipment, and mask-wearing requirements, WWCC managed to begin certain live classes as early as June 20, 2020. As education is a known component to reducing recidivism, WWCC reduced stress and increased student focus by holding classes such as welding, digital design, macroeconomics, accounting, marketing, statistics, nutrition, basic math and writing to name just a few. Some of the factors this reporter feels led to the success of WWCC conducting classes well before the rest of the nation include: Strict adherence to medical and CDC rules for mandatory wearing of masks, COVID-19 education for all students on day one of classes, increase in educational staff (due in part to social distancing mandates), and administrative professionalism across the spectrum (i.e. registering students, hiring instructors, informative dialog with student base, instructors engaging students with useful instruction). This combination of adaptation, planning, overcoming obstacles, and meeting educational objectives enabled WWCC to take the lead and point other colleges and universities to successful strategies that work in the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>2</sup>.

As an Industrial/Organizational Psychologist, one of my duties is to help organize and understand organizational data; during the Corona virus pandemic, there are a lot of unknowns. Knowing what works and disseminating that information is a key to success for all human life. According to Grand et al. (2018, p.11), "...when these are the goals that spur science, both the producers and recipients of scientific knowledge are more likely to benefit. Consistent with these sentiments, we propose that a robust science is one in which activities throughout the entire scientific enterprise are conducted with the intention of producing positively impactful and relevant knowledge." In other words, science needs to be relevant to our daily lives and that the information needs dissemination. While this reporter can only provide qualitative analysis (i.e. observation), it is my hope that the information will prove fruitful to other educators struggling over how to be successful in restarting classroom instruction.

A successful program of instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic will adhere to strict guidelines set forth by medical and Centers for Disease Control (CDC); before any planning of curricula can be had, educators need to reset priorities to not only accommodate recommended COVID-19 guidelines, but strictly adhere to them for the safety of administration, instructors,

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<sup>1</sup> According to CBS This Morning (7 July, 2020), colleges and universities are in debate whether to do limited live classes or strictly online offerings.

<sup>2</sup> As of the time of this writing, 7-12-2020, Washington State Penitentiary reports zero inmates identified with COVID-19, unlike other prisons within the state.

and students. As the scientists and medical professionals learn how the COVID-19 virus spreads exactly, the rest of the world needs to implement their recommendations and carry on with the work at hand<sup>3</sup>. Keeping educational protocols within medical and CDC guidelines not only keeps everyone safe, but helps to reduce negligence and liability. This demonstration of professionalism at Washington State Penitentiary was noted in a report earlier this year (Minatani, 2020). In short, one success factor includes modifying protocols based on medical and CDC recommendations; many governors are regulating state agencies (which includes educational institutions) to follow suit.

One of the important parts to defeating the ‘Invisible Enemy’ is to educate everyone that 1) the Corona virus does exist, and 2) the Corona virus is a threat to all human life. In this respect, WWCC on day one of classes taught mandatory COVID-19 material, up to and including, washing hands and general hygiene; in this regard, the American population has different ideas on what constitutes ‘good hygiene.’ Once the COVID-19 material is taught, the instructors then duly inform all students that before and after they attend class, all equipment is sprayed down and sanitized. Again, this protocol is the recommended manner to combat the virus and the results are working. Revisiting the sound wisdom of one of the WWCC staff, if everyone follows the rules (i.e. COVID-19 protocols), everything will be fine; problems arise because many citizens desire freedom over safety at this time.

Increasing staff seems always a headache and a burden to administrative staff for any business, and colleges are no exception. However, to comply with CDC recommendations and keep both students and instructors safe, social distancing protocols must be implemented. Here, WWCC leads in this manner as live classrooms are arranged so that no student comes in contact with another student or instructor. Increasing the safety in the classroom comes at a cost; administrators at the college broke normal classes into two separate classes. This translates into more hours teaching for a single instructor, or hiring another instructor to teach the second class. In this way, the college looks to students’ future by providing quality over quantity; in addition, in order to provide education services to the students, social distancing must be maintained. Failure means a total shut-down of the educational program. So while increased costs in overhead by hiring additional instructors can be a great burden, the question one needs to ask is, “What is our return on investment?”

Administrative professionalism, as this reporter defines it, is doing one’s duty and responsibility; responsibility to ourselves and others is seen relatively little in today’s society. All too often, media news reports various businesses not resetting their business models, and soon see their business dwindle due to an outbreak of Corona. When interviewed, the business owners usually state they didn’t see failing to follow CDC recommendations as important; only in hindsight of their customers’ sickness do they realize their lack of discipline and haste to reopen was dangerous. Therefore, one should identify the professionalism of all stakeholders at WWCC concerning education during the pandemic. For example, in one class the Dean of Education came in to field questions about degree programs, schedules, and to check that CDC protocols

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<sup>3</sup> One WWCC instructor noted the task of implementing live classes was simply to follow the rules. In addition, for the prison environment, the COVID-19 threat lies in teachers introducing the virus to the inmate population.

are executed; in answering questions, the Dean was patient, knowledgeable, and professional. Before classes had begun, administration staff sent out degree audits (informing the students which classes they needed to take to earn their degrees) and answered questions promptly via inmate kiosk. In addition, teachers (even new to prison teaching) engaged students with relevant information, and adapted that information to a Post-COVID-19 world; the teachers are not teaching obsolete material in obsolete ways! Lastly, all staff are dedicated to being a part of the solution toward the battle against Corona, rather than being part of the problem. Anecdotally speaking, all instructors have one goal in mind: Educating the students. In a time of the most chaotic times of our history, the administrative professionalism of the WWCC staff translates into two things: Duty and Responsibility.

While the 'Invisible Enemy' that is the Corona virus is giving many colleges and universities in the United States pause in relation to fall quarter classes, WWCC is clearly taking point and getting brilliant results from their methodology in administration and the classroom. Simply adhering and apply CDC and medical recommendations, live classes began as early as June 20, 2020. Adding staff helped maintain social distancing mandates, which in turn, kept students healthy and safe. Making sure instructors and students understand the most up-to-date material on COVID-19, such as washing hands, and good hygiene was another major success key. In order to make this all happen, it began with the WWCC staff and new hires having a great sense of professionalism, which translated into doing their duty and responsibility; WWCC seems to be applying principles in hiring that adhere to scientific standards (Psychology, Society of Industrial and Organizational, 2018, pp. 51-54). Here at Washington State Penitentiary (WSP), the 'Invisible Enemy' is known and avoided, due in part to the WWCC staff. God Bless.

## Works Cited

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