

Necessity Drives Innovation

Creativity allows Delaware Tech instructors and students to continue achieving academic goals **BY DR. MARK T. BRAINARD**

CREATIVITY AND INNOVATIVE THINKING have long been key to Delaware Tech's success, but never so much as over the past 16 months. Our faculty and staff have worked hard to fulfill our mission of putting students at the center of everything we do. The pandemic forced us to drastically change our operations and methods of delivering instruction, but we seized this opportunity to implement some creative teaching techniques that will stay with us long after the pandemic ends.

We realized early into this challenging period that our faculty would appreciate the opportunity to learn more about how to develop high-quality, distance-learning courses, so our Center for Creative Instruction and Technology (CCIT) team launched our first Course Design Institute last June. Since then, 737 of our instructors have completed the introductory "Teaching a Distance Education" course, and 776 instructors have participated in CCIT trainings and workshops. Our faculty and staff worked diligently last year to transition more than 1,800 academic courses to a distance-learning format against the incredibly short deadline of just a few weeks. The Course Design Institute offered our instructors the opportunity to enhance their distance-learning methods to ensure students were receiving top-notch instruction, despite the challenges of learning from outside the classroom.

Some instructors have really stretched themselves with creative ways of encouraging student participation. For example, Mathematics Instructor Megan Wagaman was looking for a fun team-building activity to start off the semester with her students and decided to create an escape room.

"I was a little nervous about having my class do it," she said. "It is a little goofy, and I wasn't sure if they would like it. But they really did! I first used it with my night class. We had already been in class for about two-and-a-half hours. I gave them this activity to try in breakout rooms, and they came back energized and excited."

Wagaman was inspired to try this after attending a CCIT escape room last fall. Chemistry Instructor Charlene Kemmerle was also inspired to create several interactive learning tools for her courses to keep students engaged in a distance-learning environment.

"Using interactives within a class, especially a class that usually has hands-on labs, but is now 100 percent virtual, is a great way to deepen student understanding of a key concept," she said. "Interactives require

students to take what they have learned in lecture and truly apply their knowledge to a real world problem."

In ways both large and small, our faculty, staff, and students used their best thinking and creativity to ensure all students meet their academic goals without interruption. As the saying goes, "Necessity is the mother of invention," and we have countless examples. At least one faculty member last year taught classes from a minivan parked at her parents' house because of a weak WiFi connection at her home. And some of our allied health students learning from home came up with interesting alternatives to practicing in a lab, such as practicing catheterization skills on a stuffed animal.

Despite the many challenges we have faced since the pandemic, we were proud to graduate more than 1,900 students in a virtual ceremony this spring, which is a record number for Delaware Tech. These students achieved their academic goals and will now go on to continue their education, join our workforce, or both.

As we look toward the fall semester, we are continuing professional development opportunities for our faculty and have added more distance-learning courses to our regular curriculum for those students who would like that option even after the pandemic ends. This fall, we will offer more courses in a traditional classroom format, but we are proud to say that after more than a half-century of delivering course content in person, we now have additional options for our students. This will be especially helpful to those students who are working and raising families and might appreciate the flexibility distance-learning provides.

Certainly, we have been challenged since March 2020 to find new ways of getting our students to the finish line, but in the end, we are actually coming out of this pandemic stronger than ever before. By offering our students additional services and support that will continue long after this global health crisis ends, we have done it all while remaining laser-focused on our College's mission. ■



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