



Pandemic Ignites Innovation in Higher Education

BY DR. CHRIS DOMES

IF NECESSITY IS THE MOTHER OF INVENTION, then the pandemic, for higher education, was the mother of innovation.

When the threat of coronavirus became frighteningly apparent in March 2020, colleges and universities across the country made the ethical and pragmatic decision to switch to online instruction. Like many other colleges, Neumann University had to make this transition rapidly. On March 12, I informed the university community that we would begin fully remote learning on March 16. Four days was hardly sufficient time to engineer such a fundamental change in the nature of an educational institution, but the stark reality of COVID-19 kicked our innovation genes into high gear.

By the time we launched our fall semester in late August, the faculty and staff had brainstormed and implemented changes that are now part of the everyday campus culture and will continue to be routine long after the pandemic is a distant memory. What began as an urgent project to switch

classes to an online format evolved into a pervasive movement, fully in alignment with our mission as a Franciscan university, to improve academic instruction, student services, and office operations.

To ensure high-quality delivery of academic content, we installed cameras in every classroom. In addition, we recorded every lecture and lab to offer students more flexibility in their access to course content. What we discovered was that both individual students and study groups regularly viewed these recordings multiple times. They were eager to hear a professor explain a concept or illustrate a laboratory procedure a second or third time. Neumann will now continue to record courses so that students have more opportunities to master the academic subject matter.

In the realm of student services, the most prominent hurdle posed by the pandemic was how to deliver physical and mental health care to students on a daily basis. Because of the virus and the accompanying stress, we anticipated more demand for Student Health Services and our

Counseling Center for Wellness. To bolster our health care capacity, we partnered with TimelyMD, a medical telehealth service, to provide free, on-demand, 24/7 health care for students. The service provides support through its medical platform, which is staffed by doctors and nurse practitioners, and "Talk Now," which is staffed by mental health care providers. This service is now a permanent feature on campus.

The pandemic was also the catalyst for us to reexamine and streamline office operations. Instead of separate methods for students and families to complete the necessary back-office processes for matriculation (transcript requests, graduation applications, tuition payments, library services, class registration), we created a one-stop portal with access to all of those services at a student's fingertips. This concept, too, will continue to be part of the student experience at Neumann.

These improvements likely would have occurred eventually, but the pandemic accelerated their arrival and provided evidence that innovative thinking is welcome in higher education. ■



Dr. Chris Domes is president of Neumann University.

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