



UNYT Remains Close to Students Through Distance Learning

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Covid-19 took us all by surprise. As unexpected and unprecedented as September 11, businesses around the globe slowly have taken prudent containment measures. As the world began to shut down all around us, there was one area of our lives that hardly skipped a beat and just kept on trucking: Education.

Students have continued to take classes. This should not be a complete surprise. We, humans, thrive on regular routines. Former Dean and Professor of Psychology at Tirana's prestigious private university the University of New York in Tirana (UNYT) Dr. Enila Cenko agrees, "Yes, definitely a routine is necessary for adjustment to the situation and one of the recommendations of the American Psychological Association and European Psychological Association is to create a routine during quarantine to preserve mental health." Perhaps this is why educators are eager themselves to deliver e-classes. Faculty members can create for themselves a new routine right along with their students. In this manner, both the educator and the student benefit.

Globally, the response to continue classes came quickly. Here, in Albania, the first two viral cases were announced on a Monday morning and within an hour, schools were ordered closed across the country. As everyone grappled with the new emergency situation, faculty members and school officials swiftly met to discuss how to move forward. UNYT busily re-organized and adapted courses to be delivered online. A flurry of logistical activity by administrative employees resulted in a virtual course schedule with faculty and the latest list of students all consistently updated. The entire process from locating a platform to training personnel to the first online class was completed in less than a week. Those early days were chaotic but UNYT staff felt hopeful and accomplished. Work could continue, albeit slightly altered.

UNYT chose a platform which fit with its expected use. While there are many platforms on the market, UNYT chose one that will allow a variety of faculty members to teach using an assortment of instructive techniques, each according to their academic field. For example, most professors lecture using PowerPoint.

A platform which allows this feature was imperative. For UNYT, professors also need to hold class discussions, speak directly with individual students, illustrate concepts by hand,



and to break students into pairs and groups. Thus, knowing how classes are taught was essential. With Zoom, the format of most classes remained fundamentally unchanged.

Part of the implementation process was communication and training. UNYT raced to train education personnel using the platform. In-person training of a new computer platform was out of the question in the new Covid-19 era. However, as experts in education, UNYT faculty knew the best, most efficient and effective method: education through experience. Training took place directly on the Zoom platform. This gave the added benefit of preserving social distancing. As faculty expeditiously learned the features, standard rules and expectations of student behavior quickly emerged. Indeed, direct training via Zoom was thoroughly successful.

UNYT's adaptation of lectures to an online format was nearly seamless. Like any other new technology, implementation had its challenges. Most lectures are quite conducive to one speaker with a listening audience. Other professors collaborated with each other to share pedagogical methodologies and to demonstrate implemented ad-hoc solutions. Statistics lecture Prof. Dr. Ines Nurja showed others how to use a whiteboard during an online class. English lecturer Michele Pani showed others how to break students into groups to maximize discussions. Thus, all lecturers have creatively found solutions and classes have continued, business as usual.

Naturally, there were concerns of conducting classes in this manner. Most concerns related to attendance and privacy. UNYT aimed to maximize the education of students while maintaining the privacy of students and faculty members. Vice Rector and Law Professor Dr. Enkelejda Koka quelled concerns of the usage of privacy features such as cameras, mics, and the recording of classes by explaining Ministry requirements and legal ramifications of such features. Thus, all lecturers were clear on what was expected of the university and what could be expected of students.

That first Monday morning one week after the first case was announced in the country UNYT faculty greeted students virtually. The Rector of the University Prof. Dr. Ismail Kocayusufoglu visited each and every classroom to personally and warmly welcome to students onto the new platform.

Response by students was overwhelmingly positive. Students have quickly adapted to the platform. Since UNYT is an international, private school, there are many foreign students in attendance as well as students from outside the nation's capital. In light of Covid-19, students were grateful to be able to leave and be with their families in quarantine and simultaneously continue their studies.

As life outside school gradually came to a halt, regular extracurricular student activities also were canceled. Noticing the boredom in the eyes of students during classes, UNYT



staff decided to take action. To safeguard mental health, staff implemented a new university-wide activity. Every Saturday evening, faculty and students meet virtually to share their week and entertain each other. Last week, students showed off their talents. One student shared her recipe for hazelnut cookies, walking through her kitchen and demonstrating her own special techniques. Another student read an apt poem by Lord Byron. Not only have students and faculty enjoyed the activity, but family members have also tuned in. One student played the guitar with her father. Children of faculty members have also made appearances. It has been such a hit that attendees have decided to compete with each other. As rhetoric and competition has heated up, there is a official talent show taking place.

While UNYT was busy adapting to the “new normal”, it has been quite sensitive to the variety of experiences of people during this difficult time. Individual effects sometimes have looked considerably different. For those who already telecommute, this meant minimal change to their routines. However, some workers have been furloughed. Others have lost their jobs altogether. Some have family members who are living far away. Some either are part of the more at-risk health group or have family members who are. Worries vary from isolation, supplies, income, child and elderly care. In response, UNYT Psychology professors has repeatedly offered free services.

The university has recognized their fortunate position and has been able to maintain its generous spirit. We are all in this together after all. To ensure the highest level of protection for those most vulnerable who require absolute social distancing, UNYT has urged everyone to organize grocery delivery and wellness checks. The elderly especially are prohibited from free movement. Thus, such activities are critical.

If you would like to take part in this charitable effort or know anyone who may benefit from speaking to a psychologist for counseling, call the university for more information.