Lessons Learned: Social Work Schools and the Global Pandemic

BY PETER CRAIG

What’s a social work school to do when a dangerous virus suddenly emerges, spreads rapidly from country to country, quickly brings the global economy to its knees and threatens to leave the traditional higher-education model in ruins? What else? Get creative and work fast.

During a Howard University School of Social Work faculty meeting in January, a professor just back from visiting her family in China asked if anyone knew where to get face masks to help protect her family and friends from a deadly new disease there, says Dean Sandra Edmonds Crewe. “That’s when it really began to hit me—as I, along with my other faculty members, went about trying to get the extra masks for her—that the disease could become a real problem here as well.” Then the situation snowballed as the virus hit the U.S. Soon, at Howard and all other social work schools, everything had to be done remotely—classes, faculty meetings, “town halls,” capstone presentations, even fieldwork.

A Lucky Break
Fortunately for nearly all schools, it was close to spring break—a perfect time to make such a transition. Howard was keeping faculty and students informed about such matters as COVID-19’s impact on local hospitals and how to help students who lacked Wi-Fi or laptops, as well as training faculty in Blackboard and Zoom, says Crewe. “It was a ‘full-court press’ in making sure we were ready.”

Spring break at St. Louis University was extended by a week as faculty there got crash courses in holding meetings and classes remotely, says School of Social Work Associate Dean and Director Noelle E. Fearn. Meanwhile, at San Francisco State University...
University, the Center for Equity and Excellence for Teaching and Learning (CEETL), which trains faculty in pedagogy techniques and tools, swung into action, says Faculty Director Wei Ming Dariotis, an Asian-American studies professor. CEETL helped faculty maintain student communication and instruction through everything from sending out emails linked to readings, to using sophisticated systems like iLearn.

Online Report Card
How effective has all-online social work education been? Entire degree programs at St. Louis University’s social work school, such as Criminality and Criminal Justice, offered no online courses, says Fearn. So professors had to get on board quickly, sometimes by recording a lecture to an empty room instead of trying to master all the tools of Blackboard or iLearn. To monitor student engagement and progress remotely, adds Fearn, many professors got proficient with online course-management systems, “so we could reach out and say, ‘Hey, is everything OK? I noticed you didn’t turn in that assignment.’”

At Howard, Crewe says, “we have to ask students different questions because we don’t have the same face-to-face connection where we can gauge emotion.” San Francisco State’s Morty Diamond, LCSW, field director at the School of Social Work, says he has tried to make his class as “normal” as possible, presenting information through Zoom followed by the usual discussions and occasional Zoom breakout sessions.

Diamond says fieldwork at hospitals had to be immediately canceled, but many students in behavioral health settings were able to move from face-to-face work to Zoom or Skype, or else to research. His school’s director, professor Jerry Shapiro, adds that a number of BASWs were able to switch to volunteer phone work with the elderly offered by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, while MSWs, with deeper roots in fieldwork, could more easily remain with their agencies but work remotely. Luckily, students had racked up a large number of hours for the year, and the Council on Social Work Education helped out by reducing the required hours.

Necessity: The Mother of Invention—Once Again
Before COVID-19, says Crewe, “I think we moved to online and to all these things because that’s where technology was taking us. Now we’re doing it with a more deliberate understanding of how you can use it effectively.” Curriculum-wise, she adds, a lot will come out of the pandemic, such as exploring its social justice implications.

And students have also gotten a real lesson in what it’s like to be a social worker: handling uncertainty and sudden change. “We could show them what the heart of social work is,” says Fearn at St. Louis University. “This is what we do. This is how we respond.”

TOP LEFT: Dr. Noelle E. Fearn, St. Louis University School of Social Work associate dean and director, is all in with Zoom-based faculty meetings and classes. RIGHT: Dr. Wei Ming Dariotis, faculty director of San Francisco State University’s Center for Equity and Excellence for Teaching and Learning (CEETL), in her home office. BOTTOM: A San Francisco State University field seminar class, conducted via Zoom by instructor Lucy Fuentes.
Catholic University’s Interdepartmental Alliance to Keep Children Safe

Dr. Eileen A. Dombo, assistant dean at Catholic University’s National Catholic School of Social Service, talks about the Catholic Project and its Child Protection and Safe Environments Certificate.

Please describe the year-old Catholic Project.
It is Catholic University’s response to the crisis caused by the clergy sexual abuse and failure of leadership within the church to address it. Focus areas include research, education and prevention, both inside and outside the church.

What’s behind the project’s Child Protection and Safe Environments Certificate?
We brought together our law school and schools of canon law, theology and religious studies, and social service to create courses in the dynamics of sexual abuse and exploitation, trauma-informed systems of care, and criminal and church law. Then a capstone course pulls all this together for the student’s specific discipline, institution or organization.

It sounds as though it may be particularly useful to current practitioners. A lot of people are sort of thrown into these roles within organizations, but often don’t have specific training in law, social work or trauma. We launched the first class on campus last fall, then had to switch our courses online. But we are learning from this, in hopes of introducing a formal all-online option in January.

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Through a grant from the National Council for Behavioral Health (NCBH), the Division of Social Work at the University of Wyoming’s College of Health Sciences has joined social work schools at nine other U.S. universities and colleges to marshal resources in the war against opioid and other types of addiction.

As part of the program, each of the 10 schools has named a “faculty champion.” At the University of Wyoming, it’s Assistant Lecturer Kym Codallos, MSW, LCSW, who helped expand the school’s addiction-related course and will teach it starting this fall. In train-the-trainer sessions, the program’s 10 faculty champions participate in monthly calls and webinars, via Zoom, learning about everything from evidence-based practices to the neurobiology of addiction. Meanwhile, eight Wyoming students (BSWs and MSWs) will receive up to a $6,000 stipend for a year and get field placements at substance-use treatment agencies like Wyoming Recovery in Casper or Peak Wellness Center in Laramie, says Dr. Eleanor Pepi Downey, director of the Division of Social Work. “In order to get the stipend, we ask students to meet one additional hour a month with the faculty champion, and also do a research project related to their placement.”

If COVID-19 is still an issue in the fall, everything may go online and to telehealth. “We already use a lot of Zoom around here,” says Downey. “Out West you Zoom a lot of things.”