Team Building and the Reprioritizing of the Teaching and Learning Experience in the Midst of Ambiguity

Christopher J. Young
Indiana University Northwest
cij@iu.edu

Vicki Román-Lagunas
Indiana University Northwest
viroman@iu.edu

Abstract: This essay discusses one campus’s response to the 2019 coronavirus disease pandemic. We explore the issues our campus faced and how we tackled the challenge through cross-functional team building. By prioritizing teaching and learning, we were able to navigate the inherent ambiguity of the public health crisis with flexibility and transparency. Like others in higher education, our institution embarked into the unknown in spring 2020. It was a journey for all of us, and along the way, there were lessons learned: the usefulness of establishing a cross-functional team with a narrow focus (teaching and learning) and desiloing the efforts of campus-wide offices and the importance of prioritizing and investing in faculty development, communicating across campus constituencies widely and broadly, and modeling being comfortable with ambiguity. The experience underscored that it is imperative, especially when facing a crisis, to assemble a team whose members trust each other and are collegial and curious, comfortable with ambiguity, and willing to reconsider previous working assumptions. This is our story.

Keywords: team building, cross-functionality, collaboration, transparency, communication, teaching and learning, learning outcomes.

Like other institutions, Indiana University (IU) Northwest assembled a Restart Committee during the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic to consider the factors that would affect university life in spring 2020. The campus-wide team grappled effectively with wide-ranging questions about teaching and learning during a fluid situation fraught with ambiguity. In this essay, we discuss our campus’s response to the evolving pandemic crisis during spring and summer 2020, while at the same time it prepared for the fall 2020 semester. The latter was particularly challenging as we tried to maintain a sense of normalcy when nothing was, or could be, normal. We adapted without always knowing what we were adapting to, and knowing that the agreed-upon adaptation might need to change (“pivot”) at any moment. The situation was constantly evolving and we knew that we needed to be nimble enough to evolve with it. Furthermore, we were keenly aware that being “nimble” was not a characteristic normally associated with institutions of higher education. Finally, as a regional campus of a large institution, we needed to anticipate which decisions would be made autonomously and which needed to wait for direction from the central offices. As the Restart Committee explained in its initial town hall meeting with faculty and advisors, the committee’s primary purpose was to address this question: What instructional modes can we use to ensure our students enrolled in face-to-face classes achieve the learning outcomes of our courses given the required responses to the COVID-19 pandemic?

The team worked through six phases: researching and recommending appropriate pedagogical modalities; relearning appropriate scheduling codes (as we discovered that they were not being fully used on our campus); providing for increased training for faculty in the recommended teaching and learning (modalities); ensuring appropriate health and safety protocols in the teaching and learning
environment; establishing policies, practices, logistics, and communication strategies for each of the above, including the design of “process maps” for mitigation and symptomatic testing; and maintaining enrollment and attending to faculty, staff, and student needs and concerns.

We concluded that proper team building and reprioritizing of teaching and learning praxis and pedagogical modalities would ensure that student-learning outcomes remained a primary focus—even during a time of crisis and the associated ambiguity. Like others across the country, and the world for that matter, we anticipated that we would soon be pushed out of the familiar and into the unknown. As we prepared to enter unchartered territory, we leaned on what we knew and had at our disposal. The executive vice chancellor (provost) gathered together the Deans’ Council and asked them to prepare their faculty for the likelihood that the pandemic would necessitate a move to a virtual teaching and learning environment for the foreseeable future. She then reached out to the campus’s center for teaching and learning, the Center for Innovation and Scholarship in Teaching and Learning (CISTL), to gauge what training could be offered immediately to faculty to prepare them for the anticipated pivot as well as for the coming months.

All things considered, IU Northwest was in a good position to make the transition. For close to a decade, the campus had already been engaged in teaching-online training for faculty, and a significant number of courses were already online, including local graduate programs as well as university-wide collaborative programs. Furthermore, in May 2020, full-time faculty voted to compensate adjunct faculty $250 for participating in the 4-week training program offered by CISTL.

In addition to faculty development at a local level, the rich resources and support for faculty offered regularly by IU suddenly took on new importance. For instance, IU had developed its first iteration of KeepTeaching.IU in 2009 as the H1N1 virus loomed. Its relevance was rediscovered as we anticipated the unprecedented shift that would soon involve all of us. Eleven years later, the site was so relevant and effective for the purposes at hand that nearly 50 other academic institutions, systems, and programs from California to Massachusetts and from Trinidad & Tobago to Ireland asked to utilize it for similar purposes. In addition to KeepTeaching.IU, IU developed and published KeepLearning.IU as well as a myriad of other resources such as Knowledge Base, a searchable repository of information about specific technologies. The latter became especially valuable as CISTL developed complementary videos on how to use Kaltura and Zoom for online recording and conferencing as well as how to import recordings into Canvas, our learning management system.

**Team Building**

To respond to the challenges, we assembled an all-inclusive campus-wide, cross-functional Restart Committee that represented a broad spectrum of colleges, schools, offices, and organizations, including Academic Affairs, Faculty Leadership, Student Affairs, Facilities, Development, Information Technology, Admissions, and the Registrar. It was cochaired by Academic Affairs, CISTL, the Faculty Organization (similar to a faculty senate), and University Information Technology Services (UITS). We sought necessary and sufficient representation without making the committee unwieldy. Critical to its success was faculty representation. Because faculty representatives were partners in our discussions about fall 2020 options, the broader faculty was as well. Faculty actively participated in the decisions and recommendations of this committee each step along the way and their questions and concerns nudged us to explore scenarios and answer questions that we had not considered. We credit the structure of faculty representation and their decision-making process for this fortunate result.

The team resisted the temptation to splinter into subcommittees, reasoning that each of us on the team needed to know everything that everyone else knew. The result was that members took ownership of the process and the shared information, and the campus community had an array of people to whom they could go with questions, knowing that they were receiving the most up-to-date
information. Moreover, as the situation evolved, so did we. When we began planning for the unknown, we started off as a team of 13, which included five faculty members representing each of the campus’s schools and colleges and chosen by the president of the Faculty Organization. As we began to get a better idea of the issues with which we needed to grapple, the committee nearly doubled. However, we remained focused on teaching and learning.

Working collaborations emerged within the group to establish needs and lines of communication. This allowed for a desiloed discussion between discipline-specific faculty and all other related offices. For instance, the Restart Committee arranged a number of meetings between academic units and UITS. Together, they explored the possibilities as well as the limitations of relevant technology in the context of short supplies. To move forward, these interactions established the pedagogical, technological, and internal communication requirements as the campus faced the pandemic crisis.

According to Bennam Tabrizi (2015), most cross-functional teams fail for a variety of reasons, including lack of specific goals and clear governance as well as a tendency for siloes to continue despite meeting as a team. He suggests that to succeed, cross-functional teams must have a leader who is accountable for the project’s success, the project should have agreed-upon goals and deadlines, and the main objective needs to be the project’s success. The success of IU Northwest’s Restart Committee was due in part to meeting these requirements.

The Restart Committee convened for the first time on May 14, 2020. In this first meeting, an overview of a necessarily revised (and agreed-upon by the Faculty Organization leadership) 2020–2021 academic calendar was explained, including when holiday and school breaks would take place. Additionally, we spent time on course section coding explanations (to ensure that students would understand what pedagogical modality they were signing up for), clarifications such as the difference between online and remote learning, and an overview of what we went through and learned during the spring 2020 semester and looked forward to in the fall. We had to begin considering how to navigate modalities when students had already registered for and expected fall 2020 face-to-face classes, while also ensuring the health and safety of all students, faculty, and staff by observing precautions recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and required by IU. We explored precautions such as social or physical distancing, mask use, cleaning, self-care, and testing as recommended by IU’s Medical Response Team.

While the Restart Committee was cochaired by leaders in Academic Affairs, the campus’s faculty, CISTL, and campus technology services, the lead organizer was the executive vice chancellor for academic affairs (EVCAA or provost), who served as a first among equals. The provost moved the meetings and agenda forward with cochairs. From the outset, the focus was on teaching and learning, broadly speaking. This was a goal that all of the Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and other leaders who made up the Restart Committee could—and did—readily agree upon. This clear goal served as a bulwark against the tendency to resilo. The deadline was clear since we were working primarily toward the beginning of the fall 2020 semester (while being informed by the ongoing experiences of the spring and summer). Meeting learning outcomes, prioritizing student success, and at the same time ensuring the safety of the teaching and learning environment for all members of the IU Northwest community were the objectives in which we all had a serious stake.

Quickly we learned that inclusive communication across the entire campus community was requisite to the success of our efforts. While our focus was teaching and learning (certainly a faculty role), early on, it became evident that not including the professional advisors in our communication strategies, for example, was a mistake. They, of course, were one of the “front lines” for the students’ questions and concerns, and as such, they certainly needed the information as it was developing. And they provided valuable feedback and suggestions that the members of the committee had not yet considered.
The participation of UITS, Student Affairs, and Facilities via an Academic-Affairs-initiated (i.e., all things teaching and learning) group fostered a special partnership between those units and the faculty. The experience served as a critical reminder of the singular importance of certain qualities when assembling a team. Team members must trust one another, be collegial, intellectually curious, and undaunted by ambiguity, share goals and a sense of purpose, and be willing to reconsider previously held assumptions.

**Teaching and Learning**

In our discussions of teaching and learning, our main focus, we paid particular attention to meeting student learning outcomes regardless of modality. This impacted every division on the campus. Overarching topics included pedagogical innovations, technological needs, safety, signage, cleanliness, student and faculty on-campus traffic, and a variety of lines of all-campus communication between administration, faculty, staff, and students.

The centerpiece of our communication strategy was the town hall meeting. The initial meeting, held in June 2020 approximately 1 month after the initiation of the Restart Committee meetings, underscored that our primary goal was to ensure that students would achieve the learning outcomes of our courses given the required responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, especially once the academic calendar had been established, we could anticipate that a variety of modalities would be offered in the fall semester until Thanksgiving break. After the break, all courses would move to online or remote learning. As this schedule was adopted in early to mid June, it allowed time—although limited—to provide faculty teaching-online training and help them develop and/or enhance their proficiency with Canvas. With few exceptions, faculty rolled up their sleeves and went to work for their students, and CISTL and UITS staff put in an heroic effort to meet their needs.

Initially we advocated for faculty taking a multimodality approach for a single course to ensure that students achieved stated learning outcomes. To this end, the first step was to prepare class sessions as if one were going to offer them online. This decision was based on the assumption that it would be an easier task to pivot back to face-to-face instruction from an online modality, in comparison with pivoting to an online modality from a face-to-face course design.

The next step was to learn from respective deans, and based on the guidance of the registrar and staff from facilities, how many students in each section would be able to meet face-to-face given the size of each faculty member's assigned classroom. As part of the multimodality approach, faculty were encouraged to design ways to “rotate” students from a face-to-face modality to the synchronous Zoom modality. The committee then needed to challenge faculty to consider how to meet learning outcomes even if in the same section they were utilizing both modalities simultaneously. This needed to be done while also preparing to pivot to fully remote teaching and learning at any given moment. Finally, faculty were encouraged to consider giving their final exams before Thanksgiving break and using the post-Thanksgiving time to explore innovative projects that they may not have otherwise explored. We closed the first town hall meeting by letting faculty and advisors know that there would be future meetings and that topics would include technology, health and safety protocols for the classroom, and future training. Moreover, the provost reminded faculty and advisors that we didn’t have to be perfect; rather, we needed to do our best to respond to our students’ needs.

While committee members may have sensed it at the time, it certainly became crystal clear in hindsight that this meeting was of critical importance for a variety of reasons. Attended by well over 100 colleagues between the two meeting dates, it established a genuine sense that “we are in this together.” What was known and what remained unknown was shared, which established transparency while also signaling that we are learning as we go—something that was shared equally across what is typically a hierarchical academic spectrum. Genuine empathy and the collaborative milieu that
characterized the initial meeting as well as subsequent gatherings seemed to underscore this important reality.

As promised, the Restart Committee continued to offer town hall meetings to explain what we knew at any given time and to offer opportunities to ask questions, express concerns, and comment on processes. Every meeting was professional and friendly and there was, we believe, general appreciation for an environment of widespread mutual respect that was part of our institutional culture. This allowed us to move forward as seamlessly as possible when other institutions in the United States entered acrimonious and unsteady times with votes of no confidence for presidents and other administrators (Burke, 2020a; Burke, 2020b; Dever & Justice, 2020; Pettit, 2020a; Pettit 2020b; St. Amour, 2020). That our campus was able to work through this together as an institution was the result, we believe, not only of our institutional culture but also of the cross-functional collaboration on the Restart Committee and the critical role that faculty representatives and leadership played in it.

**Working Together and for Each Other**

*Shared Communication Strategy*

Shared leadership facilitated discussion with a variety of constituent groups. This was realized through email messaging, listserv messaging, and the previously mentioned town halls (eight so far), the latter being a method used by other institutions as well (Mickey, Clark, & Misra, 2020). The town hall approach to shared communication was modeled afterward by staff and Student Affairs leadership with related constituencies.

As mentioned above, establishing policies, practices, logistics, and communication strategies was a constant topic of conversation for the members of the Restart Committee. One of the strategies we determined would be helpful was to respond to the faculty’s request for guidance, including information on syllabi so that students would be aware of campus-wide decisions regarding teaching and learning and best practices for learning during a pandemic. Committee members went to work on developing a best practices/syllabus language document as well as a FAQ sheet. As the Restart Committee discussed, reviewed, and revised these documents, we found that most aspects of both the FAQ and syllabus language were straightforward. For instance, IU required all students to sign a student commitment form in which they agreed to follow all health and safety behaviors required by the university. Faculty and staff were required to agree to similar behaviors on a community responsibility acknowledgement form (*IU Employees and COVID-19*, n.d.). However, upon further examination and discussion of these new requirements, we learned that some were a bit thornier than we had initially anticipated.

An important example was encountered as we discussed the health and safety of the learning environment. As the Restart Committee considered where cleaning supplies would be stationed, the order of entering and exiting classrooms, and faculty and student responsibilities for these measures, the team encountered a snag when it came to the complex requirement of wearing face masks and, even more complicated, the notion of who or what unit would be responsible for face-mask enforcement. That is, who would be the “mask police,” an undesirable task that could potentially escalate a situation for whomever would be involved. The team worked through whether this would be faculty, and if so, what kind of situation would this create for them as well as other students in the classroom? Would it be the Office of Student Affairs and the dean of students, and how would this be enforced? It could be campus police, but did we really want to get into the undesirable business of having police come to the classroom to remove students? Moreover, during the course of the discussion we learned that like some campus administrators, campus police stationed on regional campuses also served two masters—the campus itself as well as the university. As the Restart
Committee grappled with this prickly scenario, we concluded that it would be best to utilize the policies that were already in place. In this case, the committee would recommend to faculty that they follow campus and university protocols for a disruptive student. Akin to the mask issue was another very important one: How would students, faculty, and staff be sanctioned if not adhering to these behaviors? Who would sanction them? What would the sanctions be? Did IU Northwest have the human resources to enforce these sanctions? The Restart Committee members, and the administrators ultimately responsible for the answers to these questions, agreed to maintain flexibility, to take each case as it appeared, and to use positive communication rather than “a stick” (sanction) to address these matters.

Ultimately, the documents that emerged from the Restart Committee were a nexus of sorts that resulted from the communication strategies, both intentional and unintentional. Information that found its way into the documents came partly from ideas, concerns, and comments brought to the Restart Committee by the representatives who constituted the group. Other times, the Restart Committee learned of the needs and concerns of faculty through the series of town hall meetings. These meetings engaged faculty while opening and encouraging a line of communication characterized by transparency.

Investing in Faculty Development

The first item of attention for the Restart Committee was how to move forward with our main objective: student learning during the pandemic. When the pandemic upended our professional lives during spring 2020, Academic Affairs and faculty leadership looked to CISTL to help faculty—both full- and part-time—pivot immediately.

CISTL accelerated the training it was already engaged in while adding additional resources for faculty. In addition to the videos on how to use Kaltura, Zoom, and other teaching and learning technologies, the staff added workshops that focused on Zoom and other essential tools for remote learning. Moreover, they developed a site on Canvas that served as a go-to place for faculty looking for resources related to the pivot (i.e., recordings of workshops and other training) and discussion boards where faculty could ask questions. To meet the demand for faculty training, the provost and faculty-leadership support allowed CISTL, which suddenly found itself at the center of things, to do its work uninterrupted. The result was a significant uptick in individual faculty consultations, workshops, and teaching-online training.

CISTL’s training can be broken down into one-on-one consultations, workshops, and teaching-online training courses. CISTL consultants met with faculty during the week and weekends from March 10, 2020, through July 31, 2020. In that time, CISTL provided 1,181 individual consultations. To put this into perspective, the CISTL consultant held 140% more sessions with faculty from March to July 2020 than he provided during the same time period in 2019. In addition to individual consultations, CISTL instructional staff, which consists of two full-time consultants and one part-time consultant, offered 52 workshops.

The workshops centered on preparing faculty to pivot to online or synchronous virtual teaching by way of Zoom. Workshop included Zoom Training, Canvas Training, Zoom Security: Using the Waiting Room Feature, Zoom: Embedding a Zoom Recording into Canvas, Hybrid Teaching, Accessibility, IU eTexts, Asynchronous and Synchronous Discussion, Creating Sections in Canvas, Google Collaboration with Jamboard, and a student engagement series that focused on virtual office hours, asynchronous and synchronous discussion, and instructional videos using Kaltura.
In addition to the variety of workshops and individual consultations, CISTL offered teaching-online training of varying degrees of intensity depending on the skill level of faculty. The most rudimentary was a 2-week course that teaches the basics of Canvas. This was meant to prepare faculty to take the 4-week teaching-online training course, which is a general overview of the nuts and bolts of teaching online. Adjuncts were paid $250 for completing the latter course. Between March 2, 2020, and July 20, 2020, CISTL paid 58 associate faculty $250 when they successfully completed the course compared to only 19 during the same time frame the year before.

The 2-week Canvas basics course was not part of the center’s initial plan. Staff in Academic Affairs, deans, and staff in CISTL assumed a certain level of proficiency with using Canvas but discovered during the sudden shift to remote learning that we had overestimated the comfort level that faculty had with the learning management system. This forced CISTL staff to create a new course that would prepare some faculty for the 4-week course, a professional development opportunity that we had previously thought was our most basic.

Eighteen faculty completed the intensive 15-week program on online-course development between March 2, 2020, and July 20, 2020. Of the 18 faculty, 14 were paid $3,000 for successfully completing the course by designing and building an entirely online course under the supervision of CISTL staff, while three faculty members were paid $2,000 per person (all three collaborated to design and build two separate courses that included labs) and one faculty member $1,500 (for completing a partial grant). This grant program tends to prioritize courses that are of strategic importance to IU Northwest and its students.

Modeled Flexibility and Patience with Ambiguity

As the members of the Restart Committee grappled with the challenges the campus was facing, there were times that felt like some were almost insurmountable. For example, in the early stages, at first in the Deans’ Council and later in the early meetings of the Restart Committee (which, of course, included the deans), we struggled with imagining how to teach in an environment that provided for physical distancing and yet included all of the students who were enrolled in a section. We landed on a HyFlex model (Lederman, 2020), using technology to allow for an on-campus, physically distanced student experience for (intermittently) part of the semester and a Zoom experience when the students were not present on campus. For one class session, some of the students would be in the physical learning environment while others would be in the Zoom environment. The students would switch environments for the next class session. The Restart Committee members struggled as they considered this at first: How to schedule the students, how to know how many students could now fit into our physically distanced classrooms, how the technology would work, what technology would be needed, where the technology would be needed, how to train the faculty in the use of the technology, how to get the faculty “on-board,” and how to even explain this model were all questions that needed to be tackled. These questions highlighted the importance of including faculty representation on the Restart Committee. Tech-savvy faculty brought their experiences to bear on these conundrums. For instance, an astute faculty member raised the possibility of establishing groups within Canvas that would facilitate this HyFlex model. Discussions with CISTL soon followed, which led to newly designed workshops that helped us overcome one of the problems that had seemed insurmountable earlier.

IU Northwest is one of five Indiana University regional campuses. The vast majority of the time, being a part of this whole is productive and helpful and provides the smaller regional campuses—their faculty, staff, and students—access to resources that they would not otherwise have. One exceptional example is the IU Medical Response Team’s guidance in responding to the health and safety issues as we faced the pandemic. However, the pandemic also served to highlight some of the challenges we can face when operations are centralized. The Restart team used its weekly meetings to
think of solutions to possible problems, and the meetings were productive and forward looking. The work of the Medical Response Team often led to actionable items that were then communicated to the rest of the university community. More than once, after the Medical Response Team’s work was complete, our Restart Committee received communication indicating that what we had chosen to do now needed to be done differently. Clearly the centralized functions had much more to take into account than the regional campuses, but this created a lag in, and/or confusion with campus communication. This struggle with autonomy versus being part of a larger university community required that even at the local level, and only indirectly related to the pandemic, we needed to “pivot.”

Student enrollment for the fall 2020 semester presented another quite daunting fear. Anecdotally we knew that not everyone enjoyed learning in the remote environment. We needed to provide access to current and prospective student advising, and we struggled with the possibility that our current and prospective students might want to take a semester or year off and return to school once the pandemic was over and face-to-face courses were offered again. Through a campus-wide effort to communicate with these students, the creation and support of remote advising, and the creative strategies devised by our admissions team, our fears were quelled. However, we are currently facing the same worries for the fall 2021 semester, as applications and acceptances are substantially lower than at the same point in cycle for fall 2020. In response, and in addition to the Restart Committee, we have formed a Strategic Enrollment Management Committee. While many individuals serve on both committees, the focus is different, and we realized that we needed to carve out a separate time to focus on enrollment.

Testing for COVID-19, both symptomatic and asymptomatic (surveillance and mitigation testing) on all IU campuses was designed with the leadership of the University’s Medical Response Team.

Led by top doctors at the IU School of Medicine, the team meets daily to continually assess how the virus is spreading, the effectiveness of our efforts at controlling it, and allocation of resources. They use their medical expertise and a variety of ongoing metrics to shape decisions regarding campus operations in a way that prioritizes health and safety (IU Covid-19 Testing Dashboard. n.d.).

A complete and complex schematic was designed to ensure that each and every regional IU campus received timely information and direction from this Medical Response Team. At the regional campus level, the Campus Response Unit’s (CRU) leads were identified, and the chief of staff in the Office of the Vice President/Chief Financial Officer was assigned to coordinate these efforts, as was the chief of staff in the University Office of Academic Affairs for the regional campuses. At IU Northwest, the executive vice chancellor for Academic Affairs (EVCAA or provost) was assigned as the campus CRU lead. As this assignment became more time consuming, the associate EVCAA and the associate vice chancellor for student affairs were added to this role. Primarily, the campus CRU leads’ task was to establish a site for mitigation testing (with associated staffing) and another for symptomatic testing, as well as to ensure communication with the campus community and compliance with the university’s requirements. In IU Northwest’s case, it was fortuitous that the provost was actively engaged in this endeavor. All of the knowledge shared with the CRU team was subsequently shared with the Restart Committee, which, in turn, could help with the communication strategy regarding the mitigation and symptomatic testing requirements and guide the entire community as it conscientiously addressed issues of health and safety during the pandemic.

The Restart Committee determined that for the IU Northwest community, the communications coming to our campus from central locations needed further clarification, in the form of “mapping” actions with regard to close contacts, symptomatic testing, mitigation testing, and other
details. Smaller teams were formed and maps were designed, reviewed, and shared with UITS to “fix” and place on our website (https://www.iun.edu/campus-updates/covid-processes/index.htm). The same day a town hall meeting took place to share this information, the university-wide communications team unexpectedly published their own maps. While we incorporated IU's communication, we also continued down our own campus’s communication path, recognizing that IU Northwest’s faculty, staff, and students had become accustomed to our own communication strategies. This was another example of when IU Northwest demonstrated its flexibility as it navigated its relationship with the larger university while dealing with its immediate needs.

Conclusion: Emerge Transformed?

The experience underscored the importance, especially when facing a crisis, that it is imperative to assemble a team that trusts each other; that is collegial and curious; that is comfortable with ambiguity; and that is willing to reconsider previous working assumptions.

The pandemic catalyzed us to reconsider how and why we do the things we do in the academy. Consequently, we are in the midst of a paradigm shift. When we return to the fullness of the campus experience, we anticipate that we will have a better sense of what the paradigm shift will mean for our campus. We hope that it includes that future teams as well as individual instructors continue to model thinking that is out of the box and will continue to look for new paradigms. We are encouraged that this will lead to pedagogical innovations as we approach the different teaching modalities.

At IU Northwest, we pride ourselves on being a student-centered campus. For a commuter campus, Student Life has fostered an atmosphere of community and peer-to-peer engagement that is commendable. Despite best efforts to know our students, the pandemic catapulted us into their lives in an unprecedented way. Whether through teaching, advising, or fielding questions, we literally entered students’ homes and work spaces, including in one case, a delivery truck. Previously when we discussed student success, we usually talked about the challenges that face our students. We can see now that these discussions didn’t have the breadth that will now be part of the conversation. We know our students in a deeper, more personal way. Surely, this will affect our teaching, advising, and student life as we move forward. And in some ways it already has. For instance, faculty have conveyed in discussions that they find themselves checking in on students and have discussed making this a more regular practice. Connected to the check-in is our awareness of students’ mental health. When we return to campus, one of the first discussions should be an exploration of the role of the constituencies of the campus community in continuing to address students’ physical and mental health.

Faculty development has been transformed as well. Since the end of the spring 2020 semester and through the summer, the campus's center for teaching and learning held thousands of hours of training (2-week, 4-week, 10-week), 60- and 90-min workshops, and one-on-one consultations for full-time and adjunct faculty. The significant uptick in CISTL training and consultations over spring and summer 2020 brought into relief for center staff the various needs of faculty. This recognition resulted in new workshops that enhanced the focus on the basics of Canvas and how to engage remote learning communities, in addition to accelerating teaching-online training. While the urgency may dissipate, the importance of developing our craft as teachers will not. The increased contact with CISTL will translate, we hope, into increased faculty participation in future professional development opportunities. Our faculty development workshops continue to evolve as we learn what does and does not work, as well as what our faculty and students need to increase engagement to meet learning and success outcomes. To this end, we will increasingly rely on our faculty colleagues to share with each other what they learned as they dealt with ambiguities and uncertainties that disrupted their pedagogical praxis.
For administrators, the experience invites other questions and opportunities. How will the journey since early 2020 affect job descriptions for faculty and staff searches? What will staff life and scheduling look like now that so many employees have worked remotely? We believe that in the postpandemic world, trust will take on an even greater importance in work relations. In terms of student success, will extended automatic withdrawals, which were temporarily approved for the duration of the pandemic, be made permanent? In short, will university life be characterized by greater flexibility and understanding for all of the groups that make up our campus community?

This experience brought us together as a campus community in a way that an event or guest lecture would not have, could not have. While our campus is a friendly place and maintains a culture of respect, the busyness of our day-to-day working lives often prohibits a closeness with our colleagues that could add a layer of pleasure to our existence. Confronting a health crisis together brought us into communion with each other in a way that we hope will leave us stronger than ever. Trust, which was so crucial to IU Northwest’s success as we confronted the pandemic, will provide the foundation for cross-functional partnerships as we ponder teaching and learning and the success of our students in the future. We are all the richer for it.

References


