

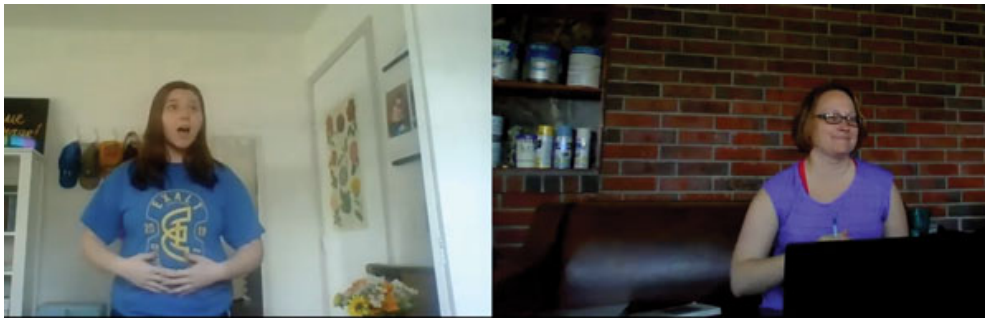
# IN-PERSON TO ONLINE: COVID-19 GLOBAL PANDEMIC SENDS SBU STUDENTS HOME TO FINISH THE SEMESTER

By Denise Elson Tucker '89

On March 11, "the world changed," and Southwest Baptist University had to change with it in order to get through and survive the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Fortunately, conversations began as early as February regarding how SBU would move forward with the remainder of the Spring semester.

"We were seeing the impact of the virus in the news; we were hearing that the West Coast was starting to deal with it, and we were feeling the wave starting to come," said Dr. Lee Skinkle, provost of SBU. "We started to realize there was probably a point that we would have to address this, and then it started to speed up, everything started to pick up. With the rate of change that was happening, the timing of announcements like the NCAA canceling March Madness, the NBA postponing the season – the bubble very quickly popped. If an organization that is as focused on revenue as the NBA is making the decision to postpone and lose significant revenue, everybody would soon be taking the virus even more seriously."



SBU President Dr. Eric A. Turner sent an email to the Executive Cabinet on March 2, requesting each member present their COVID responses.

"We'd been watching this early and it was kind of a slow-moving thing," Turner

said. "You didn't know if it's going to happen or not, but we wanted to mitigate panic. Our initial approach was a very measured response through press releases that we were watching this. We started dialing back mission trips first and began slowly dialing back domestic travel, paying attention and watching the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

"Well, March 11, the world changed — and all of a sudden a measured response was not going to happen."

The [Executive Cabinet](#) met that morning, and at that time, a select number of [mission projects](#) still were happening. Turner then received a call from a parent before the team's afternoon meeting. The country of Colombia was starting to shut down.

"He said, 'Eric, I see that you have trips going, and I'm concerned they're not going to be able to get back,'" Turner said. "Well, this was new information we didn't have that morning. So, we began shutting down the trips."

Turner, Skinkle and the team met with the academic deans via Zoom during Spring Break, and it was then the decision was made to move the remainder of the Spring semester online. Spring Break was extended another week to allow faculty time to prepare for remote learning and staff the time to adjust to working from home.

"The flattening of the curve argument early on made a lot of sense to me," Turner said. "I didn't want to bring 1,000 residential students back and slam the healthcare system."

Turner said when the gathering mandate changed in just one day from allowing approximately 500 people to gather to then just 10, that precipitated the decision to transition in-person classes to a virtual environment.

And, it was time for SBU's Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) to help with the transition.

"As soon as we made the decision, I walked out and called Angie Carr '99, senior director of the CTL, to talk about the transition," Skinkle said. "This is what we're going to need and let's come up with a plan for how we support our faculty as best we can. We need to provide them with the tools and make those available not just in live presentation, but in recorded delivery.

"Then we came up with a schedule for what content would be presented, focusing on the basics: how to use Blackboard (learning management system), how to use Panopto (video recording and playback software), and then providing opportunity in a more general sense of a brainstorming session so faculty could come together to present concerns, things that they were facing, and learn from each other as we move forward. The Center for Teaching and Learning did a phenomenal job. Angie held those brainstorming sessions weekly, sent out encouraging reminders to faculty and pointed out what we were seeing and observing, and really helped to encourage and support faculty through the process."

## **ANTICIPATION, REACTION TO THE MOVE**

As the news was filled of the effects COVID-19 was having across the nation and around the world, a majority of the SBU faculty knew the university was headed toward moving all of its courses online, and even began preparing for the transition.

"Right before we left for Spring Break, I actually went over with my students, 'If for some reason we don't come back for the rest of semester, this is what our class will look like online,' and I think that really helped," said Dr. Angie Brown-Peterson '07, '08, associate professor of business administration. "I still wasn't prepared that we actually wouldn't be coming back, but having that contingency plan and my students knowing before break kind of what to expect, was very valuable.

"The great benefit for me and my students is I already teach online; I teach in a general business online program and our online MBA program. So, for me, I wasn't as worried. My biggest thing was my interaction with my students, but I knew that learning could still occur online."

Others assisted colleagues with the transition.

"I kind of anticipated the move for the simple fact that we knew that the game had changed for us as far as having contact," said Dr. Duke Jones, professor of Christian education. "Trying to equip the guys and help them and Redford College to make that transition, I think, was harder for some than it was for others. I had been teaching online since 2000, so it was a much easier transition for me. This is where it got really tricky for us for the simple fact that we had to learn how to do some lectures online and learn new technologies. And for some of the guys, it was a learning curve for them. It was hard because they were talking to a camera, and they're not used to that.

"We did have to adjust our syllabi. We had to get creative on some of the assignments to accommodate and help our students."

For others, the change was a little more emotional.

"I was very sad because we left for Spring Break thinking that we had a week of relaxation to come back strong for the final part of the semester, and then it was like a shock," said Dr. Jennifer Fox '07, assistant professor of education. "I was sad because I didn't say goodbye to my students. I didn't hug them like I normally would have."

## **CHALLENGES WITH THE TRANSITION**

For faculty whose courses rely on a more hands-on approach, the transition was more challenging.

“My first reaction was, ‘how are we going to prepare our nursing students to be nurses in an online environment,’” said Nancy Delmont, instructor of nursing in the Don and Carrie Babb pre-licensure bachelor of science in nursing program on the Bolivar campus. “Our nursing courses with clinical components were the ones that were most affected because we weren’t able to go to the hospitals. Our clinical interactions, where we practice our skills and learn how to be nurses with patients, we didn’t get to do those for half the semester.”

The nursing programs on the [Springfield campus](#) experienced much of the same challenges.

“At first, it seemed a bit impossible because nursing has always relied on training students to care for patients in a variety of clinical and simulated settings,” said Dr. Renay McCarley, head of the Division of Associate Level Nursing and Health Sciences. “Our State Board of Nursing was very supportive as they provided guidance for clinical experiences. I was also sad for our students because I know how much learning and growth occurs in the clinical setting, especially for our graduating students during their practicum clinical experience.”

## **VALUE OF IN-PERSON LEARNING EXPERIENCE**

The arts, including theatre, music and art, also rely on that in-person, hands-on experience, as does biology, exercise science and education with student-teaching and practicums.

“For theatre, the in-person advantages cannot be overstated,” said Jonathan Wehmeyer ’05, instructor of theatre. “Although I certainly see the value in digital course delivery and am not opposed to exploring this, theatre cannot exist without the physical collaboration that happens in rehearsal, the scene shop, the costume shop, and with the audience. As amazing as Zoom is (and it is remarkable), it cannot replicate the interpersonal connections necessary for theater training.”

Collaboration also is important for music students.

“The arts thrive on live interactions with each other, whether that be on the stage between a singer and a pianist, or a choir being able to hear one another and respond to a director,” said Dr. Sarah Howes, assistant professor of voice. “We need that close proximity to each other to really be able to respond to one another’s emotions, etc. Let’s face it, we all, as humans, need the in-person connection. I think it is the greatest problem with this generation. It’s too easy to isolate. Our souls need to interact with other souls.”

Jason Halverson, assistant professor in exercise science, was able to take advantage of his college- and high school-aged children being home to help demonstrate lessons.

“I took a portable massage table home, and since my children were home, I used them as props to demonstrate activities because some of the special tests that we do for hands-on things are presented in the text, but it’s so much more beneficial seeing them, of course. I would usually demonstrate that in the class and then have them practice it. I only had the demonstration, so we got a little creative. I had my kids at home. They helped me out with the modeling and filming.”

## **THE STUDENT ADJUSTMENT**

Losing that in-person learning experience was difficult for students, but faculty also found students to be resilient and flexible.

“I think for some of my students who are more extroverts, it got a little progressively harder throughout the semester, just not having that kind of social interaction, that kind of contact,” said Dr. Bill DuVall, associate professor of psychology. “Those are also the ones who were most faithful for showing up, if I did any live Zoom

scenarios, instead of just video lectures. I think it was a combination of still being able to see my face as I'm lecturing, which provides at least a little bit of a sense of normalcy."

"Overall, the students preferred the in-person classes," said Kristin Hamm '09, instructor of accounting. "Learning can be more difficult in an online setting. I also missed sending off the seniors. However, the students were understanding of the situation and were flexible through the process."

Blaise Torrence, who graduated in May with a bachelor of science degree in accounting, said the quarantine revealed how vital routine is for proper learning.

"Without the structure of the classroom, the pattern of regular homework, and the camaraderie of classmates, my sense of discipline and ability to retain information plummeted," Torrence said. "But, I scheduled every hour of my day and gave myself deadlines by setting online meetings with classmates or professors to talk about the assignment.

"Professors were incredibly encouraging. They understood that education is not going to function perfectly in this kind of environment, so they generously forgave misunderstandings, relaxed deadlines, and simplified assignments that would typically involve a lot of face-to-face discussions."



### **VIRTUAL COMMENCEMENT CEREMONY**

The Spring [commencement](#) ceremony also looked different. Instead of rescheduling an in-person event, SBU held a virtual ceremony on May 16 – the original date for graduation.

"We wanted to celebrate and we wanted to provide some closure to the semester because it had shifted abruptly," Turner said of the decision to hold a virtual ceremony. "We wanted to provide something, a bookend to the semester.

"I know it looked different, but I will say, in retrospect, having the slides and the personal comments added so much to the ceremony and are elements we would like to add in future in-person commencement exercises."

Although it was not the experience they had planned for, the May 2020 graduates still appreciated being recognized.

"I graduated in my pajamas, sitting on my couch," said Darby Dougherty, who graduated with a bachelor of music degree with elective studies in business. "It honestly didn't feel like I had just graduated college. Friends and family weren't gathered round, there wasn't a graduation party to plan, and I received congratulations through social media likes instead of in-person hugs. It honestly felt very incomplete, but it was really nice of SBU to still honor the Class of 2020 and make us feel like we weren't forgotten. I appreciate the efforts the school put in."

"Though I missed out on sentimental moments with peers, this was, by far, the most comfortable graduation I have ever attended," Torrence said. "I sat on a couch with my feet propped up, talking and laughing through the whole thing with my family. I thoroughly enjoyed it."

### **MOVING FORWARD**

Having made the shift to a remote learning environment, faculty are looking at what they've learned and how they can use that in their classrooms moving forward.

"I've never used online discussion boards," said Dr. John Murphy, assistant professor of biology. "I'm not a real tech person, but my students actually really liked the discussion boards and it allowed them to kind of chat back and forth, so that's something I'll definitely keep in. The other thing I found is this new software that's available – Complete Anatomy – that I used. My students just loved it, and so I think we're going to bring that into the class and continue to utilize that as well."

"We can be very flexible as educators and meet students where they are through technology," McCarley said. "The Zoom sessions with students were a nice form of communication."

## **EXCITED TO RETURN**

The SBU faculty can all agree they are eager to see their students face-to-face this fall.

"I'm super-excited to be making art, and helping others make art, in the flesh with those students who fall in love with the process of creating with painting and drawing materials," said Chadd Caldwell, assistant professor of art. "I miss seeing the 'aha' moments and growth."

"I want to give each one of them a hug," Fox said. "I'm not sure if I'll be able to do that by that time, but I want to show them how much I am ready to teach them and have conversations with them and listen to them. I can't wait. I'm kind of counting down the weeks until we can be on campus and just be able to see them. One thing that I regret is not being able to do that with our graduates."

## **TAKEAWAYS**

Dr. Skinkle was impressed by how the SBU faculty responded to the quick transition.

"I was blown away by how effectively the faculty were able to make the transition," Skinkle said. "Even those who were self-admittedly not tech savvy demonstrated a willingness to make the adaptations that were necessary. And, to me, that's one of the favorite things I have about working at SBU is the spirit of collaboration. We knew it was not an easy transition, but faculty were able to step up to meet the challenge put before them."

And, Jones said it was important how quickly SBU was able to react to the global pandemic.

"I think we were more proactive than we were reactive," Jones said. "And, for me as a faculty member and even for our students, and for our alumni, we didn't miss a beat. I think that shows you the Christ-centeredness of us as a university, that we had the assurance of our salvation throughout this process. Knowing that and taking away the fear and the anxiety allowed us to go into action."

"I'm very proud of my faculty. I'm very proud of the students. I'm very proud of the staff and the support and the administration to get us through this, and I think the Lord came out on top. For me, that's what discipleship is all about."

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Photo 1: Darby Dougherty, a 2020 music graduate, performs a song during a lesson with Dr. Sarah Howes, assistant professor of voice at SBU.

Photo 2: Blaise Torrence, a 2020 accounting graduate, with his mom, Chastity Propst, during the online commencement ceremony.

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