

As Coronavirus Spreads, Moving Classes Online Is the First Step. What's Next?

By **EMMA DILL, KARIN FISCHER, BETH MCMURTRIE, AND BECKIE SUPIANO**

BRAD MITCHELL, ALAMY



The March 6 decision by the University of Washington to move all classes online amid concerns about the novel coronavirus raises questions that colleges nationwide are already asking: When is the right time to make that call? On what basis? And how easy is it to make the transition?

As reports of infections in the United States grew, Washington officials said they had made the decision out of an abundance of caution. “We have a responsibility to our community and to the community at large,” the university’s president, Ana Mari Cauce, said at a news conference.

“We want to be clear,” she said, “we’re not saying that it’s not safe to be in class.”

Later on March 6, Stanford University also announced it would move its classes online for the final two weeks of the winter quarter. At press time, a growing number of colleges were moving courses online, urging students to leave campus, and canceling study-abroad programs, conferences, sports events, and university-sponsored travel. One college had canceled its spring semester.

Washington’s decision was made by a campuswide task force, the Advisory Committee on Communicable Diseases, which includes medical professionals, student-support staff members, international-education experts, and others. The group also consulted with local and state public-health officials. Cauce said the decision to cancel in-person classes was made on Thursday, before officials learned that a staff member had received a “presumptive positive test” for Covid-19, the disease the coronavirus causes.

In large lecture halls, students may be crammed into close quarters, heightening the likelihood of transmitting the infectious respiratory illness. And while young people have been less likely to fall seriously ill from the coronavirus, or have recovered more quickly, many of the university’s students are beyond the “traditional” 18-to-25 age range.

In addition, students who have disabilities, who are pregnant, or who have underlying health conditions could be at increased risk in tight classrooms. Even before the decision to cancel classes was made, about a quarter of students were participating in

classes remotely.

Though in-person classes will be canceled at Washington, dining and residence halls will remain open, and campus organizations can decide whether to hold scheduled events. Students who choose to return home may do so. But Cauce noted that some students, particularly the university’s large population of international students, may be unable to go home. For those from coronavirus hot spots such as China and Italy, it may be safer to remain at Washington.

Cauce praised the campus’s response to the announcement. Faculty members are “really stepping up” to figure out how to deliver their courses remotely, she said, and librarians and academic advisers are working to put more resources online.

MAKING THE TRANSITION

The decision to move classes online didn’t come out of the blue. Jennifer Doherty, a principal lecturer in the biology department, said that in the week or so beforehand, professors got emails from the provost’s office and, in her case, department leaders that encouraged them to think of contingency plans for their courses. “We’ve been talking about it all week,” she said.

Even earlier, Ben Wiggins, the department’s manager of instruction, told professors who teach its large lecture courses that they should be ready to iron out shared policies in the event that in-person classes were canceled. The department emphasized to students that they would not be penalized if they decided not to come to class.

Doherty is teaching an upper-level research seminar with 40 seniors this quarter. The seniors in Doherty’s course haven’t been particularly worried, she said. They had been coming to class — and washing their hands. But in some larger lecture courses, attendance had already dropped significantly, and some professors had already canceled classes.

Doherty’s students had just finished collecting data and were about to analyze their results. The final was supposed to be a poster session. “So obviously we’re not going to do that,” she said. She is figuring out how to adapt the projects for videoconferencing. The university has given every professor and stu-

The U. of Washington moved to a distance-education model in response to the threat of the new coronavirus.

dent an account for the web-conferencing program Zoom, Doherty said. The biggest wrinkle: “This presumes that everyone has the internet where they are. And broadband.”

That raises questions about equity.

Internet access may be a challenge, especially for students and faculty members in small cities and towns, where service can slow when everyone is trying to use video-conferencing at once, said Daniel Stanford, director of faculty development and technology innovation at the DePaul University Center for Teaching and Learning. Stanford also worries about how to replicate the learning formats, such as laboratory work, in which being physically present is central to the experience.

Another question is institutional capacity. Are colleges generally prepared to support thousands of instructors’ moving quickly from in-person to online teaching?

“In a word, no,” said Flower Darby, director of Teaching for Student Success at Northern Arizona University. “I don’t think most institutions are equipped to handle a situation such as this, in which more demands are

that if the transition to online teaching is rushed, it could have long-term effects on how professors view teaching remotely. “We don’t want to get the idea that this is what effective online education looks like,” she said. “Moving online with inadequate support is a short-term solution.”

Touro College, in New York City, is trying to avoid that by planning ahead: Students would take all classes online for four days, an official told *The Chronicle* by email, as a test “to prepare for academic continuity in case in-person classes will need to be canceled.” The University of Southern California announced a similar dry run.

While one national survey found that 46 percent of professors had taught an online course, different skills are needed to switch abruptly to doing that. What is the best way to deliver a lecture? What about student presentations, or active-learning projects? Is it better to teach class in real time or asynchronously? Campus ed-tech experts are wrestling with those and other tricky issues.

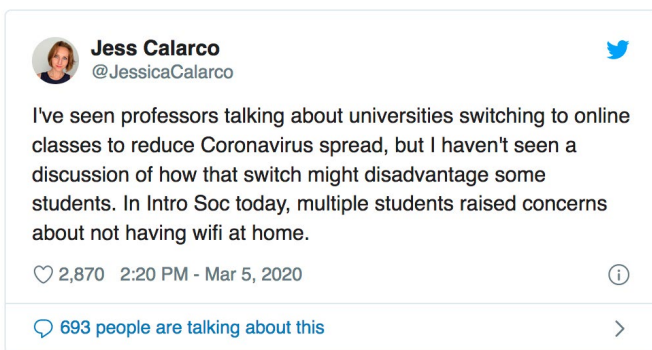
DePaul’s Stanford collected some of the resources he came across in a crowdsourced Emergency Remote Teaching Guidelines document. The New York Institute of Technology’s Keep Teaching page, for example, offers instructors advice on creating live, online classes through Zoom or prerecorded lectures with Voice Thread. Duke University has created a similar series of tips and tools for keeping class going in an emergency.

Stanford said plenty of user-friendly technologies exist to support both synchronous and asynchronous communication. GroupMe, Slack, and WhatsApp can all be adapted for class work, for example. And while none of those might be ideal for creating vibrant discussions, they are effective enough in the moment.

In the meantime, DePaul is one of many colleges trying to ramp up faculty training. The university is offering a series of short webinars in which instructors can quickly learn the basics of videoconferencing or how to get the most out of their learning-management system.

LESSONS FROM ABROAD

In thinking about moving classes online, college leaders may want to look to univer-



Jess Calarco
@JessicaCalarco

I've seen professors talking about universities switching to online classes to reduce Coronavirus spread, but I haven't seen a discussion of how that switch might disadvantage some students. In Intro Soc today, multiple students raised concerns about not having wifi at home.

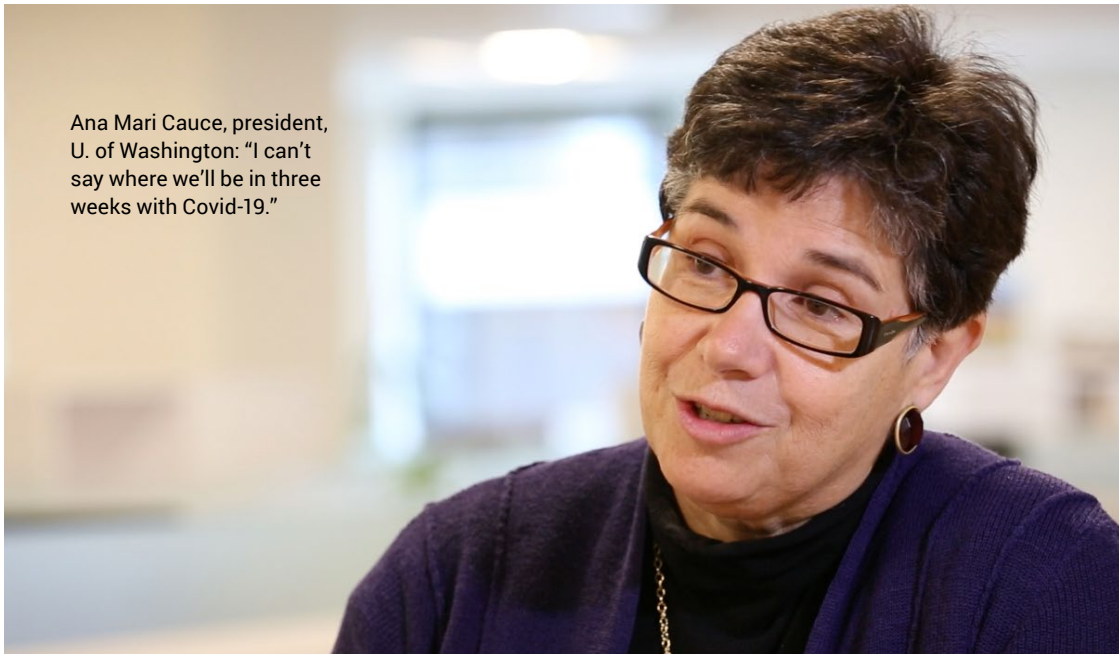
2,870 2:20 PM - Mar 5, 2020

693 people are talking about this

made of the technological infrastructure and you need a lot of qualified people to help.”

Darby has been following conversations on social media among education-technology and teaching specialists in recent days. While people are rallying to share resources and support, she noted that on many campuses teaching centers may be small operations. “Broadly speaking, at public institutions there are not enough support folks in general,” she said. She fears that, in an emergency, faculty members “will be thrown into the deep end of the pool.”

She and her colleagues are also concerned



Ana Mari Cauce, president, U. of Washington: "I can't say where we'll be in three weeks with Covid-19."

CHRONICLE PHOTO BY JULIA SCHMALZ

sities with campuses overseas. Duke Kunshan University and New York University's Shanghai campus made the transition to online instruction in February, following recommendations from Chinese officials.

Leaders at both universities recommend keeping things simple by employing digital tools that professors and students are familiar with and are already using, said Clay Shirky, NYU's vice provost for educational technologies.

"The tools you want to use are the tools you have in place before the crisis hits," he said. "You don't want to be deploying a whole bunch of fancy new tools."

One professor at NYU's Shanghai campus shared what he had learned from the experience on Twitter:



Even when teaching and technology work, a sudden shift online can be a challenge. It "can still feel isolating for students and fac-

ulty," said Noah M. Pickus, a dean at Duke Kunshan University. "So as we get ready for our last session of the year, we're putting a lot of our effort into both student support and community."

NYU "triaged" its courses by shifting online those classes with the largest enrollments first, and determining which courses could not work in that medium. Lab-based science courses and field-trip-heavy classes were canceled, Shirky said.

The university will follow the same template as it moves its campuses in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, and Florence, Italy, to online-only instruction. Each transition makes the process easier for faculty members and university officials, said Shirky.

"Every time we do this, there's a larger group of people familiar with it. There's more documentation. There's better walk-throughs for faculty," he said. "I don't think we would have chosen to get suddenly good at this, but that's been one of the side effects."

While the University of Washington is exploring scenarios in which it is forced to use distance learning in the longer term, President Cauce said, it has "every intention" of reopening at the beginning of the new quarter, on March 30.

"But I don't have a crystal ball," she said. "I can't say where we'll be in three weeks with Covid-19." ■