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Penn State's School of Public Affairs Security-Related Academic Programs Amid the Novel Coronavirus Catastrophe

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ABOUT PENN STATE'S SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

The School of Public Affairs is located at Penn State Harrisburg, the Capital College of the Pennsylvania State University (Penn State). Penn State is a public land-grant institution of higher education whose mission is to serve the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and a global community. The School of Public Affairs, among other things, is the academic home of the Intercollege Master of Professional Studies in Homeland Security Program that collaborates with eight Penn State colleges. The school houses online (OL) and residential face-to-face (F2F) undergraduate and graduate programs in criminal justice, health policy and administration, political science, public administration, and public policy. The programs include emergency management, civil security, and public safety concentrations. The Master of Professional Studies in Homeland Security Program is delivered entirely OL asynchronously via the university's World Campus and currently serves approximately 700 students. Besides that, well over 1,000 of the school's total student population of approximately 1,500 students are in OL programs. This provided the School of Public Affairs with a great deal of OL teaching experience that prepared us for teaching during the COVID-19 crisis (Penn State, 2020b).

HOW THE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS ADAPTED
TO THE EVOLVING COVID-19 CRISIS

Due to its large OL student population, Penn State's School of Public Affairs had (unintended) applicable crisis contingency protocols in place prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. With the support of our college's Center for Teaching Excellence, many traditional F2F residential courses had already been set up on our learning management system (LMS), Canvas. As a result, many of our school's traditional students and faculty had a handle on using Canvas and remote learning technology. The center enhanced and focused its services to faculty as COVID-19 evolved (Center for Teaching Excellence, 2020).

As the COVID-19 crisis hit Penn State during the Spring 2020 semester, most residential F2F classes were moved to a synchronous-OL modality using Zoom, a videoconferencing platform. For statutory and university policy reasons, as they apply to Penn State as a public land-grant university, we had strict limitations regarding asynchronous teaching during the Spring semester since residential students had enrolled with a reasonable expectation of being taught F2F, or if circumstances should require, synchronously OL. In addition, students on internships were able to continue with their respective real-life internship experiences, moving to home-office settings with classes held via Zoom. While the PhD program had some flexibility, the school could not deliver the program fully asynchronous OL due to Penn State Graduate Council rules and

especially its residency requirement. Consequently, the doctoral program was delivered OL synchronously, enabling students to fulfill their residency preferences and requirements. In its newly added homeland security/emergency specialization, the PhD program had previously planned to use existing research-focused courses from the Intercollege Master in Professional Studies in Homeland Security Program. This plan was fast tracked, and our program will see its first homeland security-specializing PhD students in asynchronous OL classes in the Spring 2021 semester as policy allows for some PhD classes to be taken in this mode.

In addition, Penn State administrators modified several policies to alleviate student concerns. The maximum time-to-degree was extended by one year, the final grade submission deadline was extended by two weeks, and students were offered a pass (P)/fail (F) option. Passing grades fulfilled course requirements and did not impact students' cumulative grade point average (GPA). Failing grades did not fulfill course requirements and were not factored into students' GPAs. Moreover, in collaboration with the Penn State College of Medicine, the Intercollege Master of Professional Studies in Homeland Security Program includes a Public Health Preparedness Option that offered a series of webinars that provided COVID-19 public health guidance to all members of the Penn State community.

Challenges in the Crisis

Challenges included student-practitioners and volunteers who were directly involved in COVID-19 and other 2020 crises, displaced international and domestic students, technological issues including limited/no Wi-Fi, availability of personal computers, and psychological issues. To mitigate those issues, we offered flexible deadlines and make-up assignment opportunities.

In a number of cases, international as well as domestic residential students were unable to return home and some of those that were able to return home experienced Wi-Fi issues. Zoom dial-in options ameliorated the situation for some students although those students were unable to view the video content. In this case, instructors were able to tailor make-up assignments. There was some pushback when faculty requested that students visibly engage the class (turn their videos on) during Zoom videoconferences so to that instructors could track students (take attendance) and better engage students. Some students were either unwilling or unable (for reasons such as culture, faith, security, or simple technology) to appear on Zoom. In response to these issues, the University issued guidance that promoted accommodating students' privacy and other concerns.

In addition, many of our adjunct professors are active members of the homeland security enterprise. We consider this to be one of the strengths of our program, as those adjuncts provide our students with the most current homeland security practices. As the COVID-19 catastrophe evolved, however, several adjuncts were bogged down operationally and in some cases were not able to meet their teaching commitments. We were able to replace those instructors, at their request, basically overnight with minimal disruption, thanks to the flexibility of their adjunct colleagues and our administrators.

Opportunities in the Crisis

The School of Public Affairs' OL presence relies on the availability of professors during nontraditional office hours. The is a core feature of holistic OL programs and is built upon asynchronous course delivery, LMS applications, responsive student-faculty email correspondence, as well as a strong social media presence. The school effectively leveraged our OL practices to engage our students throughout the pandemic crisis. In the longer term, opportunities from the COVID-19 crisis could include an impetus to overcome existing resistance at Penn State to explore more use of OL asynchronous course delivery including in research degrees, as discussed below.

CRISIS COMMUNICATION AND VIRTUAL TEAMS

Penn State School of Public Affairs' experience so far has reproduced a series of state-of-the-art findings in the domains of crisis communication as well as of virtual teams. First, as noted above, several of our traditional F2F classes already had substantial content and interaction components implemented on Canvas, and student-faculty and faculty meetings were already held via Zoom. We were able to expand on that quickly to meet communicative demands in the evolving COVID-19 crisis. Per Coombs's (2012) crisis communication principles, we were "present," that is, we were "where the action was." The action was the move from F2F to OL course delivery via Zoom, enhanced by Canvas's many applications, while still teaching synchronously. Following the regenerative crisis communication model (Coombs, 2019), this pre-crisis set-up gave us a communicative infrastructure for managing information effectively both in terms of delivering course content OL and keeping students informed about Penn State's evolving COVID-19 response and academic policy changes. Beyond that, as the school was already connected pre-crisis to its students through various social media channels, we were well positioned to understand how students were perceiving the COVID-19 catastrophe as a whole and the effectiveness of our response. We used those channels for reputation management purposes, translating general Penn State COVID-19 response information to the level of our school and programs, and giving our students new policy guidance and what that might mean for them personally at their respective point of progress in their programs. Moreover, in our homeland security and emergency management foundational courses as well as relevant research courses such as HLS 558 Disaster Psychology and others, we modified course content to cover the COVID-19 response. In doing so, we added relevant academic content and built-in reviews and discussions of local, state, and federal behavioral instructions to empower students to inform personal crisis response.

Second, we observed typical aspects of virtual team processes while moving ongoing residential classes to remote learning (Gibson & Cohen, 2003). With common social clues less perceivable via Zoom, often students who had been followers or more silent observers in the actual classroom emerged to become discussion and thought leaders in the same class, just now delivered remotely. While group formation and seeding class identity can be a challenge in asynchronous-only education, and we see that a lot in our homeland security World Campus courses, students who had started the semester in-residence had already bonded with their

classmates in the F2F classroom settings when they moved OL. While the typical difficulty OL groups have assigning meaning to information and delivering feedback still shone through, students have already had the opportunity to develop mutual trust in the residential setting during the first part of the Spring 2020 semester. The move to OL discussion forums then enabled more equality and leadership roles, as research would let us have expected, rotated. Specifically, those students with the background knowledge and skills to integrate the contributions of their classmates emerged as conversation leaders in the remote setting.

APPROACH TO THE SUMMER 2020 TERM

Penn State decided to deliver all classes OL throughout the Summer 2020 term. As student expectations were now managed accordingly and ahead of the start of Summer classes, it became possible to move from synchronous to asynchronous OL teaching to accommodate international students currently unable to return to the United States and are in different time zones or those students busy serving in the first responder community or otherwise impacted by COVID-19 in a way that limits their ability to attend OL classes synchronously.

While the Intercollege Master of Professional Studies in Homeland Security Program is an OL program, it includes a one-week executive seminar that is held on campus during the Summer semester. The purpose of the in-residence component is to allow students to work with classmates synchronously and interact with one another, instructors, and guest lecturers in a F2F format. This year, however, we delivered the course synchronously OL, through Zoom. This was a valuable new experience for us and our students. It was very helpful to have observed how the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) delivered their Annual Emergency Management Higher Education Symposium OL this year (FEMA, 2020). We adapted their practices for our executive seminar.

An opportunity that came with the remote delivery of that course, mainly via Zoom, is that expert lectures could easily be recorded and auto-close captioned and edited into video platforms for content enrichment of our common asynchronous courses. Otherwise, videography requests would need to be submitted and funding secured to cover recording and editing. In addition, we had been apprehensive about losing registered students upon notifying them that the course would be delivered remotely. All registered students, however, stayed in the program, plus we were able to gain some additional registrations. Upon further consideration, this makes sense as in the remote format, the course still offered an interesting virtual element of residency in an otherwise asynchronous OL program, including ample opportunity for real-time interaction with agency representatives and subject matter experts as well as for task-based interaction with peers across the course week. At the same time, students were able to save costs by not having to travel to campus and securing accommodations.

APPROACHES TO THE FALL 2020 SEMESTER

The School of Public Affairs plans for the Fall 2020 semester followed college and university guidance. Penn State's early official position had been that it "remains optimistic for a Fall return to on-campus learning in line with the latest directives and guidelines from the governor and

other government and public health authorities" (Penn State, 2020c). However, among faculty and students, there was concern about fully returning to a F2F mode of delivery if they felt they were particularly vulnerable due to COVID-19.

On the other hand, some students continued to prefer F2F instruction in the Fall. The school was flexible enough to offer a mixed model of course delivery in Fall 2020, where those students able and willing could return to F2F instruction, while those vulnerable, unable, or uncomfortable could participate remotely. In particular, we were able to offer several classes in what we refer to as mixed-mode, with concurrent F2F and synchronous-OL student groups. Accommodating international students who experience an extended inability to return to the United States and our campus added a layer of complexity because, considering time-zone disruption and other barriers, it can require the same class to be delivered in three different modes: F2F synchronously, F2F remotely and asynchronous fashion to accommodate time zone conflicts. We also expected Fall 2020 to be challenging for our students in OL programs due to extended financial hardships or possible extended telework requirements that can stretch and enhance the typical working day into evening hours and weekends, which are timeframes OL students usually reserve for their course work. We prepared for such a scenario by taking student success advising to the next level by extensively applying success management tools to graduate programs and implementing a variety of updates, tools, services, and resources made available by Penn State as a whole (Penn State, 2020a). For example, by building time management and work-study-life balance skills development into first-semester orientation courses. Penn State also made available Microsoft MyAnalytics to faculty and staff, announcing that:

> The program provides insight into two of the most important factors in personal productivity: How you spend your time and who you spend it with. It aggregates information collected from other Microsoft applications you use—such as Outlook email and calendar and Teams—to capture your day in a glance. This information can assist users in setting goals and identifying opportunities to free up time. (Penn State, 2020d)

LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS

In particular for the School of Public Affairs' homeland security and emergency management-related education, we expect three sets of long-term implications:

First, as Penn State anticipates extended telework requirements and/or professional practice, so is the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) starting to focus on efficient and safe teleworking in the homeland security enterprise as part of a new normal. For the School of Public Affairs professional master's programs specifically, it is important (even critical) to adapt courses and curricula to emerging workforce requirements in the mission space as emerging circumstances dictate. We are already seeing new emerging workforce requirements and related knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) expectations in DHS and homeland security enterprise workspace. As Acting DHS Secretary Chad Wolf pointed out in a recent talk, the new normal may include allowing non-frontline workers extended telework to save time lost on the daily commute, particularly in the greater Washington, DC area (Auburn University, 2020).

The ability to work independently and remotely could be a mixed technological and social competency to build into homeland security core curricula. One program that is well equipped to develop this competency is Penn State's OL Master of Professional Studies in Homeland Security, which includes, among other specialization areas, a Cyber Threat Analytics Option and Prevention and Information Security and Forensics Option. Also, we would be able to draw expertise from the Master of Professional Studies in Human Resources and Employment Relations which also resides on the World Campus.

Second, at Penn State, there has been a certain dividing line between OL programs delivered through the World Campus and traditional F2F programs. Reasons for that include some dogma that research degrees cannot be delivered OL. While this may be true in certain domains such as laboratory science, experience in the distributed homeland security research community, especially including DHS' Centers of Excellence, shows that quality basic research as well as applied course research can be conducted OL with virtual teams. With the unanticipated need to deliver high-level research courses remotely in Spring 2020 and the need to be prepared to continue to do so for at least the rest of the 2020-21 academic year, examples will be set, and Penn State may become more comfortable exploring opening up the World Campus to the OL delivery of research degrees at master's as well as doctoral levels.

Third, following DHS Acting Secretary Wolf's recent remarks on how COVID-19 may change the homeland security enterprise and lead to new workforce requirements, he also highlighted the mission set of economic security within homeland security:

> "Economic security is really homeland security," said Homeland Security Acting Secretary Chad Wolf in a virtual live event hosted Thursday by Auburn University's McCrary Institute for Cyber and Critical Infrastructure Security. Wolf said that, in addition to its newfound role of fighting COVID-19, his department has taken a stronger position on its role dealing with economic security. Wolf noted that whether it is imports, exports, airports, or seaports, it all weaves together homeland and economic security. In response, the department created the Office of Economic Security to provide recommendations on best practices and policies. With 90 percent of everyday consumer goods coming through ports, Wolf said it is imperative for his department to take a stronger role on the economic side (PRNewswire, 2020).

Relatedly, the School of Public Affairs started collaboration with the Smeal College of Business at Penn State. The Smeal College now offers a Master of Business Administration with a Concentration in Homeland Security that our School provides (Penn State 2002e).

Finally, for homeland security and emergency management programs, COVID-19 demonstrates the need for international exchange of information and coordination of mitigation and response. While research and textbooks cover perspectives of international and comparative homeland security, this is not well reflected in current hiring and instructor assignment policy of U.S. institutions of higher education (Givens, Busch & Bersin, 2018; Jerković & Siedschlag, 2018; Morag, 2018; Newsome & Jarmon, 2020). We may hence see policy changes with respect to hiring faculty with the necessary international and other subject matter expertise that is not

currently possible due to citizenship requirements. Such instructors may be able to deliver their courses remotely from outside of the United States.

At the same time, with the extended fiscal and budgetary effects of the COVID-19 catastrophe, graduate programs in our fields will be confronted with an ongoing need to unlock new constituencies of prospects. The pandemic context may contribute to ending the national lockdown of homeland security education that has been observable over the past few years. This may pave the way for a much-needed internationalization of the field in terms of students and faculty as the mission space is less and less geographically defined, and even where it is, cross-cultural competency is needed to exercise homeland security missions professionally and responsibly.

Through a cooperative agreement between Penn State's School of Public Affairs and School of International Affairs, we have already enhanced the International Track in the Intercollege Master of Professional Studies in Homeland Security Program to be ready to deliver to the expected rising demand as well as to contribute to a truly networked homeland security community working across the country and around the world. Even if we still insisted that homeland security only exists in the United States, it would be undeniable that homeland security today at least is "transnational homeland security" (Givens, Busch & Bersin, 2018) given the typology of the evolving risk and hazards environment.

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