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EDITOR'S PICK

Fisher: Looking towards fall semester at UW: some continuing optimism

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After finishing out a crazy semester of teaching at UW in the spring, I wanted to know more about my colleagues' experiences of shifting their courses online. So, early this summer — as part of my work understanding and promoting effective teaching at UW — I offered small group sessions for colleagues to debrief with one another. What had they learned about themselves? What had they learned about their teaching? What worried them as they considered the prospect of teaching fully online this fall?

What I learned from them was fascinating — and it was encouraging, too. Many of those I talked to — from a range of disciplines at UW including music, education, business, geology, statistics and beyond — were frustrated and exhausted. But they also expressed creativity about their teaching and concern for their students. I want to share this information with students, parents and other educators, because I believe it can increase understanding across — whether students are enrolled at UW or elsewhere, in or out of state.

First and most importantly, the faculty members I talked to were impressed and inspired by their students' resilience. These teachers gained energy from students who were patient, empathetic and motivated to continue their learning. They appreciated students who were co-experimenters with them as they tried out new technologies, new assignments and new grading schemes. These teachers recognized that their expertise was being pushed and expanded. The spring was scary for many of them, but they also found new energy in a chance to reimagine their relationships with students.

Second, many professors expressed real concern about creating a sense of community with students this fall. In the spring, they argued, at least they had a half-semester to build relationships in face-to-face settings — and they credited those relationships with helping students stay engaged through the rest of the semester. These teachers understood the importance of creating strong communities of learners — and they recognized that their tried-and-true strategies might not translate to the new environments we are all facing this fall.

Third, they recognized how much time and effort they had spent to shift their teaching approaches in the spring. Many of these faculty members had previously attended training sessions and workshops focused on best practices in education; those colleagues often felt well-prepared for changing their methods and assignments. And, for the fall, over 350 teachers (many of whom were new to UW's Ellbogen Center for Teaching and Learning) took part in week-long Digital Teaching programs and other activities to help them revamp their courses.

I have heard a lot of talk — at UW, on social media and in conversations with students, parents and friends — about “returning to normal,” as if the big goal right now should be getting back to old processes and practices. I don't agree with that goal, so I was excited to find — even back in May — that these instructors knew that “normal” was not a step back to old ways but rather an active process of moving forward. The colleagues I talked to valued stability, good teaching and strong community, and they were anxious but eager to figure out those values can fit into a new version of “normal.”

Students, parents and educators should know this information for two reasons. On one hand, I just want other people to appreciate the commitment and concern my colleagues expressed. I feel so, so fortunate to work alongside passionate educators. On another hand and much more importantly, I also want parents and students to see this moment as an invitation. I suspect that higher education around the country will be clunky and awkward and stressful this fall and next spring. As someone who studies how people become engaged members of academic communities, I see this coming year as a huge chance for students to work with faculty to develop a new and more meaningful version of what college can be.

As a final point, I also heard these instructors voice their concerns about lack of institutional communication during the spring. During the current academic year, I think that all of us who believe in the benefits of higher education should seize this opportunity to practice passionate, engaged and empathetic communication with one another. At the UW level, I think that the recent efforts of President Seidel and Interim Provost Alexander are very positive signs — and I believe campus and statewide stakeholders can look forward to smart, clear communication and science-based decision-making as we all adjust to changing realities on the ground.

Rick Fisher is director of Communication across the Curriculum at UW; his work focuses on promoting stronger writing and communication across campus. Fisher teaches in the English Department and supports faculty through the Ellbogen Center for Teaching and Learning.

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