

Faculty Rise to the *Challenge* of New Instructional Methods Due to COVID-19



Juli Steadman Charkes, instructional designer

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Mercy College faculty acted quickly and nimbly to best support students. When the College cancelled in-person instruction in March 2020 due to social distancing guidelines, faculty members shifted to online instruction, and Mercy College President Tim Hall praised them for embracing the unprecedented challenge “without skipping a beat.”

Mercy reopened for the fall 2020 term based on its comprehensive OnCampus Plus plan centered around ensuring students had the support they needed to continue their education. Under this plan, along with adjusting to

new health, wellness and safety protocols, faculty members played an instrumental role in students’ academic success.

To enable students to learn in a way they were most comfortable, Mercy offered students the options of taking classes in person, online, or in a blended learning format, in which a live class is held both in person and via live stream at the same time.

In the blended format, students chose how they would like to participate whether in person or online or a mixture of both, based on their comfort level with being in the classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic. In planning for the fall 2020 term, deans and department

heads decided which classes were the highest priority to meet in person, which ones could be offered online, and which ones were better suited to the blended learning format.

Mercy faculty were able to meet the challenge of blended learning head on, thanks to the dedicated teams at the Center for Teaching and Learning (the Center) and the Online Learning Office, part of Mercy College’s Office of Academic Affairs. The Center focused on preparing training tools, including workshops, small group coaching and individual consultations that guided faculty on how to navigate all teaching modalities, while the Online Learning Office provided

professional development essential to faculty successfully moving to online delivery through Blackboard.

“It’s a new experience for most faculty members to have a blended classroom,” explained Mitchell Fried, Ph.D., the Center’s interim director. Therefore, the workshops covered a range of topics such as how to use Zoom, how to design classrooms for blended learning, how to incorporate multimedia tools, how to engage students in new ways, and how to work both with students who are on Zoom and those who are in the classroom during the same class session. As of January 2021, over 1,500 faculty members have attended a workshop, coaching and/or consultation session.

“What we stress is that the pedagogy and expertise of the faculty remain intact,” said Juli Steadman Charkes, instructional designer at the Center. “What we’re providing in these trainings are some instructional design principles, some suggestions, some technology training that just support what’s already there: the expertise, the pedagogy and the willingness to create a learning environment in which students succeed. Rather than technology driving the bus, the technology supports what’s already there.”

To prepare for blended learning, Mercy has made extensive technology upgrades in classrooms since the spring 2020 term. “Mercy’s commitment to continued learning is clear with the technology investment of these blended classrooms,” said Fried. “Across all campuses, we now have learning environments that allow for multiple teaching modalities.”

In addition to the trainings offered by the Center, the Online Learning Office led by Director Mary Lozina, has delivered more than 700 Blackboard training sessions, including group and individual sessions, since March 2020. “Blackboard is at the heart of online delivery. Without a working knowledge of the elements of Blackboard, faculty would not be

able to deliver their courses online to students,” explained Mercy Associate Provost for Academic Affairs Lucretia Mann.

“Faculty also worked with the Online Learning team, Mercy faculty subject matter experts and an instructional design firm, Symbiosis, to create 22 master online courses that employ national best practices for online course delivery,” Mann added. The master classes provided a scalable, plug-and-play course shell that was fully deliverable, so that faculty could seamlessly transition their curricula from an in-person to effective online format.

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Mann praised the small but mighty Online Learning team, including Lozina, Online Instructional Designers Olga Bristol and Melissa Harwin and Faculty Trainer Iliana Gonzalez, for their Herculean effort working around the clock to ensure faculty had the know-how and confidence to deliver their courses online to best engage their students.

Mercy’s decisions about how to reopen in fall 2020 were heavily informed by the results of a survey sent to students early in the summer 2020. “We surveyed students, they told us what they want, we listened, and the faculty worked diligently to meet those needs,” said José Herrera, Ph.D., Mercy’s provost and vice president of academic affairs.

Of the 1,811 students who responded to the survey, 33% indicated a preference for completing all their coursework online, 25% indicated a preference for completing all their coursework in person, and the rest preferred coursework to be completed partly online and partly in person. Students now have those options, depending on which courses they take. In sharing their preferences for

a blended option, 51% of students preferred an option in which classes are taught both in person and online by the same instructor at the same time with students making the choice about how to attend.

Patrick Fazioli, Ph.D., associate professor in the School of Liberal Arts’ Department of Humanities and co-director of the Global Honors Program, is one of the faculty members who taught blended learning classes during the fall 2020 term. “One of the things I’ve been looking at is which material can be moved most seamlessly online,” he said. “Now that time is a bit more precious, I’m trying to figure out what is the high priority content that we must discuss in person and what is the content that we can move online asynchronously.”

Steadman Charkes – who also teaches classes at Mercy – was excited about the challenge. “I am one of many instructors who absolutely thrives on the energy in the live environment. I believe that a blended classroom can work with a little bit more effort and a little bit more thinking through.”



In addition to offering blended learning for the first time, faculty members are preparing for other scenarios if COVID-19 mandates alternative courses of action. While what lies ahead remains uncertain, what is known is that Mercy’s faculty are dedicated to ensuring students can continue their education uninterrupted.