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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Everything has Changed and Yet Nothing has Changed

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Students are in crisis. How can they keep up with their academic life when the pandemic has all but assured that their personal and emotional lives are experiencing some measure of turmoil or trauma? The novel coronavirus has upended every area of society. There is no sector of public or private life that it has not affected. Faculty at institutions of higher education have been reeling from figuring out how to transform their in-person classes into a virtual format in the blink of an eye. On the other side of these virtual classrooms, students are themselves reeling from all of the changes. Professors are telling stories of students flooding their inboxes with messages expressing anxiety, an inability to focus, and an inability to keep up with their assigned work. As a result, many realized that students are carrying so much emotional and psychological distress that they need professors to be sensitive and mindful of their circumstances *outside* of the classroom. Without a doubt, they are right; students are drowning and they need faculty to throw them a lifeline.

Professors are seeing that they need to “shift gears” to exclusively online formats *and* shift their expectations and requirements for students. Higher education in the age of the Covid-19 has professors making changes that are sensitive to what is happening in the students’ lives *outside* of the virtual classroom. Many have taken their cue from those like UNC-Chapel Hill Professor Bandon L. Bayne who made headlines after he amended his own syllabus and

expectations for his students when classes were forced to go entirely online. Bayne explained that he discovered that his students not only had “a whole range of differential access to material,” but also that students were all treading water trying to navigate their own anxieties about the pandemic and their varying family and life contexts.

Thanks to the pandemic, many in higher education are realizing what has always been true-- that they must keep in mind the *whole* student when teaching. They are learning that teaching during a pandemic means that being an educator entails more than pedagogy, it includes structuring classes around the premise that student circumstances *outside* of the classroom have a direct impact on their ability to navigate the classroom and to meet classroom expectations and requirements.

Faculty are learning that this was *always* the case, even in the *pre-pandemic* world of higher education. In our current Covid-19 world, many rely on the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) for guidance and updates about this relatively unknown virus. Yet, the reality is that the CDC had already warned of a public health issue that has a direct impact on the functioning of students in higher education before they ever heard the words “Covid-19” or “coronavirus.” In November 2019, a few months before Covid-19 began spreading across the globe, the CDC declared *trauma* a public health issue.

Additionally, before the CDC made this declaration, faculty across disciplines were seeing college students navigate what seemed like ever-increasing mental health crises. Increasingly, students have been dealing with mental health barriers coupled with rising rates of mass gun violence and campus sexual assaults. Experts have long suspected that many college students carry the effects of childhood trauma well into adulthood, in addition to having to navigate the challenges and realities of modern college life.

Many of us who teach in higher education can testify to this *pre-pandemic* reality. We have known students whose educational experiences have been marred by mental health crises. Many bright and promising students are forced to forgo their educational pursuits in order to tend to untreated and unresolved trauma which commonly manifest themselves during the college years. Other students may not forgo their educational pursuits, but lean on maladaptive coping mechanisms or sacrifice the quality of that educational experience with an academic performance that is not indicative of their ability. These are all pre-pandemic realities.

As a result, the needs of students during this pandemic is teaching educators to *always* be mindful of students’ circumstances *outside* the classroom in order to educate the *whole* student in the classroom. The students of this pandemic are tasked with more than meeting the expectations and requirements of the classroom (virtual, or otherwise). In this respect, while everything has changed, nothing has changed.

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