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Being Dordt during COVID-19

Sarah Moss ('10)

When Dordt students and faculty left for spring break on March 6, they planned to come back to campus to finish off the spring semester. Because of COVID-19, a coronavirus that caused a worldwide pandemic of respiratory illness, those plans changed.

On March 12, Dordt announced that spring break would be extended by a week and that classes would be held online until April 13. Then, on March 25, President Erik Hoekstra announced that Dordt would not resume on-campus instruction following spring break but would extend online instruction to the end of the spring semester.

By early April, students had gone home or to other locations across the country; faculty had taken their in-person courses and translated them to online learning. Across the country and the world, alumni had begun dealing with lockdowns, health scares, work instability, and more—all because of COVID-19.

Despite the uncertainty, frustrations, and anxiety, the Dordt community found ways to rally. From alumni working in the healthcare industry to students striving to stay connected from afar to faculty spending extra time providing a quality educational experience, here is a snapshot of how Defender Nation has responded so far during the COVID-19 pandemic.

HOW FACULTY AND STAFF CHANGED COURSE

When Laurel (Alons, '06) Koerner first heard that she would need to transition her theatre arts classes to an online learning format to finish out the spring semester, she thought of her students.

“My biggest question was how to proceed with highly interactive classes. I decided to just take it one week at a time, keep an open mind, look for creative solutions, stay patient with myself and others, and be responsive to students’ needs.”

One challenge Koerner and other faculty dealt with was balancing academic rigor with having grace and understanding for individuals’ circumstances.

“It simply takes longer to get through material online than in person,” says Koerner. “As instructors we’re having to guess what sort of demand we’re really placing on students with each piece of content we put in front of them.”

Also, students had to deal with a variety of circumstances when working from home, including spotty Internet access, having to share one computer with other siblings, and finding a quiet spot to work. That impacted the quality of the assignments and projects turned in, as Koerner found out.

“I had high hopes for performance students to still be able to do some kind of scene work together using Zoom,” says Koerner. “The technical hurdles made it an ineffective use of their time and the learning outcomes became obscured, so those assignments transitioned to solo work that could be recorded for assessment, peer review, and discussion.”

But, in some instances, technology gave theatre students a chance to still produce great content, even if the audience had to tune in digitally.

“A couple of student-directed plays that were shelved for the semester ended up debuting as virtual performances, so that students could still present their work—albeit in a scaled-back form—and we could still celebrate what was achieved,” says Koerner.

Initially, it might seem difficult to transition theatre classes to an online learning format, but Koerner and the theatre department made it work.

“By nature, theatre is a collaborative art form, and one that comes to fruition in shared space and time with an audience,” says Koerner. “It thrives when we can be in the room together, and there’s no substitute for that creative chemistry. But we can continue practicing the skills, even while we cannot present the fullness of our art form in the ways we’d hoped.”

Although she missed the excitement and energy of working with students in person, she felt pleased overall with students’ engagement in her online courses and in the ways the department has been able to connect virtually.

“We have gathered via Zoom to play improv games as a department-wide activity, but really the students just want to be present with each other and have relaxed conversations,” says Koerner. “It’s been more important to host space for them to catch up with one another, process, vent, laugh, and remind themselves what it feels like to be in community.”

Maintaining a sense of community during long-distance learning was important to Dr. Tom Clark and the mathematics department, too. In April, the math faculty held a virtual game night using Jackbox, playing silly trivia games with a handful of students. They also gathered to talk through some of the department transitions and to answer questions about final exams.

“I held online office hours, too,” says Clark, a mathematics professor. “Not many students went, but for the ones who did, they seemed to get a lot out of it. They had some great questions, and we had excellent conversations.”

Clark only had two classes in the spring semester, so he was able to put in quite a bit of time prepping. He felt like his students were able to stay on top of their assignments, for the most part. Students seemed to respond positively to his online classes, too, which weren’t too different from his usual class setup.

“Usually in class, I’ll talk about the main idea, do some examples, and then have students work through a problem or two at the end of class. With online classes, I had a similar structure, but in video format,” explains Clark. “What students missed out on is the guided practice—the formative assignment where I had them work through a problem while I walked around the room and helped them. With online classes, they went straight to homework. For some students, that didn’t work well. For others, it did.”

Clark missed interacting with students in person. He missed being able to easily have impromptu conversations about how faith integrates with mathematics. Still, when in-person classes resume, Clark plans on implementing a hybrid teaching model for his courses—perhaps continuing with the five-minute videos for the main idea and examples portions of his classes.

“That would give my students and me more time to work through problems together in class. Also, if students miss class for whatever reason, the content would still be available to them. I think it would be an improvement and would give me more time with students in class.”

While faculty like Koerner and Clark found ways to transition well from in-person to online learning, Student Services and Campus Ministries staff sought to connect with students regarding their emotional well-being by calling every Dordt student.

“We have 1,500 students that we’re calling, and each one of them has a specific story, has a unique situation with unique needs,” says Derek Buteyn, director of residence life.

“We ask them about how online learning is going, what they miss most about not being on campus, if there is anything we can pray for, and how COVID-19 has impacted them in a way that might make it financially difficult for them to return to Dordt,” says Kim (Brinkerhoff, ’12) Byma, learning community area coordinator.

They began making phone calls in the spring semester and plan to continue calling through the end of the summer. Sometimes they leave a voicemail message, but other times they have meaningful conversations with students who are eager to chat.

“We miss students,” says Byma. “It is good to connect with them and make sure they’re doing all right. I think COVID-19 has taught us that Dordt is more than a physical space—it’s you, it’s me, it’s the students. We’re part of the family of God, and if you want to be part of that, this is the perfect place.”

HOW STUDENTS ADAPTED AND CONNECTED

“Who would have thought that the day I left campus for spring break would be the last time I would see my friends for months? I still wonder how differently my friends and I would have treated those goodbyes at spring break if we knew what was going to happen.”

Devyn Driesen, a junior graphic design major, remembers seeing the email notification pop up on her phone and tearing up a bit as she read it.

“I had a feeling that this news was coming, but part of me always hoped it wouldn’t.”

Still, as she processed the news that she would need to finish out the year with online classes, she tried to take a step back and remember that this was for the best. “We were doing this to keep the immunocompromised safe and healthy and to limit the spread,” she says.

She was already living at home in Orange City, so she didn’t have to worry about moving her belongings home. Instead, she picked up extra shifts at work and adjusted to online classes.

“A good thing about online classes is that I could do school wherever I wanted and on my own time, which was nice because I could fit it in better with my work schedule,” she says. “On the other hand, I ended up procrastinating and had low motivation. It was hard for me to get into the right mindset.”

Driesen is very thankful for how understanding her professors were during the end of the spring semester.

“I can’t even begin to imagine how challenging it was for them to reformat all of their classes to fit into an online setting on such a short notice.”

She also found that the pandemic has pushed her to grow in her faith.

“Everything in my life had seemed so certain up until March, and then there was a shift where nothing was guaranteed. It was scary. My comfort bubble was gone, things I was excited for were canceled, and my friends moved home. I’d be lying if I said that I didn’t question God during that time. Still, I was constantly reminded that God is always with me, guiding me. I have learned how important it is to trust in him and that, as Psalm 46:1 says, ‘God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.’”

Dylan Runia, a digital media major, also experienced a range of emotions at the prospect of a different spring semester than he expected. During spring break, he headed to the East Coast for Dordt’s concert choir tour; on March 12, he and his friends were set to sing at Sussex Christian Reformed Church and were also excited about heading to New York City to check out Broadway. Their plans changed when Ryan Smit, director of concert choir, asked all the students to take a seat in pews at Sussex CRC.

“I didn’t want to film that moment when Professor Smit told us that we had to cancel the tour and go home, but I did,” says Runia.

Runia was also in a documentary film class, where he and a classmate were planning on producing a film on the Nazarite vow. But as COVID-19 forced students and faculty to move to online classes, Mark Volkers, digital media professor, decided students should create documentaries on the effects of COVID-19 in their hometowns.

Runia ended up taking a slightly different approach. In addition to interviewing people in the hometown of Sibley, Iowa, he included footage that captures the rollercoaster of emotions he went through when adjusting to finishing his junior year during a pandemic—including what it was like to have the concert choir tour cut short.

“I’ll admit I was angry, bitter, and depressed, which was not good, but I decided to just let it show in the interest of providing an honest portrayal of what the experience was like for me,” he says. “I also thought my mental state was important to address, because mental health has become a serious issue for many people as a result of COVID-19.”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tuVz2wtuqns&list=PLjBkWBvZVTdXPJG32v8ZOJUyV9UIKk_Jc&index=12

The *Diamond*, Dordt’s student-run newspaper, also decided to shed light on how the pandemic was impacting Dordt’s community.

“Even though campus was closed, the spring semester still happened. Life went on. We wanted to create as much of a sense of community and continuity as possible when a lot of things seemed unsure. There was still news for the *Diamond* to report, and our staff really stepped up to the plate during this time,” says Emma Stoltzfus, *Diamond* co-editor.

Stoltzfus and her co-editor, Erika Buiter, decided to send out newspaper issues via email so that students, staff, and faculty could receive the issue directly. The writers held interviews through phone calls and video chats instead of in-person. The entire team had a bi-weekly budget meeting on Zoom to talk through story ideas and relied on Microsoft One Drive for sharing documents. Lee Pitts, journalism professor and faculty adviser for the *Diamond*, encouraged them along the way. In the end, they published three fully online versions of the *Diamond*.

“It was an interesting end to the semester, but our staff put in a lot of hard work, and we’re glad to have been able to continue publishing the *Diamond* during this time,” says Stoltzfus.

Keeping a sense of community going even from afar is the reason why two seniors—Tom Oord, a theology major, and Jason Hartnett, a computer science major—started “Keeping Up with the Defenders,” a talk show where they just chatted with their fellow Dordt students and others via Zoom.

“I was Facetiming Jason, and we ran out of things to talk about,” explains Oord. “We added Dan, one of our roommates, to the call, and then Dan talked with us for 15 minutes before he had to go. So, we called another roommate. At the end of our call, Jason jokingly said, ‘What if we called everyone at Dordt and just checked in with them and saw what they were doing?’”

And that’s how “Keeping Up with the Defenders” was born.

“We originally started it as a joke, but it turned out to be more fun than we expected,” says Hartnett.

Their goal was “to have it so that every person who attends Dordt is either on the show or knows someone who was on the show,” says Oord. By the end of the semester, they had more than 10 episodes and had recorded 20 students and staff, including President Erik Hoekstra.

Each episode was about 30 minutes long and aired Monday, Wednesday, and Fridays during the end of the spring semester. Hartnett was inspired by popular talk shows when dreaming up the structure of their talk show, so “Keeping Up with the Defenders” typically featured elements like a game or activity as well as an interview. Otherwise, Oord and Hartnett tried to relate directly to their guests’ interests.

“For example, Zach Dirksen had his play get canceled by COVID-19, so we did an improv of his entire play,” says Oord. “Sam Landstra is really into March Madness, and that got canceled, so we gave him a bracket of cereal mascots.”

On Dordt’s campus, students have a chance to interact not only with their close friends but with acquaintances, too.

“At Dordt, you can meet new people every day if you want to. You can walk down the sidewalk and see someone you don’t really know that well, and just stop and ask them how they’re doing. I missed that. We wanted to make sure the last half of our last semester had that interaction with people who aren’t necessarily in your circle,” says Oord.

“Keeping Up with the Defenders” helped Hartnett and Oord maintain Dordt’s community from afar and gave them a chance to get some closure at the end of a strange senior year.

“It’s been a fun, joyful, bumpy ride, and it’s been the best experience of my life, without a doubt,” says Hartnett.

“Are you talking about working on the show with me, or being at Dordt?” jokes Oord.

“Both,” says Hartnett.

HOW ALUMNI MADE A DIFFERENCE

Alumni are finding ways to make a difference during the global pandemic as well.

As a nurse for Memorial Health Hospital in Aurora, Nebraska, Rachel (Groneck, '12) Griess watched her work change significantly due to COVID-19. Before the pandemic, Griess took care of approximately three to seven patients at a time. On a typical day, she spent time answering questions, working with pharmacy and respiratory therapy, providing medicine, and communicating with the doctor.

When COVID-19 swept the United States, things changed at Memorial Health. She and her coworkers had days where no patients came to the hospital, as people feared contracting the virus. Orthopedics and cardiology offices closed.

“As nursing staff, we get our temperature checked before coming to work. We wear masks and goggles at all times. We have weekly meetings via Zoom, where we review what we know about COVID-19. We also talk through scenarios—if someone with COVID-19 comes in, how do we respond? What PPE do we put on?”

Grand Island, Nebraska, a city about 30 minutes away from Aurora, was one of the nation’s COVID-19 hot spots in April.

“We bought extra ventilators in preparation and hoped that we wouldn’t need to use them,” says Griess.

And, like many health care facilities around the nation, Memorial Health locked down their buildings.

“Before, visitors could come and go as they pleased. Now, all the doors to the hospital are locked to protect the patients from a possible spread,” she says.

As with nearly all health care facilities around the country, no visitors were allowed at Memorial Health for several months. Patients and families were scared and frustrated; still, they made the most out of a difficult situation.

“At one point, a grandson stood on the lawn and played trumpet while his grandfather watched out the window,” she says. “We had patients who would draw pictures and put them on their windows for their grandkids to see when they drove by.”

In their weekly Zoom calls, Griess and her coworkers considered difficult questions—how should nurses and doctors protect themselves so that they don’t spread COVID-19 to patients or bring it home to their families? How do you comfort patients dealing with loneliness? What happens if COVID-19 hits their facility?

Recently, she read 2 Corinthians 4:18, which says, “So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” This verse stood out to her, particularly as she has had to face the unknown every day at work.

“COVID-19 made me trust in God more than ever. You don’t know what’s going to happen when you go to work. That’s the reality of being a nurse, but during a pandemic, the community is on edge and scared. What else can I do but trust in God? There’s hope in him.”

Being a nurse during a pandemic is nerve-wracking, but it also makes Griess want to help people more than ever.

“Many people go into nursing wanting to help others. Seeing how scared patients are, it makes me want to jump in even more and be a light—be there for them and say, ‘You’re going to get through this.’”

Finding ways to protect nurses, physical therapists, doctors, health care workers, and patients from COVID-19 takes innovation and creativity. For Zach Wensink ('14), a mechanical engineer at Bemis Manufacturing in Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin, thinking outside of the box is one of the driving factors of his career.

“Every project I start is a blank slate and requires creative thinking to deliver the results management or customers are asking for,” he says.

Usually, Wensink gets to be creative by designing automation equipment.

“This involves quoting, designing, developing prints, leading the building and installation process, and troubleshooting issues that arise,” explains Wensink.

But COVID-19 changed that. Johannah Wenig, director of the St. Nicholas Hospital Foundation in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, reached out and asked if he would be willing to help design testing booths that help preserve personal protective equipment (PPE) for health care workers. The booth would add an additional layer of protection for medical providers testing for COVID-19.

“I told her that is already close to the types of barriers I design as safety measures surrounding some of our robot work cells,” he says. “It seemed like a pretty simple thing for me to design and have made in our shop.”

It happened that a member of the hospital’s board was also a manager at Bemis, which helped with speeding along the partnership.

“We reviewed a concept and agreed on a design. Now, a few weeks later, they are using it at the hospital,” says Wensink.

The testing booth isn’t something that Bemis is marketing to other hospitals, but they are open to constructing more.

COVID-19 has reminded us of how our actions affect others, says Wensink, including in the workplace.

“The whole company needs to be on board with social distancing and good hygiene, or the virus is going to spread. It will take teamwork to maintain a safe working environment,” says Wensink. “Also, the Lord has used this time to remind me that I’m not in control. He is who I need to rely on for my health, my family’s health, my income—for everything.”

Henry Byl ('13), a physical therapist, also had to deal with changes that COVID-19 brought to his work at ProActive Physical Therapy in Sioux Center. COVID-19 impacted Byl’s favorite part of being a physical therapist: interacting with patients and having a positive influence on their lives. When the local schools closed in March, Byl saw a shift in patient intake.

“There was a decrease in the number of patients who came in; many patients decided to stay home,” recalls Byl.

Physical therapy is very hands-on, as Byl and his colleagues work to strengthen the body and help patients meet goals. They never stopped their manual techniques but were careful to do proper hand sanitization before and after working with patients and to wear masks at all times.

Byl and his team also began implementing telehealth, which has been helpful for patients who were unable to go in to Byl's office.

"Telehealth can range from a telephone call, where I check in to see how patients are doing and how their exercises are going, to a video interface like Zoom, where I can play videos for patients to learn a new exercise," he explains.

He has been pushed to think creatively when implementing telehealth; for example, rather than being able to physically show someone how to do an exercise, Byl has relied on verbal cues and shared videos. He has discovered that one major benefit of telehealth is how convenient it can be.

"There are people who, due to time or location, may not have access to care. Especially in rural Iowa, some people aren't willing to take the time to drive 10-15 minutes into town for physical therapy. That's where telehealth can be exciting—there might be people who have just suffered through their pain, who can now quickly talk with me, look at a few things, and get some advice in a 45-minute time period, rather than taking a few hours of their day to meet in-person."

This summer, Byl has seen more new patients set foot in his office. Although things likely won't go back to how they were pre-COVID-19 for a while, Byl is thankful to be part of the physical therapy profession.

"It is fun to be part of God's restorative plan of creation and his kingdom that is already here but not yet. Working toward restoration is similar—we can play a small role in giving people hope that things can get better, things will be better, and ultimately Christ will come again to restore things perfectly."