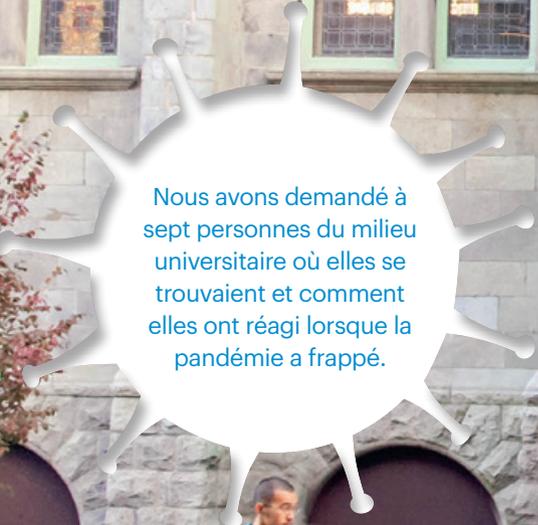




We asked seven individuals within academia where they were when the pandemic hit, and how they responded.



Nous avons demandé à sept personnes du milieu universitaire où elles se trouvaient et comment elles ont réagi lorsque la pandémie a frappé.



Our pandemic
moment

À l'heure de la
pandémie

by/par Moira MacDonald

FXHAUSTING DAYS, sleepless nights, overwhelming uncertainty and a paramount concern for the welfare of students, faculty and staff. Universities were among the first organizations to shut down in-person operations and pivot rapidly to remote teaching and learning in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic. This unprecedented situation called on the very best that our universities are capable of. These seven stories, drawn from universities across the country and across a spectrum of roles, demonstrate the ingenuity, tenacity and care that administrators, faculty, staff and students showed for one another and their communities through the most challenging episode faced by universities in decades. We asked each individual: When did you realize COVID-19 would have an impact on higher education and your role within it? How did you respond? And what has been your biggest takeaway? These are their answers.





Danine Farquharson, associate dean, school of graduate studies, and associate professor of English, Memorial University

FORTY PERCENT OF our over 4,000 graduate students are international students. They were a vital source of on-the-ground information in the early days of the pandemic. In early January, Andrew Kim, our director of graduate enrolment services, was in contact with one student in China's Hubei province and was getting updates about the situation there. We had this unarticulated sense that once we started seeing cases outside China the chances of a pandemic would be enormous and that would have an impact on us.

Our team's response at the school of graduate studies was always "students and safety first." From March 13 to the end of March we triaged students' needs. A lot of the most urgent were financially related. Our dean, Aimée Surprenant, decided that fellowship funding would be extended for at least a semester. There was an enormous amount of internal work to ensure that happened efficiently.

I am partly responsible for dissertation defences. We had to roll those out remotely, with none of us deeply experienced with the online systems. I worked with two staff members to ensure all the documents were in secure servers, accessible to the appropriate people, and to draft a guide to the online platform for all participants. All of us had to make a huge cognitive shift from doing something the way we've always done it to having to think through every step.

Our last on-campus defence was March 17. Our first completely virtual defence, by the faculty of medicine's Augustine (AJ) Devasahayam, was March 19. It was nerve-wracking. I think I was more nervous than AJ was! I'm thrilled to say, though, that every defence we've had since has been successful. I am so grateful and impressed by the patience and generosity of students, their supervisors and examiners. Without sacrificing rigour or integrity, they've still been able to make the experience as positive as they can.



Robert Haché, president,
Laurentian University

WE BROUGHT TOGETHER our infectious disease response planning group in mid-January, as the disease was making headlines in China, and we prepared to activate our emergency response plan if needed. We recognized – partly because of knowledge of retroviruses gained through my scientific career – that the key issue would be the nature of the virus’s transmission. We needed to be ready.

Late on March 10, Sudbury’s public health unit announced its first case: someone who worked in a provincial government building on Laurentian’s property, with connections to the university community.

We immediately called a meeting of our emergency management response team. About two-and-a-half hours in, it was obvious to me that we needed to move quickly to reduce the number of people on campus. I was assured that we had the IT capacity to transition rapidly to remote learning. We immediately suspended in-person classes and turned to remote learning the following day.

We held daily meetings initially, with leaders from around the university. We also spent a lot of time thinking about how to provide other valid means of instruction for students involved in off-campus activities and labs as part of their learning. We went through every aspect of the emergency – what was happening, what could we do, how were students reacting, how could we support them and faculty, how do we play a larger role in the region supporting the hospital and the health unit.

The early decision to suspend campus was a risk – we were the first Canadian public university to do so – but we could always return to in-person classes knowing we had made the best decision based on what we knew at the time. I’ve learned about the value of communication. I think we received such a positive response from day one because we focused on being as transparent as possible and sharing everything we knew with our community.



Jason Kindrachuk, assistant professor,
viral pathogenesis, department
of medical microbiology, University
of Manitoba

MY FIRST “LUMP IN MY THROAT” moment came in late January. I was leading a science outreach program for students in Nairobi, which is part of my ongoing work helping local partners in Kenya with viral preparedness and identifying long-term health complications in Ebola survivors. As the China lockdowns progressed, there was increasing uneasiness that Africa was in a precarious position if COVID-19 spread rapidly out of Asia. Throughout the month of February, my lab, the Laboratory of Emerging and Re-Emerging Viruses, discussed what could happen if we saw the same spread in North America. The galvanizing moment for us was when the governor of Washington announced a state of emergency on February 29.

Our lab focused on how we would ensure we were prepared for a potential long-term shutdown. My biggest concern was giving students a sense of comfort during such uncertainty. We knew that an open-ended closure could impact their ability to perform any lab work for an extended period, but I tried to reassure them that they would be protected in terms of time and stipends. I also had the unique privilege to use my voice and expertise to provide insights on COVID-19 to the public through the media. I have been humbled by the opportunity to give back, including through knowledge and conversation.

The most significant lesson I’ve learned so far is that when we consider emerging viruses, we have to continue to expect the unexpected. Viruses have been circulating in nature for long periods of time, yet our ability to predict their exact behaviour once they emerge is still in its infancy. I have also been amazed at the global research community’s response, utilizing social media and technology to provide continual global updates, independent of political or social differences. It’s been so inspiring to be a part of this.

Brian Lamb, director, learning technology and innovation, Thompson Rivers University

I WAS VACATIONING in Mexico in mid-February when I saw reports of international schools in China closing down. I remembered going through the SARS outbreak, at another institution, and suggested to my team that we prepare contingency plans. When I returned to work on March 5, it was clear some U.S. campuses would be closing, including in nearby Washington State, and we began preparing in earnest.

Our team fast-tracked planned system upgrades. Our IT colleagues significantly boosted our dedicated computing capacity. We created instructor help sites and tutorials for different online learning, meeting and video platforms. We also collaborated with other staff and departments to launch Pivot to Digital, an online resource with strategies for online teaching, learning and assessment through a student-care lens. When the in-class suspension was announced on March 15, we were terrified of what was to come but also felt we had done all we could to prepare.

We next set up online drop-in help sessions. We identified the “Faculty Avengers,” a group of confident users across the university, to provide peer support and quickly let us know of problems. We set up an internal work management platform and helped move our Open Learning division, so staff were ready to work remotely from home.

The pace was unrelenting. Mike Caulfield, director of blended and networked learning at Washington State University Vancouver, said something like, “Being an ed tech right now is like waking up every morning to a sewer backup and your apartment flooded.” It’s been like that, except it’s a different and equally unpredictable issue each day.

I’ve learned there is no technology or resource that means as much as having skilled, passionate people you trust working alongside you. The commitment and care among my colleagues and partners across the university has been an inspiration, even at the lowest points.

Kim Lavoie, professor, department of psychology, Université du Québec à Montréal, and co-director, Montreal Behavioural Medicine Centre

THE RESEARCH AREA for me and my husband [Simon Bacon of Concordia University] is behavioural medicine – preventing disease by motivating people to do things that may require some sacrifice. So, the virus was on our radar when news came out about it from China. One February morning I mentioned how the efforts to control it were entirely based in behavioural medicine and that we should do something on it. He was like, “We’ve got so much other work going on,” which we did, even though we were on sabbatical.

By the time of Quebec’s school spring break at the end of February, we suspected the virus could have a huge impact. We closed our lab March 12. Schools and universities were closed by the end of the next day. On March 18, I woke up, rolled over and told my husband, “We need to do this.” We drafted the proposal the next day. We created a survey, piloted it and by the time we launched it on March 27, we had about 60 international researchers willing to collaborate with us; that’s more than doubled since.

The survey, the International COVID-19 Awareness and Responses Evaluation (iCARE), canvasses people’s behaviours and attitudes around the virus. We were overwhelmed by the response. The survey’s first wave received more than 35,000 responses from people in 143 countries. A second wave launched on May 15. We’re working on making the data open-access.

We are so impressed and grateful at how the international research community wanted to help and came together so quickly and productively. I’ve also found that the far-reaching nature of COVID-19 has made me reflect on the research community’s priorities and how some things we have invested in for a long time maybe aren’t as important as we might have thought.



Mery Mendoza Rengifo, president of the Graduate Students' Association (2019-2020) and PhD student, department of geological sciences, University of Saskatchewan

I STARTED TO realize the impact COVID-19 was having when I returned from a week-long research trip to San Francisco on March 9. There was a tense atmosphere at the university and in Saskatoon. But it wasn't until the university sent an email on March 16 stating the campus would be closed until further notice that it dawned on me what a huge impact this would have on universities, especially on research. Research and academic progress have come to a standstill, severely affecting the global transfer of knowledge.

My work investigates the mechanisms by which mercury exerts its toxic effects. That research depends on access to the lab and to a research facility on our campus which provides a special kind of light source called a synchrotron. I use this to investigate how mercury binds to selenium at the molecular level. So, my ability to complete my experimental work properly is at a halt, which has been stressful.

The same is true for many other graduate students. As president of the GSA, I received several emails from students after the announced shut-down expressing concerns and asking for help. The GSA then sent a letter on April 6 to senior administration requesting universal support for graduate students. They've implemented some of our requests and we continue to advocate on students' behalf. We also approved the implementation of Empower Me, which delivers counselling and other mental-health supports remotely and is much needed by our students right now.

As an international student from Peru, it has been extremely difficult not to have my family close by. This experience has shown me how important it is for students to have some kind of close-knit family, community or other support system in place to help them through difficult circumstances.



Wisdom Tettey, vice-president
and principal, University of Toronto
Scarborough

UTSC STUDENTS WHO were in China and our recruitment teams alerted us in late December about the outbreak in Wuhan and what it might mean for their plans. We were also in contact with partner schools of our Green Path student recruitment program in China, and with other Canadian postsecondary institutions, while considering the advice of Canadian governments, public health authorities, as well as our own public health experts. That allowed us to anticipate the impact on our activities and plan for them.

In the new year, when it became obvious that a major crisis was in the offing, we activated emergency and crisis response protocols that have been in place for about a decade. Around mid-January, the university formed an incident leadership team of senior leaders who oversaw pre-planning for operations at U of T's three campuses, including ours. At a campus level, we had an emergency response team that guided planning for academic and business continuity, crisis management and the implementation of health, safety and research protocols.

In the March crisis phase, we focused on supporting students and faculty to finish the term. A tremendous effort was required, with many individuals and teams working around the clock. This included moving about 6,000 courses online between March 13 and 16, across U of T. We provided access to internet resources for students who did not have them. We arranged for residence students to return home and facilitated the well-being of those who could not leave. We also instituted an emergency student support fund to assist with urgent student needs. Our health and wellness centre ramped up its services, including medical and counselling supports.

I have seen first-hand the value of preparation, long before a crisis occurs. Our emergency and crisis preparedness framework meant our actions were thoughtful, even in extreme circumstances. **UA**



Augustine (AJ) Devasahayam, a graduate student in the faculty of medicine at Memorial University, was the first student at the university to defend his PhD thesis virtually after the campus shut down in March due to the pandemic.

Graduate education

Virtual victory: inside the new normal of online doctoral dissertation defences

Most graduates seem satisfied with the experience but miss the celebratory aspect afterwards

THEY THOUGHT THAT the biggest challenge of their PhD defence would be controlling their nerves. Instead it was securing a quality Wi-Fi connection.

Since mid-March, thesis defences at universities across Canada have gone online. The move brings challenges ranging from security to audio consistency to the downer of being unable to high-five the candidate afterwards. But while it's different than what they might have dreamed of, most new doctorates are just glad to find a way forward.

Rapid change of plans

When his defence was originally scheduled, University of Waterloo Earth and environmental science PhD candidate Jessey Rice, who is currently based in Ottawa, had intended to stay over at his parents' house north of Toronto and then make his way down to the U of Waterloo campus for the big day. But as the March 25 defence date approached, plans changed rapidly. By March 19 it was decided the committee would attend

remotely and by March 20 it became evident that Dr. Rice and his supervisor, associate professor Martin Ross, would also be calling in. Realizing he'd need a more stable internet connection than what's available at his parents' rural home, Dr. Rice relocated to the guest bedroom at his aunt's place.

Dr. Rice's dissertation looks at the glacial history of northeast Quebec, the product of three seasons of fieldwork. The defence was held on Microsoft Teams videoconferencing software, chosen partly for its closed-captioning functions to accommodate a committee member with a hearing disability. It all went smoothly but for one technical glitch that ejected a committee member briefly from the call. "I was impressed with how smoothly it went," said Dr. Rice.

His supervisor agrees. "Surprisingly, given the situation, everything went well, better than we had all anticipated as it was one of the first on campus to go online," said Dr. Ross, adding that it was his first virtual thesis defence in 14 years as a professor. He credited campus IT support personnel, who stayed online the entire time.

Dr. Rice said he was grateful for everyone coming together to make his successful defence happen, although he missed the body language cues that come from being face-to-face. "There's always that slight delay with online interactions, and when you're presenting your PhD, those little silences make you wonder. Not getting instant audience feedback can be tough," he said.

For Dr. Ross, the biggest change was the social aspect. "Thesis defences are a big part of academic life, an important part of the dynamic of a department," he said, noting that several students in his research group had planned to attend Dr. Rice's defence, along with the government research collaborators. "It's a big milestone." A week later, Dr. Ross hosted an online celebration for Dr. Rice with his research group.

A quick pivot

At Memorial University, a videoconferencing platform called BlueJeans has regularly been used for external committee members, given the challenge and expense of flying examiners to the campus in St. John's. "When defences went online, we were ready to pivot quite quickly," said Aimée Surprenant, associate vice-president, academic, and dean of the school of graduate studies at Memorial.

Hamed Tebianian was one of the doctoral candidates whose defence was chaired by Dr. Surprenant. His presentation for his PhD in power electronics generated so much conversation that it went on much longer than usual, finally ending after more than four hours. "It's always a pleasure to be in those sorts of defences where everyone is so engaged and excited about the project," said Dr. Surprenant.

Dr. Tebianian took pleasure in another benefit of the online defence: "The best part was that I had just my shirt on and was sitting in pajama bottoms," he said with a laugh, adding that he took a photo to commemorate the occasion. Dr. Tebianian defended from his apartment in Boston, where he moved a few months ago to start a new job. The only unfortunate part of the experience, he said, is that he had made plans to meet up with old friends and colleagues when he returned to the university for his defence. "It's been a long journey and it would have been really nice to be with them," he said.

"Surprisingly, given the situation, everything went well, better than we had all anticipated."

Despite being more practiced at defences with a virtual component, Dr. Surprenant said that with so many going online, Memorial has formalized the process even further, sending out a best practices document to both students and examiners ahead of time, and advising students to test their technology the day before.

Updated from the time of SARS

At Queen's University, Betsy Donald, associate dean in the school of graduate studies, said her team pulled out the plan it initiated in the time of SARS and made some quick updates. Choosing Teams as a base platform due to its familiarity among the IT department, they too instituted a best practices document and policies to have IT online for the entire defence. As part of the plan, the whole committee logs on 15 minutes beforehand and there's a plan B in place with a number to call if the online connection is unsteady. There's also a procedure for removing the student from the videoconference while a committee discusses the defence (in person, the candidate would be asked to leave the room).

As of late April, the school had held 49 defences without major complaints. "Everyone's been stepping up and making sure they're clear on how everything works so the student feels supported," said Dr. Donald. "This allows us to focus on the content, not the technology." The university also established a policy that if the student felt in any way disadvantaged because of the technology they would not be penalized or fail because of it.

Dr. Donald has participated in three defences so far, including facilitating the committee of nine who examined Sanobar Umar, the first history PhD candidate at the university to defend on Teams. Dr. Umar, whose research focuses on the impacts of global Islamophobia in the second half of the 20th century, said the best part of her experience was the support from her committee and the validation she got for her work. The worst part was setting aside her past dreams of what her defence would look like.

"I started working on this project five and a half years ago, and in your head you always imagine the defence taking place in a grand exam hall, where you dress in your formal clothes, then at the end your committee members give you a hug and celebrate you and take you out for dinner," said Dr. Umar, who defended in her one-bedroom apartment. "It wasn't a big deal because there are far more serious things in life at the moment, but it wasn't what I had visualized. So that was a bit disappointing."

For now, committees have had to improvise in terms of the festivities. In Dr. Umar's case, Dr. Donald happened to have some balloons at home which she brought out, along with a "congratulations" sign. In subsequent defences, she's

had her committee members all change their Microsoft Teams backgrounds to balloons.

– SUZANNE BOWNESS

A RETURN,



Les universités se préparent à un trimestre d'automne sans précédent

PAS COMME

UNE RENTRÉE

BUT NOT

Universities prepare for a fall semester
like none other before it



TO NORMAL

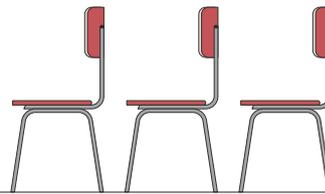
Illustrations by/par Camilo Huinca

ME



LES AUTRES

1



by Emily Baron Cadloff

Streamed lectures and empty seats: what classrooms will look like this fall

PATRICK McBRINE HAS spent many hours over the spring and summer teaching himself how to make professional-looking videos at home. Working with various types of editing software, Dr. McBrine, an assistant professor of English at Bishop's University, now knows how to splice videos together, separate audio tracks, add graphics and transitions, and make the final result look polished and ready for viewers. In transitioning his communications and literature courses to online platforms, he's spending a lot of time thinking about how his students interact with the subjects. "Some of the concepts which have been difficult for me to articulate over the last decade are now crystallized in a way I've never been forced to do before."

Dr. McBrine is one of the many thousands of instructors across Canada shifting their face-to-face classes this fall to online formats in response to the ongoing pandemic. The extent of that shift varies from institution to institution depending on the particularities of their respective campuses, the current conditions in their local communities and the dictates of public health authorities as plans continue to evolve by the day. Nevertheless, the enormity of the transition is unprecedented in the history of Canadian higher education.

Some universities have moved almost the entirety of their courses online for the fall term and, for the most part, students will not need to be on campus. Carleton University is one such institution, having announced relatively early on that all scheduled undergraduate and graduate courses for the fall will be delivered online, and that all lab activities associated with undergraduate courses will be conducted remotely. In a message to the community in early July, Carleton president Benoit-Antoine Bacon said: "We remain hopeful that it will be possible to welcome some students back to campus in January."

Most universities, however, plan to offer a hybrid, or blended, model of teaching this fall. Generally, that means the majority of courses will be taught online, with face-to-face instruction used only when necessary, such as for hands-on labs, studio work and courses that would be difficult to teach remotely.

But, for each university there are variations. Mount Saint Vincent University, for example, will be working with a hybrid model, but instead of offering labs in person during the fall semester, the university will be postponing the necessary hands-on instruction until January for a week-long intensive bootcamp of sorts. Brandon University, meanwhile, will be mostly online but will offer some in-person classes in music and the arts, and will also ensure that students have access to computer labs.

David Docherty, Brandon U's president, says he's aware that computer and internet access aren't always guaranteed at home for students. "We made sure there was computer space on campus, and we were able to identify as many students as possible and give them a key fob to get into this computer lab, and we made provisions to wipe down computers and be safe."

Ken Steele, a higher education strategist, has been collecting data on universities' teaching and learning plans for the fall. He's not optimistic about a swift return to campus. "We must plan for online delivery throughout the upcoming academic year. Any other announcement is just wishful thinking and semantics," he wrote in an opinion article for *University Affairs* in May. He is more optimistic for the longer term, however. "Canada has always been perceived as a safe place," he says in a recent interview. "If we do this well and the curve stays flat, then it will make us even more attractive in two or three years when international enrolment starts to pick up again."

And then there is a handful of universities in Canada going against the grain. Redeemer University expects about 85 percent of its 850-person student body to return to campus come September. The faith-based institution plans to outfit students with their own personal, protective barriers that will be carried to classes and sanitized frequently.



The chaotic end of the winter 2020 semester, with its shift to emergency remote teaching, “has left a resounding feeling for students of dissatisfaction.”

In a school-wide survey, the majority of Redeemer students indicated they would prefer to be on campus for the fall. But, for those students studying remotely, Redeemer plans a dual-delivery model, live-streaming all class lectures for synchronous learning. Canadian Mennonite University, another faith-based institution, plans to have a full slate of in-person classes, augmented by some hybrid features online.

David Zietsma, Redeemer’s provost and vice-president, academic, says his institution has invested close to \$800,000 in technology that will help instructors to broadcast their classes. “If emergency orders are raised to the point where we can’t have face-to-face learning, we can shift fairly seamlessly.”

Dr. Zietsma says the school’s small size should work to its benefit. “We have a thousand-seat auditorium that obviously won’t be in use this fall. Therefore, if we do have a class of 60 students, putting that class in the auditorium for the face-to-face component while live-streaming it allows everyone to be physically distanced.”

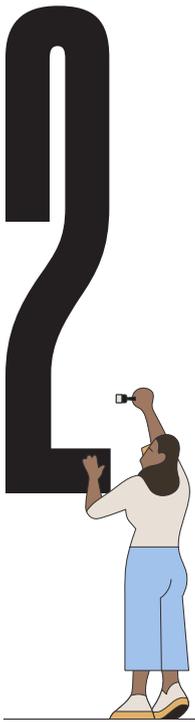
While Redeemer students appear eager to return to campus, most students across Canada seem a bit more conflicted. In a survey conducted by the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, students list a number of worries for the upcoming semester. The virus is a big concern, but so is access to high-speed internet service and computers. CASA chair Bryn de Chastelain says students also worry that they could lose out on the full university experience – “simple things, like going to see a professor during their office hours or being able to interact with your peers during a break in a class,” he says.

As well, many students question whether a majority-online schedule is worth their tuition dollars. CASA’s survey found 41 percent of students have deferred or are considering delaying their studies this year, while another 30 percent say they have decided to study part-time. The chaotic end of the winter 2020 semester, with its shift to emergency remote teaching, “has left a resounding feeling for students of dissatisfaction,” says Mr. de Chastelain.

It’s that feeling of dissatisfaction that Dr. McBrine at Bishop’s is aiming to counter with his virtual classes. He recognizes that he and other professors have serious challenges to overcome, starting with flagging energy levels as students stare at their computer screens for hours at a time. “Everything we know tells us that’s not healthy,” he says.

Dr. McBrine’s classes will be offered asynchronously, which means students can take them on their own schedule. The flexibility offers certain benefits, but it means that professors and students lose out on “reading the room” and having a more free-flowing conversation, or pivoting to an interesting tangent brought up in discussion. And there’s no denying that some professors are wary of the changes, he says.

“It does mean more preparation for classes, which is tough in the summer months when you’re trying to recharge. So, it’s not the best-case scenario,” he says. To counter that, Bishop’s has offered twice-weekly Zoom sessions, offering help to professors as they work on their transition plans. Dr. McBrine spoke at one of these virtual staff meetings in June, offering tips on his newfound video skills. “I love the fact that we’ve been all forced together in this situation. It’s not a punishment, it’s a chance to rise to the occasion.”



by Shauna McGinn

A virtual welcome: online orientation and support for first-year students

WITH THE PROSPECT of a mainly virtual fall semester, universities are faced with the challenge of making incoming students feel a genuine connection to their new school. Some student services professionals say the process has made them rethink core aspects of the first-year experience.

Tanya Bradley, manager of student and community experience at Brock University, says making orientation more accessible virtually was already a long-term goal for the school's orientation planning committee. The committee, which includes representation from student groups, designed BU4U, a suite of online programming that will stand in place this year for the usual in-person orientation activities.

"Having offerings available online will allow us to expand our scope and reach," says Ms. Bradley. "This has been something that we were looking to build ... to support the diversity of our student body. We're just having to do it now." BU4U includes an online course called BrockU 101, which gives an overview of academic support at the school. Students will also be placed in various "engagement communities," which are online groupings with other students in their faculty, overseen by a peer mentor.

At the University of Lethbridge, the Early Start Experience, or ESE, ran as a pilot program last year, operating as an in-person course that took place two weeks before the fall semester. Shelly Wismath, dean of the school of liberal education and co-creator of the course, says the goal is to prepare students for university life through a blend of traditional orientation and academic theory.

When she first learned that the ESE would have to run online this year, she says she was worried it would lose its essence, since the opportunity for students to meet one another and faculty members in an intimate environment was such a well-regarded aspect of the course. "But the more I thought about it, the more we realized in our conversations that we still have a huge amount to offer," Dr. Wismath says.

Dr. Wismath has been hosting introductory Zoom calls with ESE par-

ticipants since the start of the summer. "They're really eager to get involved and get connected," she says. "That reassured me that there's still a need for this and we can still offer something pretty special ... in fact this group probably needs it more than ever." Dr. Wismath says they've hired six upper-year students to work as teaching assistants for the course, who will focus on helping the first-year students adjust to an online learning environment.

It's a similar situation with the new Archway program at McMaster University, which has been designed to recreate the structure of the school's residence-life system (all classes for the fall term will be online and student residences are closed). Sean Van Koughnett, associate vice-president, students and learning, and dean of students, says that when he learned that first-year students wouldn't be living on campus, one of the things he immediately thought of was the team of upper-year students who work in residences and are trained to help deliver the first-year experience. "I thought, let's try to mimic some of the benefits of a residence experience, in that you're meeting peers, you're supported by upper-year students, and you've got some professional staff who are helping you navigate the university environment," he says.

Each incoming student will be automatically enrolled in the Archway program and, similar to the BU4U initiative, will be organized in groups of around 30 to 40 alongside an upper-year mentor, known as an Archway coach. Since online learning can be challenging, Mr. Van Koughnett says he thinks there could be a higher risk of students dropping out midway through the semester, which is why it's important to have a structure where issues can be identified early on. "Part of the thinking behind Archway is that if they've got additional support and someone who's proactive in reaching out to them, that will get them through those valleys," he says.

Mr. Van Koughnett says an unintended benefit of moving orientation online has been the ability to reach a wider audience of new students. Each year, about one-third of first-years don't live in residence, so there's always a portion that doesn't necessarily get the same orientation experience. But this year, he says, the university is set up to directly reach every new student in an unprecedented way.

"Of course we'd all rather be in person and on campus," he says. "But we're going to learn through this, take the best parts of what we've been able to do during the pandemic and carry it forward."

3

by Mark Cardwell



Masks, hand-sanitizing stations and single residence rooms: prepping to keep campuses safe

A UNIVERSITY CAMPUS is a lot like a town or village, says Vivek Goel, a professor at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health at the University of Toronto. “It’s not just a school, there is so much more going on,” says Dr. Goel, who recently stepped down as vice-president, research and innovation, at the university so he can devote his time to guiding its pandemic response. “We deal up front with the same public health issues that face any community.”

That’s why, he adds, life will be different at the university this fall as tens of thousands of students, faculty members and staff return to campus amid the ongoing global pandemic. In a mid-July update, U of T president Meric Gertler said that more than 90 percent of undergraduate courses will feature online delivery, either synchronous or asynchronous. However, at least one-third of courses will also have an in-person component.

Among the many health and safety measures that have been put in place are the installation of hundreds of hand-sanitizing stations across U of T’s three campuses, and ubiquitous signs instructing people to practise physical distancing and ensure proper hygiene. Yet more signage indicates the maximum occupancy in rooms and elevators, and direct the flow of foot traffic in campus buildings.

Classrooms, offices, libraries, meeting rooms and teaching labs, among other spaces, have been rearranged to space out seating, while plexiglass acrylic sheets and other physical barriers have been installed in cafeterias and service counters. In addition, everyone on campus will be asked to wear masks in indoor spaces as a temporary measure, says Dr. Goel. A growing number of universities across the country are requiring that masks be worn indoors; in Quebec, all universities have been mandated by the provincial government to do so.

U of T has also reduced residence capacity, making all rooms single occupancy for incoming students, and will clean and disinfect all public spaces and amenities regularly. It is a scene being played out, to varying degrees, at nearly every other university this fall. “As a school our guiding

principles are achieving educational excellence and building a sense of community,” says Dr. Goel. “But keeping people safe is our top priority.”

Finding and implementing the right mix of measures to ensure everyone stays safe – and ensuring the proper processes are in place to deal with those who fall ill – has proven to be a major challenge for universities. “There’s no pandemic playbook where we can turn to page 19 and see what it is we need to do,” says Darcy Marciniuk, a professor of medicine and associate vice-president, research, at the University of Saskatchewan.

A respirologist who was tapped to chair the university’s crisis response team when the pandemic hit full force in mid-March, Dr. Marciniuk says much has been done to make the campus safe. In addition to the omnipresent signage and passive health monitoring through temperature checks and the like, Dr. Marciniuk says some campus buildings have been closed to reduce the number of places that need to be cleaned and monitored. The university has instructed most students to plan for remote classes, with very limited in-person instruction.

“People will not have free access to everything like they normally would,” says Dr. Marciniuk. Echoing Dr. Goel, he adds: “Our guiding principle is to not allow the pandemic to spread. Safety is the overriding concern right now.”

The same thinking holds true for smaller universities located in rural or more remote regions where the numbers of COVID-19 infections have remained low. “We’ve had zero cases on campus,” says Peter Ricketts, president of Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. “We’ve been very fortunate – but we’re still very concerned.”

Dr. Ricketts says the university has developed safety protocols and guidelines similar to what other universities are doing, in accordance with public health recommendations. But, unlike most universities, Acadia would prefer to see students return to campus. “The vast majority of both returning and new students want to come back,” says Dr. Ricketts. “They want and choose that small university environment over online learning.”

To meet that desire, and to lessen the threat of infection, Acadia decided to push back the start of classes until September 21 to allow students time to self-isolate after arrival (any individuals coming from outside the four Atlantic provinces must self-isolate for two weeks upon arrival). “We simply couldn’t have the usual moving in and orientation,” says Dr. Ricketts. “So we decided to stagger people on the days and times they arrive.”

“We’re working to find other ways for students to connect with the campus community, which is such a big part of the university experience and a key to retention.”

Delaying the fall term, he adds, will also give more time for new students to become acclimatized to campus life and take new orientation courses dubbed University 101. “They finished high school in a very haphazard manner,” says Dr. Ricketts. “These courses will help them to settle in.”

Over in Sackville, New Brunswick, Mount Allison University is asking students to arrive two weeks earlier than usual to allow time to self-isolate before classes start. On Prince Edward Island, premier Dennis King instructed his public health office to look into booking off-campus hotel rooms to house returning out-of-province and international students for their 14-day self-isolation period.

In Quebec, the province hit the hardest by the pandemic, universities there have also been working hard to reassure and protect students, faculty and staff. “It’s not business as usual, that’s for sure,” says Marie-Karlynn Laflamme, director of public affairs at Université du Québec à Chicoutimi. “We’ve had to cancel all the usual orientation and initiation events, like our annual rector’s lunch,” she says. “But we’re working with student associations and faculty to find other ways for students to connect with the campus community, which is such a big part of the university experience and a key to retention.”

According to Ms. Laflamme, the biggest challenge is trying to accommodate the university’s international students, who make up nearly a quarter of its 6,500 students. It’s unclear how many or if any of these students, most of whom are from France, will be able to come in person. As for incoming students from within Quebec, Ms. Laflamme says the university is trying to ensure that all have at least one class on campus with in-person instruction.

In late May, the Quebec government requested that all postsecondary institutions in the province prepare scenarios that would see at least 30 percent of students return to campus. Most of the province’s larger institutions, including Université de Montréal, McGill University and Université Laval, have announced that courses will take place primarily online.

Concordia University, for its part, says courses this fall will be delivered “almost entirely online, accessible anytime, from anywhere in the world.” The university has additionally suspended all residence operations for the entire 2020-2021 academic year. In a note to students, Concordia president Graham Carr said it will be “a fall term unlike any other.” **UA**