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Hurricanes, COVID, and Schedules—O My!

A Reflection on My First Semester as Associate Dean

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When I accepted the position at Bard Early College New Orleans (BECNO) a little more than a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, I expected there to be a few new plot twists. Moving to a new city and acclimating myself to a new faculty and staff were changes guaranteed to provide more than enough growing pains; not to mention, I'd have to begin a leadership role among my new peers. After completing orientation and getting an idea of our faculty and staff, I looked forward to live instruction. I was excited to meet a new group of students, join the Seminar team, and to *laissez les bon temps rouler*. Yet, as the adage goes, "Man plans, God laughs." We were soon hit by the Delta surge and hurricane season.

What started off as a vision of a fully live launch became a reality of a soft open in August. This switch disappointed some faculty as they yearned to be back in person after the struggles of online teaching. It even influenced one member to depart just days before the semester began. However, undaunted, we leaned on our adjunct faculty to fill this vacancy until a long-term hire could be on-boarded. Within a week's time we hired two adjuncts to cover the instructor's two courses for the semester. We pressed on feeling we had avoided a major instructional catastrophe.

During this soft open, we taught remotely, yet provided some in-person coverage for students who had to attend school. Unlike other Early Colleges in our network, BECNO does not have a full 9–12 high school. We admit students from select schools into either our 1) traditional program in which students take two courses per semester with us for half a day or our 2) degree-granting program in which students attend BECNO for a full day of classes. Given that the majority of our students in the degree-granting program come from one particular high school, we had to provide in-person coverage for these students. This was our first growth opportunity presented by the school year. With assistance and support from our staff, we were able to develop a coverage team that not only allowed students to learn remotely from the building, but

also gave our team flexibility and reduced our level of exposure to COVID-19 during the surge.

As the surge dwindled, our optimism grew about finally starting live, in-person instruction. We set a date: September 7th. With each passing day, our excitement for a return to normalcy grew. At the same time, a literal hurricane was brewing. We planned and watched; we confirmed schedules by day and tracked weather patterns by night. It became evident that we could not avoid this impending storm, Hurricane Ida, and thus we shifted into a weather-related lockdown. After school, we removed items from exterior rooms that would be subject to hurricane winds. We bolted down items that could become projectiles. We sent students home with computers and books, hoping that there would be only a momentary delay in instruction. Again, God must have had a knee-slapping, gut-wrenching laugh at this scene. We would not be able to resume school for almost a month due to widespread power outages. Our building was particularly vulnerable to the storm because it was being remodeled. As everyone slowly returned from evacuation, we learned the true level of the school's destruction. We would not be back in our home facility for the remainder of the semester. Additionally, one of our newly hired adjuncts resigned as the combination of COVID-19 and evacuation took a toll on her personal life. In the time that we were evacuated, every member of her family contracted COVID-19, and some eventually succumbed to the virus. Our students had now lost their second instructor for the same course.

Hurricane Ida was the second-most destructive hurricane to hit New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina, with which it coincidentally shares an anniversary. Many in our community had experienced Katrina; a few students were even born the year Katrina made landfall. It was ironic as I thought back to packing up to leave. One of the high school teachers in our shared building was praying in her room. When she came out, she caught my eye and said, "I pray that we have a building to come back to. After Katrina, we didn't see this school for years." We briefly chatted about the building's historical and cultural significance and I began to understand the Ninth Ward motto, "Ninth Ward versus Everybody," a little better. Through Katrina's destruction, New Orleans also lost its public education system. A myriad of charter networks now carve out the educational landscape in the city. It was then that I realized my colleague's prayers weren't solely about the building, but rather about the educational structure, community, and the resilience needed to come back from the rubble again.

The trauma we revisited because of this storm forced us to slow down and change course. We could not solely focus on academics as our faculty, staff, and students were returning from evacuation and encountering hurricane damage for the first time. BECNO stepped up to this challenge. We activated our Student Leadership Council to collect a list of high-demand items that we could provide as recovery assistance. We received a great response from the Bard Early College network to help get shelf-stable food, water, and emergency supplies to

families in need. We then focused on taking inventory of instructional materials both in the building and those taken home by faculty and students. It was not a shock that many books and materials were lost to the storm. We packed up the few supplies we could from our weather-damaged building and relocated to a high school across town. This would be our temporary shelter while our home building underwent renovation.

Again, we instituted a soft remote start; however, this time we focused on the social and emotional needs of our students. We developed two days of trauma-informed instruction that included wellness breaks, empathy circles, and mindfulness practices. We avoided any talk about classwork, assignments, midterms —anything academic. We created a space for our community to return to, a place to honor the feelings that were being repressed or unspoken as we all rebuilt from the ground up. Students responded well to this soft re-start. Many noted it was nice to have an opportunity to check in with their peers and the staff. They appreciated the chance to review the material taught in August, as the month off surely made immediate recall difficult. Moreover, they began to feel a sense of belonging and community as we all pushed in to help get materials, supplies, and resources to those most impacted by the storm.

With that, we set a date to launch a new hybrid model of instruction. We invited students who could join us in person to our temporary building on October 14th. Those who were not able to attend in person were allowed to continue remote instruction. Indeed, the move across town presented many barriers for a good portion of our students. Transportation, family support and obligations, and the steadiness of COVID-19 kept many students from ever seeing our temporary location. Nevertheless, they persisted; showing up on camera every day, ready to learn and relieved to finally reap the benefits of our newly designed schedule.

If there was one thing we were keenly aware of at the beginning of this new academic year, it was the need for more contact time between students and instructors. When assigned to build the fall schedule, I was asked to include an additional hour of guided instruction for our core courses: math, sciences, and world languages. We also were cementing a new degree-granting partnership with two other high schools that requested a US History course as part of the agreement. This resulted in each of these courses having workshop time once a week for the semester. During the workshops, instructors would lead students through practical applications of course content so that the material became more salient. In the wake of Hurricane Ida, and after having a full year and a half of remote learning, students struggled to remain focused for the entirety of the hour and a half courses and many age-appropriate critical thinking and problem solving skills were delayed. In fact, many students commented that returning to school after having not been in a building since middle school was quite difficult. We found ourselves having to reteach many basic elements of Algebra 1 and Algebra 2. Writing skills reflected years of social media posting with its wanton disregard for capitalization, punctuation, or even structure. Not only did they have academic gaps, but students also had

social and developmental gaps, with many noting they had difficulty engaging in live social interactions with peers. They had forgotten how to sustain verbal conversations, opting to text or tag on social media while sitting right next to the recipient.

When I revealed these new schedules, they were quite possibly the most divisive idea I presented to my new colleagues. During the COVID-19 year, classes met once a week online for one hour with additional compulsory, asynchronous work. The new schedule had classes meet either three times a week for an hour or twice a week for an hour and a half. Most classes had a third meeting designated as a “lab” or “workshop.” A few contentious Zoom feedback sessions, emails about past practices, and meeting requests to further discuss this taught me all I needed to know about my new co-workers’ advocacy. I learned that my colleagues were confident in their pushback and comfortable calling me to the mat about items they were passionate about. As we pushed forward with hybrid instruction in a formerly abandoned high school, the schedule was doing its job. It was creating space to build up hard and soft skills needed to be successful. It was allowing missed instructional time to be folded into pre-planned syllabi. It was accommodating for losses created by having a month off from school due to evacuation. Most importantly, it was allowing our faculty and staff opportunities to grow academic, social, and emotional skills, needs that were made visible as we resumed some sort of normalcy.

As we now begin our spring semester, I look back on how much we’ve grown as a community since I became a part of this family. Although we prefer live, in-person instruction, we respect that natural forces compel us to use technology to best navigate the safety concerns and needs of our faculty, staff, and students. We were able to find yet another adjunct instructor to fill in for the one that Ida and COVID-19 had taken from us, keeping our students on track for their Associates Degree. We reformatted our workshops into lab spaces within our “Learning Commons” pilot for this semester, further ensuring more contact time with faculty. We also trained student leaders as peer tutors. Moreover, we were smart enough to orient this semester around wellness. “Wellness Wednesday” programming allows our faculty to rotate into workshops such as Time Management and Study Skills and Self-Care and Wellness Practices. These spaces teach college access and personal development skills holistically and demonstrate a more well-rounded view of our instructors. We start and end each day with check-in and check-out community building exercises to welcome our formerly remote learners into the community that they had only seen through a screen the previous semester. However, I argue that the most important takeaway we have from our fall experience is that we all are resilient, passionate, dedicated, and persistent. We remain student-success focused and resolute in our commitment to prepare students for their next four year experience. We, the Bard Early College network, are a family, undaunted and undeterred.

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