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05/12/2021

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As colleges around the nation faced unprecedented challenges switching to remote teaching and learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Utah State University had an edge. As a national leader in innovative online and broadcast education, USU leveraged its experience to adapt quickly and continue to serve students with relatively minimal disruption. A key part of USU’s responsibility is educational delivery to its students across the Statewide Campuses system, which includes and operates 31 locations across Utah.

“Our mission as a public land-grant institution is to serve our students by providing access to classes and other educational experiences in the state,” said Larry Smith, Vice President of Statewide Campuses. “With the infrastructure and resources we have in place throughout much of the state we were able to pivot quickly to continue supporting our students during these times of adversity.”

While finances were tough for some students, USU Statewide Campuses provided $121,512 in needs-based scholarships to help students who were impacted financially by COVID to help them continue their education. It also responded with adaptive, short-term certificates through the Learn and Work in Utah initiative in partnership with the Utah Governor’s Office of Economic Development. Several campuses used COVID CARES funding to purchase loaner laptops for students so they could meet the demands of classes while in their virtual setting.

Most campuses in the Statewide system experienced enrollment increases, including one that had an enrollment growth of 58%, due to students wanting to stay close to home. As Utah’s land grant institution, USU provides students with the benefit of changing campus location at any time as circumstances change through its statewide system. If a student attending another institution desired to move back closer to home, they would need to either take online classes or transfer to another institution entirely. Students from across the state shared their elation that USU allowed them to stay close to home but continue their education with opportunities to return to other campuses later.

As students returned to their hometowns across Utah, they were able to access virtual events and local resources, including testing, Wi-Fi, laptops and other student support services at their local statewide campus locations. As the pandemic continues, USU is still committed to providing in-person and virtual wellness services, involvement opportunities, and academic support to all students. For updates on current statuses of student services on a semester-by-semester basis, visit usu.edu/ready/2021.

Some students uploaded coursework from the parking lots, while others expressed appreciation for clean, quiet, “safe” spaces to focus on their studies outside of their home. To support their well-being, counseling was provided virtually along with workshops. To keep students on track, advising sessions moved to Zoom and student associations created new virtual events.

Through the Statewide Faculty-to-Student Mentor Program, 140 students received one-on-one support by a local faculty member in fall 2020 through spring 2021. The pursuit of excellence is notable with six Statewide Campuses faculty receiving awards from their respective colleges. One horticulture lecturer at USU Salt Lake utilized a GoPro to bring the greenhouse to her students so they could monitor their progress and complete their course. A welding instructor at USU Moab was even able to provide a virtual welding workshop for students, using virtual reality technology to provide training.

“The pandemic provided an opportunity for us to innovate and advance our instructional best practices to respond to student’s needs during an extremely demanding time,” said Rich Etchberger, Vice Provost of Statewide Campuses. “Our faculty were already experienced in
teaching and engaging students remotely through our web broadcast system and those interactions were expanded and enhanced with more interactions with students and opportunities for more student expression in the classroom."

Not only did students enjoy the shift but a majority of Statewide Campuses faculty welcomed the shift that elevated pedagogy with the new technology. Academic and Instructional Services (AIS) and Statewide Campuses had been exploring the future of broadcast courses with new technologies available prior to the pandemic but have now developed a task force dedicated to improving course delivery.

For the safety of our students and faculty, we implemented extremely flexible face-to-face and virtual teaching and learning environments. "Understanding that flexibility does not necessarily equate to quality, a task force is currently assessing educational delivery types that give USU students a paramount educational experience no matter where they are physically located," said John Louviere, Executive Director of AIS.

While new course technologies were introduced, other students were on the frontlines getting hands-on experiences. Students in nursing programs throughout the state adapted to new clinical requirements, helped support COVID-19 testing services, and now vaccination efforts. As hospitals need more staff, Aggie nurses throughout the state are helping fill that gap.

“I never would have guessed that while attending RN school I would be participating in simulations in caring for a COVID-19 patient. It hit me that our class is the first COVID trained nurses,” explained Makenzie Breitenbach, a Uintah Basin Class of 2021 associate of applied science in nursing graduate. “I have been nurse for over 10 years and my whole nursing career has been revolutionized by the COVID-19 pandemic. A brand-new illness that is poorly understood, changes to treatment every day, and of course huge emotional toll in losing most of our hospitalized patients has been a huge learning experience.”

Area healthcare workers in Moab utilized USU Moab Community Health Worker (CHW) training as they continue fighting the pandemic. Other statewide nursing programs also produced graduates and trainings for the community healthcare workers to have the latest training and instruction available. USU Statewide nursing graduates are now on the front lines responding to COVID across the state. Led by USU Blanding alumni and faculty, nursing graduates were also instrumental in fighting COVID and administering vaccines in the Navajo Nation area which was hard-hit by the pandemic’s initial onset.

To learn more about USU’s land grant mission and Statewide Campuses and visit statewide.usu.edu.

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