FLCF2FtoOnline

Fort Lewis College Goes Online

Prologue

In mid March 2020 about 5300 institutions of higher learning in the U.S encountered a dialectical date—a point in time at which its past and future were clearly separated. Prior to that date colleges and universities conducted most of their functions—teaching, learning, administrating—on a campus. With the invasion of the coronavirus and the threat of Covid-19, however, virtually everything all of these institutions did had to go online. Most had to close their campuses (or severely restrict their on campus activities), abandon face-to-face learning, and convert to remote education. Some made these transitions effectively. Others struggled.

In September 1958 a new TV show*, The Naked City*, was launched. Each program ended with the fabled lines: “There are eight million stories in the naked city. This has been one of them." All of the 5300 institutions of higher learning also have a story to tell about how they responded to the Covid-19 crisis. This is one of them.

The Fort Lewis College Story

[Hawk Tank](https://www.fortlewis.edu/fort-lewis-college-news/videos/news-detail/flc-hawk-tank-competition-will-conclude-virtually) is a business plan competition conducted by Fort Lewis College in Durango, CO.  The final round of the 2020 competition featured four teams in the high school track, six in the recent alumni track, and five in the current college track. When the campus was closed about March 11 the organizers scrambled to go virtual so that the final round of competition could still be conducted. On April 18, 2020 the competition was successfully held on schedule on Zoom. This meant that [21 participants](https://www.fortlewis.edu/fort-lewis-college-news/people/people-detail) representing the 15 teams also had to go online to finish their work and prepare their final presentations for the panels of judges. They succeeded. But to do this many had to make exceptional efforts. A finalist in the recent alumni track, Paige Belinte, graduated in 2016 with a degree in Art. She lives on the Navajo reservation and works as a Dine Culture, Language & Indigenous Wellness Teacher and is the owner of SugarBuffalo Skateboarding. A weekend curfew was in force during the Hawk Tank competition. Belinte did not have a home Internet connection. Consequently she could not make her business pitch on Zoom. So, after hours earlier in the week at her office she recorded a video of her presentation. Her video was played through Zoom by the event organizers. Then Belinte answered the judges' questions by cell phone. With dedicated participants under the leadership of Professors Michael Valdez and Lorraine Taylor the organizers were able to deliver the competition online and on time.

On Thursday April 23, 2020 FLC held its annual Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities Symposium as originally scheduled. However, this time it was held online. All undergraduate students at FLC are encouraged to conduct original research projects. They design their own projects or work with faculty members on theirs. In any event each student works directly with one or more faculty member advisors. The symposium is the students’ opportunity to showcase their work. The educational objective is multifaceted: to develop creativity, problem-solving and analysis capabilities, communication skills, and independent thought. Meeting these objectives is central to FLC’s commitment to experiential learning and its overall educational mission. When the campus was shut down on March 11 the symposium that was previously held in person on campus was threaten. In response a group of faculty led by Professor Missy Thompson, Coordinator of Undergraduate Research, and Provost Cheryl Nixon worked feverishly to redesign and reconfigure the conduct of the symposium so that it could be offered virtually but, importantly, still meet the original schedule. On April 23 a total of 100 students presented a mix of individual and group projects. Most were seniors presenting capstone projects. Many other students and some faculty and community members participated by attending via Zoom. To pull this off faculty mentors worked actively to help their students make the transition to online and yet still maintain their commitment to professionalism with respect to oral and poster presentations. Among the diverse topics students presented were: Reincarnated Navajo Voice, History of Arroyo-cutting on the Colorado Plateau, Asectics of Hawaiian Hula, Solar Initiatives on the Navajo Nation, Investigation of Allelopathic Chemicals by GC-MS and Developing a Lab Testing Protocol to Assess Ski Mountaineering Performance. When the symposium was completed community members as well as students, faculty and staff were encouraged to “Drop in [online] any time 10 a.m. – 3 p.m. to view student’s posters and watch presentations on demand.”

(<https://www.fortlewis.edu/academics/undergraduate-research/undergraduate-research-creative-activities-symposium>)

These are just two examples of the efforts made by the entire FLC community under the leadership of Tom Stritikus who at the time was less than two years into his presidency. FLC is a public institution founded in 1911 that has experienced many transitions. Due to its unique origins as a military fort the school was first turned into an Indian boarding school and later into a state public school. The state of Colorado still honors a 1911 mandate to provide tuition-free education for any qualified Native Americans. FLC currently awards approximately 16% of the baccalaureate degrees earned by Native American students in the nation. In the 1930’s FLC became a two-year college. In 1948 it expanded to become Fort Lewis A&M. In 1956 the college moved to its current 362-acre location on top of Reservoir Hill overlooking Durango. FLC became a four-year institution and awarded its first baccalaureate degrees in 1964. In 1994 the school’s mascot became the Skyhawks and thus inspired the sobriquet Hawk Tank. In 1995 FLC joined the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges. It became independent from the Colorado State University system in 2002 and in 2005 FLC was made a “selective” college by the state legislature. Each of these transitions was lead by a different president. The coronavirus pandemic forced the school to embark a new transition while it was in fact in the midst of another transition.

In November 2018 President Stritikus had announced a new strategic plan for FLC. This plan was conceived to make the college more responsive to community needs and provide its students with “more relevant avenues of intellectual pursuit.” The plan focused on four major areas: Students at the Center, Community Responsiveness, Knowledge in Action, and Systems to Facilitate Success. The Board approved the plan and Stritikus was urged to implement it immediately. Between November 2018 and March 11, 2020 FLC had made considerable progress in redirecting its activities to accomplish the objectives of the new plan. But, then the pandemic hit. Everything changed. Central to their new duties president Stritikus and Provost Cheryl Nixon had to transition the school’s activities to online.

FLC had a diverse undergraduate student body of about 3300 students in March 2020 when it was called upon to respond to the pandemic. According the *DataUSA* its composition at the time was: 48.4% White, 25.2% American Indian or Alaska Native, 11% Hispanic or Latino, 8.64% Two or More Races, 1.11% Black or African American, 0.63% Asian, and 0.15% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders. This diversity inspired President Stritikus to adopt a motto: Diversity, Equity, Inclusion.

Immediately preceding the COVID-19 pandemic, FLC had about 200 full time equivalent faculty and 260 FTE staff. All totaled this meant that the about 3760 individuals had to work together to make the transition to online. At the time FLC offered only a modest number of online courses. So, the faculty was encouraged to follow a version of a three-pronged approach: Develop a strategy for modifying your face-to-face assignments and assessments for remote delivery. Access the resources, such as Canvas, that are available on the “Distance Education Course Design” website. Use Zoom for both live class meetings and virtual office hours.

By adopting this approach an energized faculty converted 700 classes to online in 5 days. About 90 classes are being developed to offer online for the summer 2020 session.

Here is one student in the Center for Southwest Studies recollection of her experience:

“My transition to online classes has been mostly great. I don’t prefer the online setting, but I have wonderful, experienced professors. Not only did they set everything up smoothly, but they also walked all of us students through the rest of the semester. I mostly miss campus because I miss all the other students. I miss seeing my friends, my classmates, and just a lot of people in general. I already can’t wait to be back."

It is anticipated that students will be allowed to return to the campus in the fall but under a substantial set of new safe practices such as social distancing, wearing masks where appropriate, etc. Stritikus is requiring that the school’s original mission be maintained while realizing that its operations, norms and rules will be substantially and forever changed. In the near future some of FLC’s activities and courses (like Chemistry and other courses that require labs) will return to primary face-to-face, others may remain totally online, but many will emerge with new models such as “hybrid” in which students spend some time on campus and some online or “mixed” in which some of the students in a class will attend on campus while others remain online. There will be other models. The time is ripe for innovation.