

## **Teaching about Pandemics during a Pandemic**

In January 2021, the coronavirus has been with us for just over a year, with unprecedented societal changes. Our vernacular has shifted to readily identify with phrases of flatten-the-curve, quarantine, social distancing, control the surge, essential workers, PPE, universal precautions, contact tracing, and a daily inundation of information through various channels-all with a level of skepticism, uncertainty, fear, anxiety and to a degree hope with new science and vaccinations coming to the forefront.

Very few of us alive today have lived through a pandemic, let alone looked back at historical ones to determine if the response and recovery efforts have significantly changed over time. In mid-2020, a proposal was submitted to the College of Architecture to teach such a course, from a planning perspective. The proposal was approved for a class entitled Pandemic Times: Past and Future. The course was a condensed 3-week, 3-credit, fully-online opportunity in the Community and Regional Planning Program (MCRP). For several months the instructor engaged on a journey of hyper-vigilance on coronavirus news and entered the process of course development from a background in biological sciences and a degree in planning. A significant amount of time was spent developing a course that would be broad enough to appeal to non-majors, yet specific enough to allow future professional planners to learn processes and policies to support public health planning in the future. I envisioned a joint-venture on a journey to explore aspects of the 1918 “forgotten” Spanish Flu pandemic that erupted during World War I and killed one in three of the planet’s population or approximately 500 Million. I never expected the personal impact that came as the instructor of the course. A total of 15 unique, hardworking, diverse group of undergraduate and graduate students with experience in programs of Business, Teaching, Architecture, Interior Design, and Planning signed up for the course. Some were local and others were from out-of-state or international students that outperformed my wildest expectations.

My first announcement to the class was that I found it strange to teach a class “on a pandemic, during a pandemic” but that I was strangely excited about what we would learn as a class together. I knew all of us would be challenged and inspired looking at the historical perspective and forward simultaneously. First, through Laura Spinney’s book entitled, “The Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How it Changed the World, and second, through a formal textbook written by Bruce Clements and Julie Ann P. Casini, entitled Disasters and Public Health Planning and Response (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.).

As part of course development and wanting to provide a current and real-world perspective to the students; I initially reached out to an inundated Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to see if we could get a guest speaker from their Speaker’s Bureau to speak on COVID-19. As fate would have it, the result turned out better than expected after receiving an unsurprising “no, not at this time.”

Following this response, I hesitantly asked for support from an overworked colleague-Dr. Ali S. Kahn, the Dean of College of Public Health at UNMC. My hesitancy was related to the long list of credentials and experience of Dr. Kahn, as he is a former U.S. Assistant Surgeon General, a past Director of the Office of Public Health Preparedness Response, now a Dean at UNMC, an author of a book and an expert with direct experience involving the Ebola virus response and other public health emergencies. My question was simple; would he be willing to help support a new instructor with a class presentation on COVID-19? An immediate resounding “yes” came shortly thereafter and I was ecstatic for all of us to learn from such a high-ranking expert in the field. Additional speaker requests were made on the urging of the Planning Program Chair, Dr. Zhenghong Tang, for a more-rounded panel.

At midterm, the course had covered topics on personal student experiences with COVID-19, an introduction to planning, setting the Historical Stage from policies, to plagues affecting humankind up to the time of the Spanish Flu in 1918 and beyond. We discussed political climates, misinformation, and conditions contributing to the spread of viruses across the globe from historic times to current day, provided a basic background on virus biology and seasonal influenza, discussed planning considerations at-risk populations, and mental health.

On January 13, 2021 from 6-7:30 PM in a discussion entitled: Frontline Panel: Demystifying Coronavirus and Recovery Planning, we were joined by Mr. Leon Milobar, Ms. Heidi Wheeler and Dr. Kahn. Mr. Leon Milobar is the District Director for the Small Business Administration (SBA) based in Omaha, Nebraska. Ms. Heidi Wheeler, also has ties to UNMC with a background in Preparedness and Response.

She serves as the Associate Director of the Southwest Public Health Department (SWPHD). The SWPHD serves the community of McCook and surrounding rural areas. These professionals lent their insight and expertise in 20-minute presentations related to their respective areas. Mr. Milobar taught the class about the Paycheck Protection Program currently underway with significant Nebraska lender involvement; distributing over 94 billion dollars in funding due to COVID-19 pandemic noting “economic support is vital toward recovery, without our help-many more small businesses would have closed.” He shared information on SBA Emergency Injury and Disaster Response Loans that are part of their offices’ everyday economic support and community recovery functions in the wake of a disaster. He also noted how news of various different disasters (tornadoes, civil unrest, wildfires, etc.) are integrated into the SBA decision making and process of utilizing databases and maps to determine where their support programs are expected to be deployed next.

Ms. Heidi Wheeler provided her insights and first-hand experience to the current and historical local pandemic planning process in her local communities. Ms. Wheeler poked holes in the previous planning process stating, “it was really hard to pre-plan for a pandemic, when no one really thought it was a threat” and then saying, “I think we have their attention now and will be much better prepared in the future.” Ms. Wheeler also pointed out issues and solutions implemented toward healthcare workers, space planning, testing, vaccine distribution plans, social inequities, limited staff, and mental health related challenges. She addressed community-based concerns related to quarantine, isolation, long-term care facilities, essential workers, at-risk and non-English speaking populations in her community.

The students provided positive feedback and wrote their mid-terms surrounding the information learned from the Frontline Panel of experts, critically evaluating and assimilating what they feel is necessary for future consideration to the built environment, architecture, interior design, business, economics, healthcare workers, teaching and planners in the future.

As we closed out the course, finals were not constrained to a traditional research paper, although it was provided as an option. Many students exercised their creative license toward their finals and developed recorded presentations, videos, outreach materials and community pictorial representations of COVID-19 through 2020.

Topics covered by the students ranged from a comparison of high-level initial governmental and healthcare facility response to the COVID-19 outbreak in China, New Zealand, and Oman, Saudi Arabia. Another student took a deeper dive into research on the HIV/AIDS epidemic that has taken the lives of over 32Million to-date, noting that we are still currently battling with plans by the Biden Administration

to eradicate this disease by 2035. The City of Lincoln and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln history as it related to the Spanish Flu was not left out of the equation. A final paper noted that many houses along 12<sup>th</sup> street were turned into infirmaries during the Spanish Flu pandemic, Husker football was cancelled until Thanksgiving Day, (resulting in a tie with Notre Dame 0-0), school was closed, and many of our young men had traveled in WWI to fight for our country. Similarities exist between the confusion and response to a pandemic outbreak; then and now. A student created a youtube video citing that no matter the outbreak, disease or illness; basic universal precautions such as wearing masks, washing hands, and socially distancing are part of the “Swiss-cheese” multi-layered approach to preventing the spread of *any* virus, saves lives and protects others from exposure or getting sick.

In three short weeks, the students created a sense of community through course discussions and covered course material with a voracious appetite and desire to make a difference. They critically evaluated the future as new information developed on COVID-19, community resilience and vaccine distribution. Between the panel and the students, I am humbled and grateful. Collectively they taught me more than I ever expected to learn. For many individuals and communities alike, the impact of COVID-19 will never be forgotten-unlike the Spanish Flu. We have a responsibility to tell and keep the story alive for generations to come, to learn, to prepare, and adapt to a future event that will inevitably come again.

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