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Pandemic could reshape health care education in Western New York

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Though the way health care students are taught has been a challenge in many cases, the academic world is seeing a bright side that may change how education looks far beyond the pandemic.

Learning opportunities have been created, technology is used differently and there are new real-world examples that have become learning tools.

Adjusting learning methods and topics



JOED VIERA
Canisus College PA students work on a high fidelity mannequin during their diagnostic medicine class.

In Canisius College's physician assistant studies graduate program, there are benefits to hybrid learning but the challenge lies in making sure students get hands-on training that includes interviewing and examining patients and performing procedures, according to program director Aimee Larson. Students spend nearly half of learning time doing hands-on work.

Since the program started in January, Canisius has limited the cohort to 30 students with synchronous online discussions during the first half of the week and in-person training and practice the second half. Larson said the college expects to do the summer semester fully in-person.

For the hands-on training, physician assistant students use a simulation lab with mannequins whose responses to procedures can be controlled via laptop and trainers. For certain trainings, the students can practice on themselves, each other, pre-health students and sometimes paid actors.

By front-loading the first half of the week with lectures and the second half with hands-on learning, Larson said this technique works better than scattering the in-person trainings throughout the week. This way students learn from lecture and then put into hands-on practice.

Even when lecture can be in-person as well, she said the classroom and then training setup will work best.

Though the core curriculum for physician assistant students hasn't changed, the program now emphasizes telemedicine. Students will get a module on telemedicine visits, technology and ethical and legal scenarios, Larson said.

The college is working on creating experiences for students to observe telemedicine in action in a clinical setting before starting clinical training.

The University at Buffalo's undergraduate public health programs' classes varied in the spring semester. The majority were remote, a mix of asynchronous and synchronous classes. For the upcoming fall semester, most classes will

have an in-person component, whether it's hybrid or fully on-campus, according to Dr. [Sarahmona Przybyla](#), assistant dean, director of undergraduate public health programs.

Though public health and the Covid-19 crisis go hand in hand, she said pandemic fatigue trickles into the classroom. Instructors incorporate pandemic-related topics like the efficacy of vaccines and sometimes use Covid-19 as a real-life example, but public health spans beyond infectious diseases and educators want the students to know that.

The core lessons for UB's program also haven't changed during the health crisis, but electives such as pathogens, prevention and controversy have increased in popularity. Przybyla designed a new elective course for fall 2020 on public health preparedness and response. She thought she'd get 20 to 30 students but ended up with about 100.

The future of education

Dr. [Allyson Backstrom](#), director of Canisius' pre-medical center, started looking for opportunities during the pandemic for pre-health students to engage with the community when all activities were canceled.

Her search led to Canisius partnering with the Erie Niagara Area Health Education Center, KeyBank and First Niagara Foundation to relaunch the Emerging Health Scholars Program to give high school students in pre-health programs the chance to learn online about career pathways.

The program, which relaunched in December, includes high school and college students virtually breaking into small groups for mentoring, activities and labs for which kits are sent to students, Backstrom, co-director of the program, said.

She is looking forward to in-person labs so students can use Canisius' teaching facilities and simulation center.

Besides new learning opportunities, [Gary Smith](#), [Trocaire College](#) vice president of innovation and workforce

development, said the Covid-19 crisis has forced many to use technology that they previously weren't comfortable using.

Pre-pandemic, students were looking into digital programs and classes, he said. The health crisis sped up that trend.

Trocaire had started to bolster its strategic focus on online learning before the pandemic and hired instructors to design online academic and workforce development programs. Because of this team, when the pandemic hit and many classes moved online, Trocaire "wasn't starting from scratch," he said.

Smith said students and faculty are rethinking learning modalities.

"We're trying to use this experience of the pandemic," he said, "to evaluate how we can better serve students."

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