

Advocating for Adjuncts During COVID-19

Teresa Grettano

In fall 2020, amid COVID lockdown and without a vaccine, The University of Scranton opened on-campus housing and delivered courses in five tiers ranging from fully remote (online) to fully face-to-face. Scranton is a medium-sized, Catholic, Jesuit university in northeastern Pennsylvania that serves about 4,000 undergraduates. Our first-year writing (FYW) program delivers ~70 sections of courses a year taught by ~15 instructors, 85% of whom are contingent faculty, most of whom are part-time (PT) instructors, and many of whom teach at other institutions. Faculty submitted their preferred mode of delivery for provost-level administrative review. In theory, the process hoped to honor faculty autonomy; in practice, the precarity and logistics of contingent faculty employment were not considered.¹ As then-director of FYW, I advocated to keep all FYW courses at fully-remote delivery for 2020–21.

In this reflective piece, I chronologically narrate the ways in which I advocated for our faculty: brainstorming options before modes were announced, approaching administration about authority and decision-making, consulting with instructors, intervening on their behalf when systems and procedures did not consider their positions, arguing to administration to go fully remote, and collaborating with the registrar to do so. I also recount ways I supported faculty remotely through one-on-one consultation, faculty development, and the creation of new programmatic guidelines.

This piece serves as a case study in advocacy and support for contingent faculty in times of crisis. Crises often make systemic injustices more evident, and the vulnerability of those in insecure positions often is not only highlighted but worsened by the crisis. Such was the case at Scranton and throughout much of academia, where even a well-meaning administration did not recognize the precariousness of the contingent labor on which many of our FYW programs depend. I felt ethically it was my responsibility to advocate for my instructors.²

SPRING 2020: INITIAL LOCK-DOWN

Like other institutions, Scranton went on “temporary” lock-down, announcing on March 11 that our spring break would be extended a week so that faculty could prepare for emergency remote instruction, to be delivered

from March 30 to April 14.³ By March 27, we were informed we would not return to campus for the rest of spring 2020.

When lock-down initially began, I was concerned about our students' well-being, as well as my cadre of instructors having to juggle different situations at different institutions with added family needs and the anxiety of the pandemic. From March 19–22, I met with each instructor by video or phone to adjust collaboratively expectations, schedules, and assignments to fit our crisis environment and revise their courses for the rest of the semester.

Instructors were at different points in their schedules with a variety of assignments still planned. My goal was to help streamline the rest of the semester for the students and instructors while maintaining the integrity of the program. I recognized that everyone was in crisis mode, and I wanted to make our FYW classes spaces for empathy, relief, and care. Our guiding question was, "What more do your students need to produce in order for you to assess if they are meeting the learning outcomes for the course?" Each of the 15 instructors and I mapped an individualized plan for their courses, and I checked in with them weekly to discuss and adjust the plan. As difficult as the semester was, most of our students successfully completed their courses, and faculty were grateful for the easing of pressure to teach as if nothing had changed.

SUMMER 2020: COVID PROTOCOLS

I started brainstorming fall 2020 course delivery prior to the announcement of the university-wide options. Since there was no precedent for this kind of crisis, I wanted to (1) shape the decision-making process, and (2) alert the provost that I would be involved even if not invited officially. I made sure to do so respectfully but with the evidence needed to be successful.

Early in May 2020, I alerted our provost to the possibility of hybrid teaching for the FYW program, that we could meet with half our students once a week, the other half another day a week, and then shift to remote instruction for another meeting. He commended my flexibility and proactive thinking and assured me the option would be kept in mind. That option was never actualized, though. Once the university announced the options for fall 2020 COVID instruction around July 1, I advocated to shift the entire FYW program to emergency remote instruction.

FALL 2020: THE FYW DIRECTOR RESPONSE

While establishing masking and social distancing mandates, classroom seating maps, and cleaning protocols, the university offered faculty five delivery options for fall 2020 courses:

1. Fully Face-to-Face (F2F): Faculty and students meet traditionally F2F in classrooms, masked and socially distanced, with no remote options for instruction guaranteed.
2. Rotational F2F and A/Synchronous Viewing: Faculty meet with half the students F2F while the other half are synchronously on Zoom or accessing course material asynchronously; the groups rotate delivery every other class meeting. Students not meeting F2F are not expected to interact during class.
3. F2F Classes with A/Synchronous Viewing for Quarantined Students: Faculty and students meet mostly F2F, but sick students are provided remote access to class without the expectation of interaction.
4. Hybrid F2F and Synchronous Remote Instruction: Faculty meet with half the students F2F while the other half are synchronously on Zoom and expected to interact for the entire semester.
5. Fully Remote: Classes meet online synchronously through Zoom and on our Learning Management System. No in-person meetings are held.

The administration stressed faculty preference was their first consideration but noted other factors like classroom space and pedagogy would affect final decisions. While I commended and shared the university's commitment to faculty autonomy, I was concerned that contingent faculty would not only be overwhelmed by the choices, but also would not be comfortable requesting their preferred delivery mode for fear of job security. I felt I needed to advocate for them.

I asked instructors not to respond to the university's request for delivery preference while I remained in conversation with the provost so that the administration would not receive conflicting or confusing information, and instructors would not make themselves vulnerable in choosing a delivery method that countered what I was advocating for or one that was not preferred by the administration. I made my initial argument to the provost via email based on the following points:

- **Program Continuity:** I argued that to have a significant number of sections delivered differently disrupts the continuity of the program, student learning, and student experience.

- **Faculty Development:** I explained the FYW program shifted to emergency remote learning well in spring and that I had met with each instructor individually to revise their courses and pedagogy.

Moving forward from the shift to emergency remote learning and preparing for the possibility of fall 2020 remote instruction, I procured funding from the College of Arts & Sciences (CAS) dean's office to provide Darby and Lang's *Small Teaching Online* to our instructors. Over the summer, we convened three 90-minute Zoom meetings to discuss how to apply the suggestions in the text to our courses.

I explained that we were in the process of collaboratively developing a FYW program Zoom Etiquette Guide to communicate expectations for remote instruction, covering issues like the use of cameras and student privacy, student backgrounds and ethos-/community-building, productive and distracting uses of the chat function, and other issues.⁴

Finally, I alerted the provost to the 40 years of online writing pedagogy scholarship to assure him there were resources to access to improve online instruction if necessary.

Faculty Preference and the Ethics of Adjunct Dependency

I indicated that of the 37 sections of FYW scheduled for all 2020, seven would be taught by FT faculty, an 81% adjunct dependency for the program. I reminded the provost that adjunct instructors earn \$2,500–\$3,000 per course without health insurance benefits, and that it would be unethical to ask them to risk their health for little in return. I also noted that many of these instructors teach at other institutions, and mixing exposure across campuses would undermine safety protocols.

I surveyed the faculty anonymously, asking for their (one) preference among three options for delivery: F2F, hybrid, or fully remote. Responses were mixed in the first survey with about half favoring remote instruction, reinforcing my concern for program continuity. Questions by PT faculty also made me aware some instructors were hesitating answering even the anonymous survey candidly for fear of disappointing me or the administration.

Classroom Space

The university had not yet released the social distance capacity for classrooms, so I speculated that if student capacity for our FYW classrooms remained at the 18-student cap, then allowing FYW to go remote would free up classroom space for first-year seminar (FYS) courses.⁵ If the social

distance capacity in these rooms was lower, then delivering FYW remotely solves a space problem for 37 sections of courses.

My initial email to the provost was met with gratitude and understanding. He stressed his concern for faculty preferences, though, and that he wanted to further investigate the classroom space issues. I responded by thanking him for his commitment to faculty autonomy, indicating that I would check with my instructors to learn how strong their preferences were.

A second survey asked instructors one question—if they were opposed to remote instruction in the fall—and almost all said they were not. Before I could deliver these results to the provost, I received a phone call from the registrar on Saturday, July 18, at 8:30am informing me that classroom space for FYW was limited and asking if I preferred courses be taught through the rotating hybrid model or remotely. We made the decision to move the entire program to remote delivery. I informed the provost via email, and he was pleased with the decision. So were my instructors. We continued remote faculty development and morale meetings throughout fall 2020, and aside from addressing excessive student absences, things ran relatively smoothly.⁶

SPRING 2021: MORE ADVOCACY FOR ADJUNCTS

On September 12, 2020, the provost messaged university faculty commending us on our teaching through spring and summer 2020 and alerting us that while no campuswide decision had been made about course delivery for spring 2021, an updated system for requests was launched. Because FYW courses are not staffed with PT faculty until after registration, PT faculty were not on the schedule yet for spring 2021 and subsequently did not receive the provost's email, nor were they granted access to the new system. Once again, I found myself explaining to administration the logistics of contingent faculty labor and advocating for adjuncts.

On September 23, I emailed the provost and registrar to explain that PT faculty had not received the email, that I had forwarded it to them in case they needed to update their health information, and that I took this opportunity to survey them about their preferences for spring 2021 delivery. All preferred remote delivery, so I informed the administrators that if there was not a campuswide return to F2F teaching in spring 2021, I wanted FYW to be taught remotely again. I was determined to keep as much stability for our instructors as possible, as well as to utilize the processes and pedagogy we had developed. On September 28, I received an email from the (new) CAS dean asking me to “give a little background on why [I] would like the courses to be delivered remote beyond faculty preference,” so I forwarded

her the email I sent to the provost initially and summarized how the fall 2020 decision was made. On October 2, the dean responded that FYW courses could be totally remote for the spring.

TAKE AWAYS

Like everyone else across the US and the globe, for us at The University of Scranton, the COVID semesters were exhausting, but they offered time to reflect on and revise our personal and professional lives and taught us many lessons about the choices we make in the relationships we cultivate with others. As a WPA, I had to draw my own boundaries but also recognize the privileged position I inhabited. I chose to advocate forcefully but respectfully for the instructors in our program, trusting our administration to have the best interests of our employees and students in mind but appreciating they needed further information to make ethical decisions. Above all, we needed to keep in mind that our instructors are people with lives and concerns of their own, and our institutional systems many times are not designed to treat them with the respect and dignity they deserve. Crises make these injustices more visible and more dire. As a WPA, I am grateful I was in a position to advocate for those more vulnerable than I.

NOTES

1. While this reflection critiques the administration's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to contingent faculty concerns, I want to commend The University of Scranton for our overall response. Short of closing our doors for fall 2020, which would have been financially devastating for our tuition-dependent institution, I think we exceeded expectations for the learning and community environment we were able to provide students. I particularly want to thank our then-Provost Jeff Gingerich and Registrar Julie Ferguson for their willingness to work through decisions collaboratively and respectfully.

2. I must recognize the privileged position I was in during the pandemic. I earned tenure at my institution, and my ethos as WPA was well established. I also am unmarried and without children, so my home life during COVID did not change much, meaning I was not contending for workspace in my home like many faculty across the country were, and I had little more to care for daily than myself. These positions allowed me the security and energy to advocate for instructors in ways other WPAs may not have been able to.

3. Many faculty and our FYW program especially made it a point to differentiate between "online teaching" and "emergency remote instruction"—the former courses designed for online learning environments and the latter not.

4. The FYW program Zoom etiquette guide can be accessed here: <https://tinyurl.com/anrjy3kw>

5. First-year seminar (FYS) is a mandatory course for all first-year students that introduces them to the Catholic, Jesuit mission of the university and aids with their transition to college. All but three of the 50+ FYS sections were taught F2F in fall 2020, a decision made collaboratively by faculty and administration aimed at easing students' transitions back into a classroom space, making their first semester in college as "normal" as possible even with masking and social distancing, and increasing student retention.

6. Much of our faculty development shifted to anti-racist pedagogy because of the murder of George Floyd and the racial (in)justice reckoning of the summer of 2020. We developed a programmatic anti-racist statement and a resource guide for teaching, especially given the first-year read for the incoming class was *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin. The anti-racist statement and resource guide for teaching can be accessed here: <https://tinyurl.com/anrjy3kw>

WORK CITED

Darby, Flower and James M. Lang. *Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes*. Jossey-Bass, 2019.

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