Will I Be Behind? A Grad Perspective in COVID-19
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It's hard for me not to be critical of our field during this pandemic. In less than two weeks, the entire semester has completely changed, revenue has been lost, millions are unemployed, and every American is adapting to the new normal. In my classes, faculty talk about finding the positive in this, reflecting on the wealth of experience that is currently acquirable in crisis management.

“Ryan, think about how much you have to talk about in your interviews, think about the emergencies that will arise in a pandemic, think about the creative new ways to engage with students remotely ...”

All of these are valid points, but how much work is there for me to do in this pandemic? Hard decisions come up in discussions with upper-level administrators, national organizations across the nation are scrambling to put together plans for the rest of the semester, and peers in housing are going through some of the most difficult decisions of their career. While all these strenuous jobs are being handled by tenured professionals, myself and many of my other non-housing peers, are hanging around twiddling our thumbs. Now that students are not directly in front of us, it can be difficult to keep them engaged and supported; old methods aren’t useful in this new setting.

My days have completely changed in the past few weeks. They are taken up by simple busy work, check-ins with students to make sure they’re doing all right, and tasks to help keep my sanity intact. Almost every day, my team and I tell at least one student, “I don’t have an answer.” Until we have answers about the future of the university next semester, many professionals lie in wait as we continue informing the students that information should be coming soon. Many are starting on summer projects and fear they may run out of work to do in the upcoming months. Others may be fearful of their job as the pandemic continues. Do we as a profession roll over and let this happen, or do we take advantage of this and be the ones leading new programs? We should take our programs from hour long speakers and activities and move them to match the average attention span of generation Z and the digital platforms’ student use. It seems easy, but how many of us are truly adapting to this new normal.

So, what does this all mean for graduate students? All of my large projects (Greek Week, Diversity Celebration, exploratory programming, etc.) have been cancelled this semester. All these
opportunities and experiences are gone, and some programs cannot go virtual due to a spending freeze.

Gone are the opportunities to make mistakes and learn from them, and it makes me worried. Isn’t the main reason I’m in graduate school with an assistantship is to live through these experiences under the guiding hand of mentors as they show me their approaches to the profession? In unprecedented times, it’s tough for both supervisors and supervisees to ensure this. Now we are all scrambling to figure out what to do next. Because this is new to both me and my supervisor, I find myself having to find the answers for myself more than ever before. To find these answers, I am talking with students to gain insight by asking them what they need and bringing that to the greater community.

This has also affected my class projects as well. For example, the goals of my assessment class are becoming more lenient as daily student interaction has gone down. The class has changed so much, and the final project was cancelled and replaced with a much simpler activity that offers less than half of the previous challenge. Overall, classes have lost a lot of productivity, and discussions are becoming one sided as awkward silences happen more often. No one is to blame for this as overall motivation is down for obvious reasons. I am thankful for this camaraderie, but I am more worried about its implications in development. Professors are learning from this experience the same way as students, day by day.

This education will be different from first-year graduate students before me; I may have the same classes, but the chance to hone my skills and reflect on different competencies is fading away. My classmates and I have gone from practitioners to spectators, sitting on the edge of our seats as we wait for more information to trickle down. Each week someone else is telling me they’ve lost their summer internship or their practicum hours are decreasing. The academics that should make up the backbone of my practice feel weaker as more news arrives.

Each team meeting I’m a part of includes a comment about how the world of higher education will be changed forever, and I agree. There are some passionate graduate students out there in the world, who are fantastic workers, but what type of experience will they be bringing from the pandemic into their first job? A new professional's fresh perspective is crucial, and they've only glimpsed the old world for a short time. My peers and I have the chance to grab the reins and be part of the change in this profession. So, professionals, what will you do for this population as mentors, supervisors, and teachers? What can you provide that isn’t a link to a webinar going over the same topics?
A year from now, I’m hoping that my cohort and I will be able to physically sit together and talk about everything we learned from the pandemic. Reminiscing not just on the lost experiences, but how everyone adapted to this new world; one where student engagement hit an all-time low, where interactions are virtual, where programming is on Instagram, and supervisors don’t always have the answer.

Talking about other people’s mistakes, being critical of the universities around us, and getting ready for the day when we may be in the shoes of the decision-makers. Some days, it’s hard to find what I’m working for, as my role has changed from a highly involved coach in student’s lives, to the athletic trainer that sits on the sidelines ready to handle emergencies. Either way, I’m still deemed an essential worker and will continue to do the work of one. I’m still meeting with students, ensuring they all know that I’m available for them. They may not need me for my skills with crisis management, or even to help with their chapter, but I'll damn sure be there to talk about how bad social isolation can be, while offering ways to disrupt the mundane and improve the foreseeable future.

As I write this, I recognize that mine is just one experience, and to those graduate students who have a very different life and are drowning in work right now, I feel for you. I cannot relate to that and wish you the best as you get through these difficult times. I also recognize that many FSL staff may be impacted by this pandemic differently than us at Appalachian State University. Some may have had recruitments impacted, and just about all of us are still struggling to support our chapters who have some of their intakes and initiations cancelled until students are back on campus. Many national organizations are in tough situations where chapters may have barriers to staying afloat. There is a lot going on in the community, and I am thankful this has been an easier transition for me than others. I want to support those having a more difficult time with this; however, I want to be critical about my education and that of other graduate students going through the same problems.

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