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UMaine Today

Faculty incorporate COVID-19 content into curricula

June 23, 2020

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic this spring, many University of Maine faculty members helped students navigate the crisis through education. Professors introduced coronavirus-related content into their spring 2020 syllabi so students could delve deeper into the real-time problems it presents.

This fall, even more UMaine classes in multiple academic areas will include COVID-19-related content. Faculty in microbiology, history, philosophy, biochemistry, mathematics, literature and other fields plan to incorporate aspects of COVID-19, or the overall topic of pandemics, into assignments, lectures and discussions. Students will learn about the biology of COVID-19, the cultural effects and demographic impact of the pandemic, how various institutions have responded or adapted, and more.

Melissa Maginnis, who leads the Scientific Advisory Board for the University of Maine System, says while the pandemic has been challenging for students in many ways, it offers opportunities for faculty to use real-world examples when teaching key concepts in various disciplines.

"I am so impressed with the ways that our faculty are incorporating COVID-19 content into their courses," says Maginnis, a UMaine assistant professor of microbiology. "We are living through a time in history that others will write about and study, and our students are eager to learn more about COVID-19 and how this entire pandemic — started by a virus — has completely shaped many aspects of their lives including the social, educational and economic impacts."

In philosophy, professor Kirsten Jacobson and her students will discuss the existential ethics and responses to pandemics, injustices toward vulnerable populations and racial disparities during outbreaks in her Existentialism and Literature course. Derek Michaud, a philosophy lecturer and coordinator of religious studies and Judaic studies, and his students will explore how local Jewish, Christian and Muslim congregations adapted to the pandemic.

Patrick Callaway, a part-time instructor, plans to dedicate part of his Epidemics in American history course to COVID-19. Kristin Vekasi, an assistant professor of political science and policy and international affairs, will task students in her Politics of Media and Censorship class with conducting case studies about the dynamics of censorship and media coverage during the outbreak in a country of their choosing.

When assigning students in her Physical Biochemistry class to create presentations about applying various biophysical techniques to different biomedical issues, Julie Gosse, associate professor of biochemistry, will allow them to select a COVID-19 application for their chosen technique. Seniors in the School of Animal and Veterinary Sciences studying under Sue Ishaq, assistant professor of animal and veterinary sciences, will choose between evaluating either how COVID-19 affects the livestock industry or veterinary practices for their capstone projects.

"COVID has very suddenly and dramatically changed the way we interact with each other, and has had repercussions for food, agriculture and animal care industries," Ishaq says. "Students need to understand these changes to build more resilient and sustainable food and health care systems."

UMaine shifted to remote-learning in the middle of the spring 2020 semester in response to the coronavirus pandemic. When students returned home to continue their education, faculty members reoriented their curricula to help them grapple with the outbreak that altered their lives.

Tracy Bigney, cooperating faculty of management at Maine Business School, taught students in her Human Resource Management class about how human resources is involved in carrying out policies for work from home, closures, leave, pay and infection control in the workplace. Liam Riordan, a professor of history, discussed a smallpox epidemic set off by the American Revolution in his upper-level course about the war.

Dana Humphrey, dean of the College of Engineering, directed students in his Engineering Leadership and Management course to develop hypothetical plans for producing and distributing critical equipment for tackling COVID-19. Kevin Roberge, an adjunct lecturer of mathematics, addressed prominent quantitative issues presented by the pandemic and featured in the news using real-time data.

Benjamin King, assistant professor of bioinformatics, began each Introduction to Bioinformatics class by updating students on the number of sequenced SARS-CoV-2 genomes and discussing the sequence variants discovered. As she taught her Advanced Virology course, Maginnis included course content on viral emergence and zoonotic transmission of SARS-CoV-2, discussed the responses and recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization, and had students investigate antiviral and vaccine development for COVID-19.

When students in her Seminar in Microbiology class were selecting topics for a project about analyzing the dissemination of scientific information in social media in January, Maginnis says two chose COVID-19, then called Novel Coronavirus.

"Two students requested to cover the novel coronavirus, and I obliged and asked one to present their project at the beginning of the semester and the other at the end, to have different perspectives," Maginnis says. "We really couldn't have imagined that by the time the second student presented that we would be in the middle of a pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus and conducting our class remotely on Zoom. It was a surreal moment where I acknowledged my own privilege of having the opportunity to teach amazing students about really interesting topics and also conducting research on viruses in my laboratory."

UMaine has helped the state and several institutions combat COVID-19 since mid-March. Faculty helped manufacture hand sanitizer, face shields and testing solutions for N95 masks; created a Local Catch Network that provides consumers with local, healthful, low-impact, and economically sustainable seafood; graduated nursing students early so they can join the workforce, helped Maine state officials predict the economic fallout from the virus, and more.

"Using COVID-related topics across the University curriculum represents opportunities for students to engage in applied learning to build scientific literacy, critical-thinking skills, and communication skills while also presenting opportunities for personal and professional growth through interdisciplinary dialog," Maginnis says. "These opportunities will enable our students to emerge as leaders in their fields and communities."

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