

Pandemic “Wins” of Lafayette Staff & Faculty: Major Takeaways for Consideration of Future Work

Executive Summary

This report came to fruition as a result of the 2019 – 20 Lehigh Valley Association of Independent Colleges (LVAIC) Higher Education Leaders Institute, in which five employees participated, partly during the COVID-19 pandemic. With a charge to complete a project that would be helpful to Lafayette College, the cohort chose Pandemic “Wins” of Lafayette Staff & Faculty: Major Takeaways for Consideration of Future Work, which would harness what some faculty and staff have learned from the pandemic to inform future planning at the College. In spring 2021, the team conducted five focus groups with staff (3) and faculty (2) to gather perspectives and major takeaways. Thirty-five staff members and 16 faculty participated. The feedback from the focus groups fell into three categories: use of new technology, efficiencies in work processes, and work-life balance. While the transition to remote teaching, learning, and work presented its major share of challenges, overall faculty and staff shared many “wins” in each of the three categories. Most importantly, was the continued effectiveness of job responsibilities for those who could perform their job remotely. In many cases, pre-pandemic inefficiencies have been mitigated. A few of the major takeaways include the consideration of the following: a flexible work policy; future hybrid (virtual and in-person) events and engagement opportunities for prospective students, alumni, and the community; the ability to continue some regularly scheduled meetings for faculty and staff via web conferencing tools like Zoom; and having access to the additional technology (e.g., iPads, web conferencing tools) in the classrooms.

Project Overview

This project was developed during the 2019 – 20 Lehigh Valley Association of Independent Colleges (LVAIC) Higher Education Leaders Institute, a 10-month program designed for mid-career faculty and staff at LVAIC institutions interested in furthering their development as leaders in higher education. During the 2019 – 2020 academic year, which coincided with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, five members of the Lafayette College community participated in the program: Tracie Addy, Associate Dean of Teaching & Learning; Director of CITLS; Jason Alley, Director, Learning and Research Technologies; Jennifer Kelly, Director of Arts and Associate Professor of Music; Cristie Lazard, Associate Director HR/Benefits; and Jill Spatz, Director of Development Communications. The cohort completed the program in fall 2020 due to pandemic rescheduling.

One component of the Institute involved participants working within their institutional teams to devise a project that could be implemented to benefit their home campus. The 2019 – 20 Lafayette team developed a project focused on the tools and approaches learned from the pandemic with a major goal of gathering and sharing this information to support the Lafayette community in serving its faculty, staff, and students.

This report highlights the major findings and takeaways from five focus groups held with faculty and staff members in spring 2021, meant to serve as talking points for the Lafayette community. This report is not exhaustive of all perspectives within the Lafayette community, and there are varying views that could be considered. A major goal of this report is to call attention to a variety of emerging themes from faculty and staff focus groups.

Data Collection

The team conducted three staff and two faculty focus groups in March 2021 by inviting representatives across administrative and academic divisions. Staff and faculty focus groups were held separately given the differing natures of their work. Staff members were invited from Information Technology Services; Communications; Development; Student Life; Facilities; Admissions; the Center for the Integration of Teaching, Learning and Scholarship; Advising and Co-curricular programs; Health Services; Public Safety/Environmental Health & Safety; the Registrar's Office; various programs responsible for onboarding for faculty and staff; Campus Life; Finance; Landis Center; Athletics; The Arts; and the Provost's Office. Representative administrative assistant staff and investment administrators were also invited. Tenured, pre-tenure and non-tenure-track faculty members were also invited to participate, as well as librarians. Faculty members from each division were invited.

Thirty-five staff members participated in three focus groups and 16 faculty members in two other focus groups. Of the 16 faculty members participating, 5 were pre-tenure, 8 tenured, and 3 librarians. The Divisional breakdown of the 13 tenure-line faculty was as follows: Engineering (4), Humanities (4), Social Sciences (3), and Natural Sciences (2). Some faculty and staff members were not able to participate due to scheduling conflicts.

Each focus group lasted for approximately 1 hour and all participants were encouraged to share their perspectives. At least two members of the Higher Education Leaders Lafayette cohort facilitated each focus group.

The main questions asked during the focus groups were:

- What aspects of working remotely have created positive impacts for you?

- What efficiencies have been created as a result of you working remotely and have positively impacted the goals of your division?
- What do you plan to take from your remote experience to your post COVID experience?
- What aspects of self-care have you started using while working remotely?

After the focus groups concluded, the team analyzed the responses for emerging themes, which are presented below in addition to examples. The team is very appreciative of the engagement of the faculty and staff members for making themselves available during the focus groups given the challenging times.

Major Takeaways

Based on the findings of this project, below are major takeaways:

- Structural changes to future campus and department meetings to allow for a balance of virtual and physical opportunities for attendees. Recommendation for meetings to be scheduled in increments of 45-50 minutes to allow for necessary breaks between meetings.
- Guidance from leadership on acceptable flexible workplace opportunities. Departments are now discussing flexible options for working in the future. The feeling is that there has been success on many levels from the work from home environment and there should be a paradigm shift in the future of the Lafayette workplace in terms of remote work flexibility. With the understanding that each position and department is different and may require different levels of flexible options, there should be support for the practice and there are valuable cost savings, engagement, productivity and health benefits for both the College and employees with this consideration.
- Departments will need to work with IT to determine what technology equipment will be needed for faculty and staff in the future and what limitations are there for requested access given any shifts to remote work or new technologies required by departments.
- There is a desire from departments for preparedness to be able to adjust to something like this in the future so it doesn't lead to another mass scramble. Guidance from the College for creating work plans for departments would be helpful.

- Consideration for hybrid elements of physical and virtual interactions for alumni and student recruitment events and planning.
- Consideration for hybrid elements for virtual and physical campus guest presentations, performances, and speaking engagements.
- Consideration for the addition of new technologies and varied usage to improve teaching and working environments including but not limited to Zoom, Slack, Perusall, etc., as well as online options for office hours, the ability to record classes, and more. Virtual teaching and learning has resulted in the improved ability to connect and communicate with students and colleagues. It has also resulted in increased collaboration, compassion, and inclusiveness in the classroom.
- Consideration for greater flexibility in the workplace, leading to increased work-life balance including the option to continue virtual office hours and meetings. Extending virtual options allow those who are mildly ill to still attend class and the ability for faculty to participate in important meetings while still meeting family obligations. (Faculty)
- There is a general view of increased nimbleness, flexibility, more tools in the toolbelt in ability to reach, teach, and respond to students. (Faculty)
- The experience has liberated many to try new things and to allow themselves to fail in front of their students knowing that students also learn from this. There is an opportunity for professors to model this kind of risk-taking for students. (Faculty)
- There are potential future benefits for the College including the ability to increase Lafayette's visibility worldwide through online opportunities, the potential to raise revenue for the College through online courses, and the addition of cultural opportunities including arts events and lectures.

Expanded Major Findings from Staff Focus Groups

The Movement from Analog to Digital Technologies

Overall, staff members described a number of positive experiences and no sense of reluctance or negative reactions and feedback in the movement to various new technologies.

Examples:

- Movement to virtual meetings with technologies such as Zoom and Google Meet
- Completely paperless production process for the Alumni magazine
- Online timesheet submission requirement for students and staff
- Paperless processes between HR and payroll
- Virtual completion of financial audits
- Docusign as a mechanism for obtaining signatures for key processes and documents throughout campus
- Re-evaluating and designing software programs purchased that have been underutilized in past and now used to greater potential given shift
- Virtual Private Network (VPN) access for everyone at Lafayette including students
- Virtual lectures/presentations that allow employees to attend at hours that may not have been possible in the past
- Google Docs and similar technologies have permitted “real-time” work efficiencies

Work Process and Department Transformations

The pandemic created a number of opportunities for staff members to build more efficient processes for their work environments, and expand their reach by offering a variety of services remotely.

General Examples:

- Remote work created opportunity for the cultivation of new workflows
- Meetings have become more efficient given flexibility of time and travel between meetings and remote has presented a greater sense of structure
- Strengthened team connections through more regularly structured meetings, virtual happy hours, and dedicating time for connection and outside discussions from work (positive relationship building)
- There was a greater blend of virtual speakers and presentations that led to better participation from the community.
- The remote environment created a greater need for documentation whether that meant departments documenting processes, or the technologies that were more utilized such as Slack, auto transcription, or general email communications

Specific Examples:

- The Counseling Center offered hybrid and teletherapy counseling sessions
- Campus Life found virtual opportunities provided for better connection and accommodations for students, such as:
 - The ability to schedule virtual meetings at hours that worked better for students, especially those in different time zones
 - Creating pre-recorded training sessions which allowed the community to participate on their own schedules and improved the pace of learning
 - Virtual training that created the ability to serve a greater student population and better participation for training and education
- The Office of Admissions found improvements with virtual connections such as:
 - The ability to connect with schools that would not have made the list in other years due to remote locations or travel limitations
 - Spending more time focusing on recruitment and student connection interactions since there was less time spent traveling and pre- and post-travel planning time
 - Reaching out to more students all over the world because of more flexibility and time for students to connect
- Departments and offices connected with alumni and students all over the nation and world in ways that was not possible in the past
- The Art Department found that new practices in this remote environment built resiliency and trust with students, and also had the ability to interact on a more intimate level with virtual productions and performances and found greater levels of commitment
- The Hub obtained licensing for a tutoring program. In the past, the Hub struggled to get peer tutors to finish 10 hours of required training. Given the shift to remote, the Hub had the highest number of certified tutors than ever before.
- Finance found that the remote environment forced their department to review policies and procedures, which resulted in the creation of new methods that are more efficient, digital in most cases, and improved.

Work-life Balance Paradigm Shift and Transformations

Generally, staff members described being able to better manage work and personal obligations, and having healthier lifestyles during the pandemic.

Examples:

- Flexibility of time has improved personal routines, self-care, and reduced day-to-day stressors
- Reduced commute time has allowed for more time to accomplish work and complete home requirements
- There was less burden on employees and departments for scheduling health and personal appointments that are necessary during business hours Monday through Friday
- There was more time spent with family and pets.
- Focus group felt that our leadership has been wonderful and supportive of the necessary flexibility and atypical work hours, which alleviated many work/life stressors
- Having Healthier lifestyles with better balanced eating, fitness, and financial savings
- Having a greater ability to attend College events virtually for both personal and professional purposes

Expanded Major Findings from Faculty Focus Groups

New Technologies

Faculty members described benefiting from using new digital tools in their courses to connect better with students and build community, strengthen class discussions, and encourage collaborative work. Some technologies have also enabled faculty members to build repositories of recorded course lectures and other materials that they can use in the future.

Examples:

- Incorporated Slack into courses
 - Slack is less formal than email but has not depressed the relationship between professor and student. Email is still vital for more formal things like recommendations, etc.
 - Can track conversations
 - Students feel more supported
 - Reduces stress level regarding getting back to students
 - Contributes to more congenial relationship that doesn't necessarily happen via email; the kind of thing that might happen before/after a class but doesn't via remote classes
- Using Moodle to a fuller extent

- Anonymous commentary particularly helpful, makes student comments less about criticism and more about reflective discussion of course and how to make it better
- Integrated Perusall (<https://perusall.com/>)
 - Allows students to comment on reading and the professor to evaluate how long a student spent reading assignments
- Utilized Google Suite software such as Google Slides for collaboration
 - Allows record-keeping for later
 - Everyone can see others' comments
- Adopted Zoom for student meetings, group work, and College meetings
 - Reported students showing up for appointments on time
 - Breakout rooms have revolutionized a lot of courses
 - Another avenue toward building community
 - More privacy for small groups
 - More opportunity for students to connect; professors to connect with group or student
 - Provides spaces for professors to more thoroughly address questions while keeping an eye on other groups' needs, etc.
 - Benefited from Faculty and Committee meetings being held on Zoom
 - If the Chat function is disengaged, there should be a second channel or somewhere else for people to communicate/respond, etc. Side conversations happen; slack blows up
- Teaching with iPads had many benefits
 - Everything can be recorded. Anything written can be recorded in skeleton notes. Professor can post annotated notes after class
 - Because everything is recorded, one can envision sharing notes with other professors who teaches the course, especially for entry-level courses that repeat

Work Process and/or Department Transformations

Faculty members appreciated being able to utilize more efficient electronic processes during the pandemic as well as being able to use different forms of technology to communicate with students.

Examples:

- Ability to bring in amazing scholars when it wouldn't make sense or might be cost-prohibitive to fly them to the College
- Able to offer content to students worldwide now that wasn't available prior
- Electronic Drop/Add forms were amazing
- Electronic Approval forms for Study Abroad, etc. were awesome
- Ability to call students by name from the first day of class because their names can be displayed on the Zoom screen was Important and helpful

- Interactions with prospective students unable to visit campus were more feasible and less awkward
- Learned one can be as productive—even more productive—using skills honed during pandemic
- Expanded ways to communicate with students
- Knowing that all of these technologies and modes of communication were available broadened the ability to reach students
- Used prior commuting time for more productive activities, including devoting more time to preparing for classes and talking to students individually
- On-line office hours worked very well and can be more flexible, benefiting both the professor and students
- Pandemic experience has expanded perspectives and increased awareness toward inclusiveness and access in the classroom and generated creative solutions
- Many professors are surveying students much more than prior, asking questions such as: How is this going? Do you have what you need? Do you know where to find these resources? How can I improve how we do this?
- Preparing for on-line, remote instruction requires a “horrific” amount of investment up front, even in something as simple as holding a quiz. Once that upfront work is completed, the work in time is efficient.
- All remote...tough but possible and even some benefits. Hybrid was hard.

Work-life Balance

Several faculty members generally described how the flexibility of the remote environment improved their ability to manage work and personal obligations.

Examples:

- Work-life balance has not been blurred as much as anticipated by working remotely
- Flexibility to meet with students via Zoom later in evening that was not there prior to pandemic; this could continue post-pandemic
- Flexibility has been necessary; gives a feeling of control within circumstances where one feels out of control
- Sometimes, it is easier to balance between where does professional day start and where does it end
- On-line faculty meetings have engendered better balance for some as one can attend remotely in the car or even while caring for smaller children; faculty feel more informed and/or engaged with the College happenings
- Used commuting time to physically walk; having those hours back in the day was a huge benefit. (Noting that the extra time needed to prepare for the on-line classes each class day, learn the new technologies, and prepare and handle the hybrid teaching is time-consuming and exhausting. Flexibility is a must for things we can control.)

- Freedom to say no has been a benefit
- Learned how to set limits on personal time; felt more free to share those limits with students than had done prior. (Note that some folks said that they feel less control over setting limits.)
- Flexibility in when and how spend time with children at home; for some, balance meant working after kids went to bed to allow time for kids during the day
- Learned how to set more efficient and meaningful priorities

Work-life Transformations

Generally, faculty members discussed how holding meetings and events remotely increased accessibility.

Examples:

- Faculty and Committee meetings
 - Can attend more meetings remotely than could prior in-person
 - Attendance higher during remote meetings
 - Faculty feel more empowered or safer to speak up
 - Acknowledgement that while remote meetings work well, the faculty does need opportunities to gather in-person
- Can attend more arts events/lectures from home than prior because of online availability (due to challenges with family responsibilities that kept home before). (Note that some folks mentioned they attend fewer arts events/lectures because of screen fatigue, but they appreciate the opportunity.)
- Some are significantly more organized because of everything online
- General view of increased nimbleness, flexibility, more tools in the toolbelt in ability to reach, teach, and respond to students
- Now share strategies and tools with colleagues at universities all over the world
- Experience has liberated many to try new things and to allow themselves to fail in front of their students without as much concern; knowledge that the student also learns from this

What Faculty Members Hope to Keep

There are a number of processes that faculty members would like to keep moving forward. These include promoting online events beyond the College, having virtual options for meetings, continuing to obtain feedback from students, having the technology in the classrooms for hybrid teaching options among other items.

Examples:

- Ability to record classes; maintaining that infrastructure
 - Zoom offers unique opportunities for collaboration in several disciplines

- Online learning/cultural opportunities that increase the College's visibility world-wide, such as arts events and lectures
- Potential for on-line courses that would raise money for the College
- Flexibility to not do in-person class if sick; conversely, flexibility or infrastructure to encourage mildly sick students to attend remotely rather than come to class
- Option of virtual or in-person faculty or committee meetings—even departmental meetings
- The flexibility to run both online and in-person office hours
- Increased compassion and forgiveness that blossomed during the pandemic
- Increased surveying of students to assess how well the class is going, does the teaching style work, etc.
- Sense of empowerment gained to help students get resources/help they need to succeed
- Can we use what we have learned here to ensure that everybody has a seat—whether virtually or in person—at the table
- Ask to keep tech equipment in classrooms
- Flexibility in where one teaches; camera on a stand with wheels popular
- Diverse modalities for students to submit work
- Allowance for risk of innovation, for students watching and learning as professor tries new things that might not work; opportunities for professors to model this kind of risk-taking for students
- Sense of freedom to set priorities for family in new ways in face of work commitments; less stress in that regard than prior to pandemic (everyone was adjusting so that stressor seemed less)