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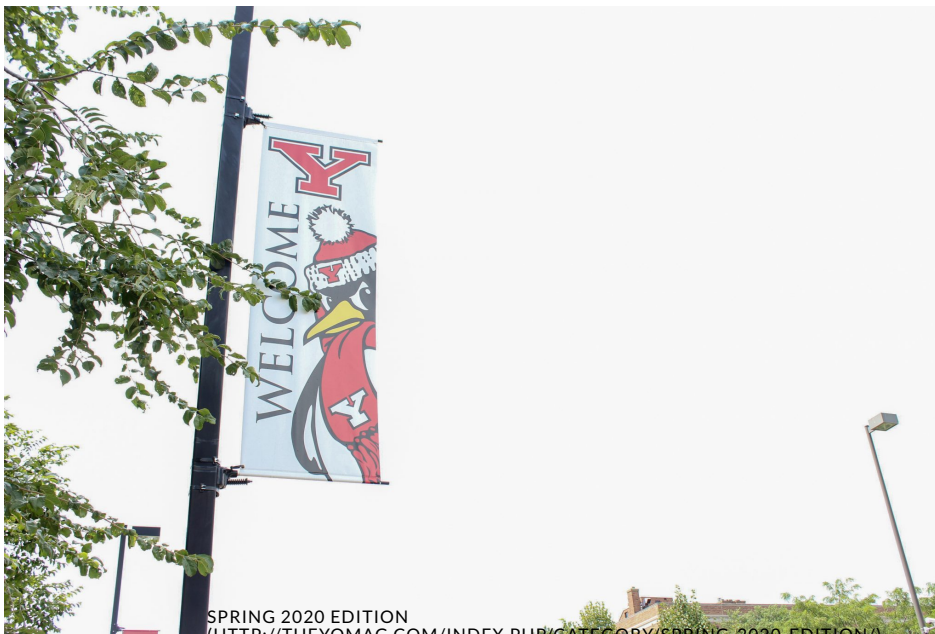
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YSU COMMUNITY ADAPTS TO DISTANCE EDUCATION MID-CRISIS

By yomag (<http://theyomag.com/index.php/author/yomag/>) / May 12, 2020

By Maria Elliott

A surreal sense swept the United States in early March as businesses across the country shut down one after another in response to COVID-19 concerns. The world systematically turned upside down for people while life as they knew it came to a screeching halt.

Social distancing and self-isolation have become strangely familiar terms in this new way of life, and suddenly millions have made the change to working and learning from home. Youngstown State University announced March 10 it would be canceling all face-to-face instruction. Following an extended spring break, classroom education became completely web-based for the first time in the university's history.

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All major events and gatherings on campus have since been canceled, including the spring commencement ceremony, and many students have had to leave the residence halls.

Stephanie Baker, housing coordinator for Kilcawley, Wick and Weller houses at YSU, described the events leading up to online instruction as a time of uncertainty and waiting as university officials communicated with one another.

Baker said that most students chose to move out of their dorms, though one residence hall remains open for international students and others who can't make arrangements to move off campus. Students were given the option to turn in their keys and receive a partial refund for their housing expenses, keep their residency at the university even if they chose not to use the space, or fill out a form allowing them to stay on campus for the remainder of the semester, according to Baker.

Because so many of the students vacated the residence halls following government responses to COVID-19, many of the resident assistants found themselves without a job.



Photo by Frances Clause

Thomas Kushner, a junior communication studies major at YSU, said he was a resident assistant for Cafaro House but was laid off along with the majority of the other 23 resident assistants on campus immediately

following the news that students would not be returning after spring break.

Like Baker, Kushner highlighted a communication struggle between students, faculty and administration during this time. Both noted, however, that following safety precautions for students living in the residence halls was considered the number one priority.

“Things were getting really scary really fast,” Kushner said. “No one has a play-by-play of what to do during a nationwide pandemic.”

Kushner said he was grateful for the opportunity to live with his parents in Pittsburgh after being laid off from his resident assistant position, but it was still difficult losing some the independence of campus life.

“No one likes to give up things when it’s not on their own terms,” he said.

Online instruction has come with its own set of challenges as students, professors and administrators alike struggle to adapt to this unique situation, which has a steep learning curve for many.

"I get distracted, or I just lose focus and get lost in the page," Kushner said.

Online language courses can be particularly difficult, according to Kushner, who is taking an elementary Spanish class this semester.

Morgan Ramirez, a general studies major at YSU, said she now feels disconnected from her Spanish phonetics class, which is being delivered via Cisco Webex, a videoconferencing service. Ramirez, who has been studying the language for five years, said it's been a difficult transition to videoconferencing in place of face-to-face communication.

"It feels like a whole different class. It feels like I'm not learning the way I used to," she said.

Ramirez also said she feels the university should allow for more flexible deadlines and change the late-work policy because technology issues can lead to students not being able to complete their work on time.

"A couple nights ago there was the big hailstorm and my internet went out for like three hours, and I had midnight deadlines," she said.

As a full-time essential worker at a local restaurant, a stepparent to two daughters and a student taking 20 credit hours this semester, Ramirez said keeping up with school has been extremely hard in the transition.

"I don't get days off," she said.

Luckily, professors across campus have been generally understanding about the situation, according to Ramirez. One of her professors even added a section to the class Blackboard page called "A Pause," where students are encouraged to take a break from their work and take part in some stress relieving activities, including meditation or just relaxing.

"What we're in college for is to be adaptable, to be able to overcome the constant changes," Ramirez said. "Every YSU student, as long as they want to, can get through this."

Some students have been less affected by the university's changes, but their daily life and future plans have still been significantly altered.

Ling Lin, a senior communication studies major at YSU who is originally from China, said she hasn't been affected by the closure of residence halls as a commuter student. Lin also said three of her courses in the spring semester were online before the university made the switch to online-only courses, so she had already been learning the landscape of web-based classes.

However, Lin highlighted another issue of the pandemic's reach: Due to quarantining, self-isolating and travel recommendations, many have been unable to visit their loved ones. Though Lin now lives in the United States with her parents, she had planned to visit friends and family after the spring semester.

"I planned to go back to China in the summer, and now all the flights are stopped, so I can't go back, and I have to stay here."

The university announced in April that commencement would move forward in a virtual format, but it's still unclear if students will be able to return to campus in the fall. The future of the university and its students remains uncertain, but one thing is

clear: The YSU community has shown an ability to adapt and evolve even in the darkest of times.

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