

## **How Our Efforts to Cope During the Pandemic Shifted into a Sustainable and Inclusive Networking Opportunity**

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We are teaching professors because we love to teach. We are adventurous in our teaching, which is reflected in the fact that we each teach hundreds of students each semester in all modalities - online, hybrid and face to face. We routinely use each other as sounding boards. Evidence clearly shows that peer support leads to increased teaching efficacy, but universities rarely have such initiatives in place, and even fewer opportunities for cross-disciplinary collaboration exist (Campbell et al., 2019). Although we occasionally collaborated with other departments before the pandemic, we gravitate together because we have so much in common (in fact, three of us went to grad school together) and because we genuinely like each other. So, we hang out a lot. Well, we used to.

### **In the Beginning**

One of our favorite things about being professors on a vibrant pre-pandemic campus was being part of the University community. We loved running into colleagues and former students. We actively sought out interactions by peeking into offices as we walked by. Before class, we would pick up a colada (amazing Cuban coffee served with tiny cups for sharing) to share with students and teaching assistants who arrived early. They would ask questions about the class or we would debate how awful the *Game of Thrones* series finale was. We loved lunches at the Faculty Club, where the dessert was often better than the entrees, and where we could commiserate on the administration, textbooks, course loads, or promotion and tenure over fresh brewed coffee that someone else made for us.

However, in March 2020, we found ourselves suddenly ripped away from the daily routines and pleasures we enjoyed. As we settled into this “new normal,” it became apparent how much we missed our students, our connections and conversations with our colleagues, and how overwhelmed and isolated we felt. We desperately needed to interact with one another, to commiserate about teaching our classes and our own children at home, and to find an outlet for all of the stress that no one else in our lives seemed to understand.

### **Creation of STIR**

Thus, STIR (the Summer Teaching and Instructional Retreat) was born. The impetus to create this organization was twofold: provide support for faculty who were suddenly teaching “remotely” but had hitherto only taught online with the full assistance of Instructional Designers

(Hodges et al., 2020) and to provide companionship during forced isolation (Basser et al, 2020). The gatherings had to be virtual, of course, and had to be with a small group that we would all look forward to talking to informally. So, we emailed a few other professors, inviting them for virtual mimosas and hors d'oeuvres. We initially devised an agenda for each session to help facilitate discussions. We included questions like, *“What adjustments are you making for remote teaching? How are students responding to the remote environment? What problems have developed from working at home?”*. Our focus shifted for our second meeting in light of the George Floyd tragedy – *“How can we be more inclusive in our remote classes? How can we best support Black students? How are students reacting?”*. After the second meeting, agendas devolved into free-flowing ideas and conversations. Being multifunctional by design, we ended STIR with a certificate ceremony that each attendee could add to their annual teaching evaluations as proof of appropriate professional development.

### **Success of STIR**

When we first started STIR, we hoped to connect with a few faculty across different departments in a somewhat informal setting. We could not have predicted how successful STIR would become. The first STIR meeting was held in June of 2020. To promote our first meeting, we each sent the invite to 2 or 3 people. There were 8 people in our initial meeting. The conversations flowed, ideas were shared, laughter filled our Zoom room, and most importantly, the void we felt for so many months was temporarily filled.

News of our STIR meetings spread throughout the University, and to our surprise, we had to limit attendance in our July 2020 meeting, with over 25 faculty members asking to attend. We continued to hold regular meetings throughout last Summer, Fall, and Spring, with new faculty members from different departments and institutions joining each session. We are launching STIR 2021 this month.

### **Where do we go from here?**

The difficulty of teaching during a pandemic is more palatable with social support and collaboration. If for no other reason than to normalize our experiences and laugh about the sheer absurdity of our situation (What do you do when your toddler announces that his ‘butt is itchy’ into a serious Zoom call about academic misconduct with a student? Nobody knows, but there is comfort in sharing these experiences together).

In pre-pandemic settings, opportunities like this to network with colleagues were typically limited to after-hours. This presents systemic barriers for those who have familial responsibilities. Furthermore, women have taken on a disproportionate amount of the child-rearing duties during the pandemic, to the detriment of career success (Deryungina et al., 2021). The gendered effects of the pandemic on career advancement will be felt for decades (Shillington et al., 2021). That said, one potentially positive facet of remote work is that women and other caregivers are no longer disproportionately disadvantaged by having to miss in-person social events. Online social

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events allow for equal access to opportunities to learn from and collaborate with colleagues. We plan to continue to offer STIR remotely, not only to enhance inclusivity, but also to expand our growing network to other institutions, cities, and countries.

As we adapt to new (positive and negative) long-term effects of the pandemic on our pedagogy, networking in this way will continue to be critical. On a larger scale, holding these events remotely can help to contribute to an overall work culture that is collegial, collaborative, and ultimately better for our students. Plus, we kind of don't want to let go of the sheer joy that comes from getting to see each other's pets on Zoom.

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