

ROAD TO HIGHER LEARNING



Kristina Erokhina, 3, completes a respiratory assessment on her stuffed animals, as her mom, Katie Muraveva, who is in the Mount Royal nursing program, looks on. Muraveva says being a student in the midst of a pandemic has its challenges, but she has enjoyed online learning and loves having an enthusiastic daughter at home to help her study. *CHRISTINA RYAN*

Steep learning curve for education this year

Students quickly adapt to online learning but miss the social aspect of campus life

NADIA MOHARIB

Most young adults these days know what it's like to be criticized for being

tethered to technology. But Joshua Sheppard says it has been a lifeline for students when post-secondary education went from the classroom to online as the pandemic rolled across the globe early last year.

"Now, technology is what is helping us thrive," says the St. Mary's University student and vice-president internal of its student legis-

lative council. "Students have found a groove and are using technology to get through their academics."

But making it work in a world where COVID-19 protocols are priority doesn't mean aspects inherent to student life are not lost. Some things simply cannot be replicated by the Zoomifying of learning and life.

"University is one of these defining social experiences. You can't hug your friends. Dating is very difficult and the classroom experience where you are there chatting before class or can grab lunch after isn't there," Sheppard says.

"There is this sad, loneliness when you close your laptop after a lecture and it's just you."

There are many stories of loss and learning following the sudden and dramatic onset of pandemic impacts on post-secondary education.

There is pride in pushing forward with courage and creativity and exhaustion from adjustments made to ensure the pursuit of higher learning wasn't hijacked by a health crisis that took

lives and shook economies globally.

"It's a tough time," says Dr. Gerry Turcotte, president and vice-chancellor of St. Mary's University. "I wanted it to end a year ago."

But it isn't over. Yet.

And as many are cautiously optimistic this fall will see a return to pre-pandemic operations, they know life is forever changed.

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That is very much the case at SAIT where the closure of campus pushed it to put its pursuit of a new way of learning into high gear.

"We were on a digital transformation journey already," says Reva Bond Ramsden, dean of the School of Construction. "We made 10 years progress in 10 months, easily."

She says being forced to not only reimagine, but rework, the role of campus space in education and shift off-campus meant greater convenience for many students who took advantage of an online option they had no choice in signing up for.

"Some out-of-town students saved a month to six weeks rent. These guys are mid-career and have families and mortgages," Ramsden says. "The flip-side was guys trying to do the whole program on their phone."

"The future of work has forever changed." But St. Mary's, like the city's other universities, excels in the face-to-face experience and Turcotte is anxious at the anticipated return in the not-so-distant future to something a bit more familiar, especially for those struggling with exhaustion and low morale as the pandemic drags on.

Reflecting on the last year, he can't overstate how impressed he is with so much effort by so many to ensure education wasn't put on hold and, indeed, excellent teaching continued.

"It's quite a feat to ask a post-secondary to go from in-person to online with two days notice, which is what so many of us did when this first hit the fan. I was relieved and overjoyed we pulled it off," he says.

Katie Muraveva says being a student in the midst of a pandemic has its challenges, like "watching recorded videos of our professor performing stuff we

"I think the term 'Zoom fatigue' didn't exist more than a year ago and now many students experience that.

should be performing," but online learning and the organization it takes to pull it off suits her just fine.

"It is different for each student because of our expectations. I am almost 30 years old, I have a kid, a husband and a home to take care of, so I love online learning because I don't need to spend time driving to university or waste my time between classes waiting for new classes," says the Mount Royal University (MRU) nursing student.

"I feel now it is harder for some people to be successful."

For many, surviving a pandemic has been a group effort.

"We have seen a high uptake in mental-health workshops. I think the term 'Zoom fatigue' didn't exist more than a year ago and now many students experience that," says Tanille Shandro, president of the University of Calgary's Graduate Students' Association.

"What we are seeing, for sure, is people are realizing the importance of community and connection. We've really seen an uptake in participation in our peer-to-peer interaction."

As the pandemic persists, Shandro says students need continued support on



Reva Bond Ramsden, dean of the School of Construction at SAIT, says the pandemic caused the school to speed up its digital transformation. She says the school has made about 10 years progress in just 10 months. CHRISTINA RYAN

many fronts. Recently, they created a bursary for international students facing quarantining expenses and are advocating for those working in hospitals to be among those expedited for vaccines.

MRU president Tim Rahilly was just shy of completing his first year on the job when the university known for its face-to-face interactions and close-knit community was pitched into new territory.

The date it was confirmed the campus would have to shut down was, perhaps, no coincidence.

"It was Friday the 13th and a full moon," Rahilly recalls.

Faculty members, most completely taken by surprise and some ill-prepared for such a dramatic and rapid request to retool how they teach, got on board while students, for the most part, rolled with the punches, he says.

Rahilly says moments

where people mustered the strength to deal with the unknown still leave him in awe. An exchange with a veteran instructor at the cusp of retirement managing to teach their first online class while "scared out of (their) mind," nearly moved him to tears.

It was, in retrospect, a great year to go to school (MRU enrolment was one

to two percentage points above normal), says Rahilly, who is proud of how everyone prevailed in what he calls a story of perseverance and commitment.

And as many indications suggest the virus may be on its way into the history books, thanks in part to the continued rollout of vaccines, that reality is met with mixed feelings.

Although a return to the on-campus delivery of education is widely welcomed it, too, will be a change.

"I think it's a transition back," Rahilly says.

"People are excited and some are worried."

He hopes the university can create an acclimatization period to ease people into campus life when officials give the green light.

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