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STAYING MOTIVATED THROUGH A SEMESTER ONLINE: A Q&A WITH COM DEAN DICHRISTINA

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As BU COM students work through their final weeks of a semester upended by the COVID-19 virus, there is a pervasive uncertainty surrounding how to complete this unprecedented semester strong, and what to do when the semester ends and summer begins. [BU College of Communication Dean and former Scientific American Editor-in-Chief Mariette DiChristina](#) spoke with the COMMunicator to share her thoughts on how COM students can continue being productive and positive through this turbulent time.



Dean Mariette DiChristina | Photo Courtesy of BU College of Communication

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Sara Magalio: With online classes, there is an inevitable disconnect between professors and their students, who are used to being able to converse in person. What do you think is the best way for students and professors to stay on the same wavelength while working with each other remotely?

Mariette DiChristina: It's interesting you mention the disconnect, because I was just reading a survey that was done by faculty not long after we started the Zoom classes. One of the things that several faculty members noted that struck me, because I have had a similar experience, is that in some ways the Zoom experience felt more connected and intimate, because we can see everybody's faces if you do that grid view. That was for at least some people helpful. I know many faculty will stay on Zoom after class, but it's not the same as hanging around at the end of a class in person.

I think for students, I would suggest asking if the faculty member can stay on a little bit after class or come a little bit sooner. It's possible to do it. It's not hard to do it, it just takes that one extra step of effort to ask for it. I would encourage everybody not to be shy to ask for help.

SM: Many students, both graduating and not, are concerned about what to do with their time over the summer in such a volatile environment. What are some steps that students can take to make themselves more marketable to potential employers, even if the traditional internship avenues are not readily accessible?

MD: At COM we are quite aware of this challenge, and we have been putting our creative thinking caps on to try to come up with a pilot that we could do over the summer to provide additional work experience. In a week or so, we will have more information on this project and will be sharing that as soon as we possibly can, we just need a little more time to cook it up properly.

As far as making sure that you are marketable, I would like to suggest that, as we say to students when they first enter COM, don't forget to take advantage of all the things that COM has to offer. Even though we are remote, we have taken a lot of pains to make sure that we've added a lot of opportunities that we can deliver remotely.

For instance, there is the virtual event series. I have also just lined up another event. It is going to be with **Jay Roewe of HBO** and **Bonnie Hammer of NBC Universal**, and they are going to be talking about how they are changing the way things work in real time, right now. These insights that we get from our amazing alumni are another way that COM can help students stay ahead and be marketable.

SM: In COM, several majors, like film, journalism, PR and advertising normally encourage or require students to explore Boston and interact with the community while completing course work. In a time where this can only be done remotely, how can these majors maximize their productivity?

MD: Students can use their experiences right now for dealing with work in the real world. For example, the use of software called **FrameForge**, which is being used in some of the production classes now, is previsualization software for TV and movie making. It's something we haven't used before but are trying out now.

I mentioned our using this software to Jay and Bonnie, and they said that using that sort of thing and learning how to make creative work within our confines is going to be extremely important in the next year or two. The world is going to be different until we can get a vaccine, and one that is distributed broadly.

These experiences are actually an opportunity. We have also just put the **AdLab** portfolios and pitch reviews online, and these are all ways, even though they are challenging now, to set students up with the skills they will need after graduation.

“Right now, all of the professionals are having to grapple with these same challenges, what COM offers is a learning opportunity with these same difficulties.”

SM: Not only classes, but also student organizations, publications and broadcasts must adapt to working remotely with each other, while still engaging with the student body. Are there any examples of notable adaptability that you've already seen in COM?

MD: The first day that we had online only classes, **Anne Donohue** still got her students' **TBU program** produced on time. They had to do it through Zoom, and they had students in Barcelona, in Puerto Rico, and sprinkled all around because they

had to return home. They did their reporting remotely from where they were through Zoom and they Broadcast through Zoom. And that's just one example.

I know it's not perfect, but these are the same sort of things that professionals are dealing with now, and we are doing that as well. Nobody would have chosen this, but since it's here, we are sorting it out together.

“Even though we are remote, we still have the same amazing professors that can help us learn to deal with today's world and prepare for tomorrow's.”

SM: Do you have any examples of adapting to unforeseen challenges from your time leading Scientific American that you can share?

MD: When Hurricane Sandy hit, we were based in Manhattan, and the office had to go remote overnight. That was some years ago, so video conferencing wasn't as easy as it is today. That being said, we all immediately jumped to emails and we all jumped onto the CMS for our website and we very quickly figured out a way to still get content up daily on the site. Communication was key at this time.

The trickier part was getting out the print edition, because the servers were in the building which was in a flood zone, and we couldn't get in it for a couple of weeks. We almost missed press because of that, and then after that we got more resilient.

SM: Do you have any additional thoughts or words of encouragement you could impart to students about staying focused through the rest of the semester online?

MD: I have three pieces of advice that I would like to leave you with for the students, because I have lost sleep a bit worrying about you all, but here is what I would say:

1. We have talked about taking advantage of what COM still has to offer. Even though we are offering it remotely, remember that all of the amazing professors are still behind the learning that you are getting, and the ways that we are figuring things out virtually are the same kinds of ways that the professional world is having to do it.
2. Don't forget to keep in touch. It's physical distancing not social. Advisers are still taking appointments, and we are still setting up virtual meeting opportunities to try to keep up the sense of community. We are having a series of Town Hall conversations that **COMSA** has arranged. Next week on Thursday there will be one with **Career Services' Patrick Nelson** and then the following Thursday there is one at the department level for people who have departmental questions.
3. Please don't forget to take care of yourself. To finish out the semester strong, we all need to find things that bring us joy in addition to the work. For me, I like to look at the flowers outside, and I have been cooking with my daughter who is a BU grad. I know this is hard to do when you have to work through weekends and nights and so on to get the classwork done, but finding ways to separate your work from your personal time is important. And if you need help, don't be shy, reach out to your advisers, your professors and your fellow students.



Sara Magalio, Editor in Chief

Sara Magalio is a first-year journalism graduate student in COM at Boston University. She received her B.A. in journalism and B.F.A. in dance performance from Southern Methodist University's Meadows School of the Arts in Dallas, Texas. She was born and raised in New Jersey, and is thrilled to be back in the northeast. Sara is passionate about writing and sharing compelling stories with readers.

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