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College of Natural Sciences, Forestry, and Agriculture_WLE 220 Ecological Statistics Description

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Robin Delcourt <umprovost@maine.edu>

pandemic

Stephen Coghlan <stephen.coghlan@maine.edu>

Thu, Apr 23, 2020 at 10:21 AM

To: umprovost@maine.edu

Dear Provost - I received an email that asked "Are you including lessons or discussions about the Pandemic in your course work? We want to capture that information. Please send it to umprovost@maine.edu with Pandemic as the subject line."

I am doing so. Here is a brief description

I am teaching WLE 220 Ecological Statistics this semester, and 90% of my students took my WLE 200 General Ecology course or EES 351 Energy, Wealth, and Power course last semester and thus are very familiar with concepts of ecological footprint, limits to economic and population growth, planetary carrying capacity, and overshoot-collapse scenarios. Several students asked me if I thought the pandemic was "the big one", or at least the trigger that started it. I suspected (and hoped) most would want to talk about the pandemic, so I surveyed my students and asked who wanted to keep learning "statistics as usual" vs. who wanted opportunities to replace or supplement statistics-related assignments with pandemic-related assignments. About 1/4 want to incorporate the pandemic into our course curriculum, and all said that no other professor had offered to do so, so I have obliged. I have organized twice-weekly "COVID chats" on Zoom and as many as 12 students at a time have participated. I have organized "Pandemic Palavers" where students can post essays or short videos of themselves discussing how the pandemic has personally impacted them (I posted my own to get the ball rolling) and so far 4 have done so. I have offered up to 5 assignments that students can complete for either extra credit or replacement of statistics assignment, and they can personalize how much work they want to do for how much credit received: 1) discuss how the pandemic has impacted their emotional health / mental well-being; 2) make predictions about how they think future is likely to play out, and critique their mental-modeling process that yields those predictions; 3) use the pandemic and its corollary effects (e.g., negative oil prices, financial collapse, declining pollution, massive increase in debt and unemployment) to generate and test hypotheses about connections between our economic system and our ecosphere; 4) compare and contrast the social-geopolitical-economic-environmental implications of this crises with similar crises from our recent history - Great Depression / Rise of Fascism / WWII in 1930s-40s and Energy Shocks / Stagflation of mid 1970s-mid1980s; and 5) compare and contrast the pandemic with the climate catastrophe.

If you're curious about how students are receiving this, I am happy to provide names and you are welcome to contact them

In addition, I sent the following email reaching out to all students in EES and WFCB inviting them to take part in my class discussion:

Dear students – I suspect that just about everyone is feeling some degree of anxiety, uncertainty, apprehension, fear, sadness, grief, etc. And why wouldn't we? You'd have to be a sociopath not to have negative emotions about a global pandemic, economic collapse, and potential unraveling of civilization. This was not the sort of future that our system (your elders? the "experts"?) promised you, even though perceptive thinkers have argued for some time that promises of a perpetual "American Dream" are awfully hard to keep for more than a few generations, especially on a finite planet. Many of you are isolated from friends and family, not able to work for even a modest paycheck or focus on remote-learning assignments that seem trivial in the grand scheme of things, and not in a position to take much control over your situation. You paid a lot of money and made great sacrifices to attend college, with hopes that your investment will pay off in a few years and over your entire lifetime. Has any aspect of your expensive University education actually prepared you to deal with (emotionally, economically, philosophically, practically, existentially) a scenario like this? Maybe you haven't yet made a significant accomplishment or contribution to satisfy your personal or professional goals, but felt on the verge of doing so, just as soon as you earn your degree or get your first job. Some of you really want to help others in some capacity but don't know what you can do. All of this probably makes you feel powerless and at the mercy of forces much greater than you. Now that you're quarantined and can hardly leave your living quarters, but still haven't finished your education, what can you possibly accomplish or contribute? And how can you possibly prepare for such an uncertain future? Although I am not a life-coach or personal success technician, my answer is "probably more

than you think”, but it will take creativity, determination, mental fortitude, and hope (hey, what’s going on here - Professor Coghlan is telling his students to have hope about the future? What kind of bizarro-universe is this!?!). Now more than ever we need an entire generation (that’s you) of critical thinkers to mobilize and engage productively towards changing entire systems - systems that have been squandering your future and, to put it bluntly, have been feeding you bullshit sandwiches while scolding you to be grateful for venison backstraps provided so generously. Disclaimer – that is my opinion, and I guarantee that high priests in charge of maintaining system orthodoxy disagree with this. You can decide for yourselves whether you’re eating venison or being forced bullshit.

Well, what can be done? I have a few ideas, and many of you have more and better ideas, and I think we should discuss them. In the longer run, I am trying to change University curricular goals and see this as a way for students to contribute towards building a more relevant educational foundation. In my WLE 220 class I have offered some alternative assignments covering pandemic-related issues and started hosting semi-regular “COVID chats”, and am trying to turn this into a “teachable and learnable moment”, although impacts will last longer than mere moments. I will open this opportunity to any student who wants to engage, and although I can’t offer you “points” unless you’re enrolled in my class (but maybe your other professors will? It can’t hurt to ask them!), you might find this beneficial nonetheless. Right now I’m constrained to doing all of this through my course Blackboard page and Zoom meetings, so I would simply give you access to my Blackboard and you can read COVID-related postings and engage in discussions at your convenience. There are several folders and discussion threads that are labeled clearly and should be self-explanatory. If anybody has a better idea to organize this, I’m open to suggestions. If you are interested in participating, send me an email

Take care of yourselves –

Steve

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and

Director, Maine Chapter, Center for the Advancement of the Steady State Economy
www.steadystate.org

"It is intellectually dishonest to talk about sustainability without stressing the obvious fact that stopping population growth is a necessary condition for sustainability" - Dr. Albert A. Bartlett