



STUDENT LIFE CENTERS ADAPT TO SOCIAL DISTANCING

by Lisa Gibbs, Ed.D.

Humans have an amazing capacity to adapt, and current technology is a tool being used for just that—
adapting to social distancing.





Furman created “Furman From Home,” a page dedicated to stories shared by students and faculty about their experiences dealing with the pandemic. One professor expressed gratitude for the time spent with family and the technology that allows families, students, and colleagues to stay connected.

Faculty have shifted to online teaching through platforms such as Canvas, Blackboard, Google Classrooms, and live meetings through video conferencing tools such as WebEx and Zoom.

Additionally, applications such as Discord, WhatsApp, Hangout and others allow students to socialize with each other to discuss class projects or be part of a virtual social gathering.

This simulated environment is indispensable in the short term, but can it be a replacement for actual human-to-human interaction?

The Whole-Person Approach to Education

Institutions of higher education frequently state they are committed to educating a whole person, where the academic side of education is only part of the experience. A “whole person” approach consists of educating the mind, the body, and the spirit.

Education of the body includes athletics, recreation, and performing arts. Education

of the spirit occurs in the social interactions on campus—during the transitions from one classroom to another when students chat in the hallways as they shift to their next class, in the cafeteria, the bookstore, the recreation center, the quad, and among all the various student organizations such as Greek life, intramurals, and campus clubs. Campus Life and Student Life centers serve as a place for organizing, managing, and sharing the social areas of life on campus.

The current pandemic has shuttered all student life centers save for health clinics. This event has disrupted a very important part of campus life—social interaction. Social interactions are vital to the character and culture of a college or university.

A prospective student chooses a school not only for the academic offerings and standards, but also for the experiences offered outside of the classroom, such as long-standing



traditions that promote a sense of belonging in a community.

Private colleges and universities can use technology to keep the social efforts of Campus Life and Student Life a part of the college experience.

The Furman Family

The office of Campus Life at Furman University explains its campus commitment to educating the whole person by offering many programs and activities that help students “connect within our residential community, putting them in a position to get the most out of their undergraduate experience.”

By supporting an environment where students can “interact and exchange ideas, we help educate the whole person and foster a sense of community.” Furman considers the entire campus as a classroom where students can easily become part of the “Furman family.”

One program unique to Baylor is a tradition that began in 1953. The “Dr Pepper Hour” brings together students, faculty and staff to socialize while enjoying a Dr Pepper float. The university keeps the tradition alive virtually, hosting the weekly meeting with changing activities to encourage student participation.

While the temporary closure of physical buildings continues, Furman has adapted their campus life activities to the virtual world. A webpage titled “Virtual Activities and Programming” offers numerous options for students to stay connected.

Students are encouraged to stay engaged through daily Instagram activities such as Mixtape Mondays, Hump Day Puzzle Party and showing school spirit on Furman Friday.

Links to virtual museum tours, along with zoo webcams and online fitness classes, encourage exploration and trying new things. Additionally, Furman created “Furman From Home,” a page dedicated to stories shared by students and faculty about their experiences dealing with the pandemic. One professor expressed gratitude for the time spent with family and the technology that allows families, students, and colleagues to stay connected. However, one major part that



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is missing is “having students ask questions during a lecture about a certain topic or making connections with other things we’ve discussed or that they’ve experienced outside of class.”

Students also appreciate technology and time with family, and they express that they miss walking to classes, jogging around the lake, attending club meetings and banquets, and going to the Physical Activities Center.

Baylor’s Virtual Student Life

Baylor University’s Division of Student Life seeks “to enrich the Baylor experience through life-changing programs and services resulting in an integrated education known for leadership, service, Christian faith, and the total development of students.”

Student Life encompasses student development, learning and engagement, spiritual

life, and health and wellness. Each of these areas offer students a comprehensive set of programs and activities to help students develop their mind, body, and spirit.

Baylor created a Virtual Programs page that includes links to special events, Baylor social media, and Student Life TV. One program unique to Baylor is a tradition that began in 1953. The “Dr Pepper Hour” brings together students, faculty and staff to socialize while enjoying a refreshing Dr Pepper float.

The university keeps the tradition alive virtually, hosting the weekly meeting with changing activities to encourage student participation. Another event is Chaotic Pantry, where students improvise a dish or meal with whatever ingredients are in the pantry, then share results via social media. Student Life TV shares the YouTube and Vimeo channels of Campus Recreation, Wellness, Missions, Chapel, and Student Life.



Baylor also acknowledges the sense of loss felt by not being on campus. One professor wrote a column for the local newspaper, examining the idea that “what we’ve lost is not the ability to communicate with each other, but the tangible presence of another person or persons, the sense of essential reality that Zoom cannot give us.”

The professor goes on to express, “While I could say positive things about discussion threads and Zoom check-ins, what I love about my vocation is those students, not their avatars or closely reasoned arguments.”

Students express similar feelings as campus traditions have become virtual activities. One student succinctly states, “Nothing can replace the in-person community that is at the heart of the Baylor experience.”

Growing Socially

College and university campuses are more than a place to engage the mind and strengthen the body. Perhaps more importantly, they are a

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place to grow socially. As cities slowly and safely attempt to re-open, higher education campuses will do the same.

Policies regarding the cleanliness of public spaces such as student life centers will be based on guidance from local, state, and national health departments. In the meantime, virtual social activities can help students keep the campus culture and spirit alive.



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