Maintaining an Experiential Focus

PROVIDING HANDS-ON LEARNING TO STUDENTS—EVEN UNDER LOCKDOWN

BY HARIVANSH CHATURVEDI, AJOY K. DEY, AND NIMISHA SINGH • JUNE 24, 2020
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AFTER THE WORLD Health Organization announced that COVID-19 was a pandemic on March 11, things changed quickly at the Birla Institute of Management Technology (BIMTECH) in Greater Noida, India. By March 15, India's government called for schools at all levels to cancel classes and advised organizations to allow as many employees as possible to work from home; soon after, the Indian government put the entire country under lockdown.

During the lockdown, many of our students moved to their homes located in remote parts of the country with poor or no internet connectivity. Staff ultin ely us WhatsApp to interact with new and exi ting students when internet connectivity was unreliable. Similarly, we moved ou   us p cesses   ne, conducting final interviews of applicants over Skype and replacing a previously required written test w   two-m ite ral p entations.

Like other business schools, BIMTECH was not fully prepared to respond to a crisis like COVID-19. Luckily, our faculty had been shifting toward the use of online learning since October 2019; we were equally lucky that by March, our third trimester was over, which remo

some of the urgency to move suddenly to online course delivery.

COVID-19 hasn't just accelerated BIMTECH's strategic plan to offer blended learning opportunities—it has allowed us to open the floodgates for online learning. Our faculty quickly explored the huge library of courses, articles, cases, and books, created by authentic sources, that suddenly became accessible free of charge. In fact, for learners, the pandemic could be the opportunity of a lifetime for self-development.

However, we were more challenged when it came to experiential learning, which is heavily emphasized in BIMTECH's programs. With our students and faculty largely confined to their homes, our faculty had to find ways to continue providing students

The most painful changes affected the institute's three-month summer internship program (SIP). Set to begin on April 1 and end on June 30, the SIP is worth nine credits—the most of any component of our MBA program. Of the school's 420 MBA students, the 20 percent who already were interning with organizations had to shift to working remotely because of social distancing guidelines. But most students had yet to start their SIPs. Many of them were left without work options when companies withdrew internship offers indefinitely.

ING THE PANDEMIC, OUR STUDENTS' HUMANITARIAN IVITIES BECAME EVEN MORE IMPORTANT THAN BEFORE.

We instructed these students to delay new internship applications; instead, we asked them to complete at least 80 hours of free online courses—offered on learning platforms such as Coursera, edX, and LinkedIn—by June 30. Their faculty mentors carefully curated courses that would align with their career goals, as well as the requirements of the All India Council for Technical Education. These courses covered topics such as artificial intelligence, analytics, digital marketing, and social media marketing. In the spirit of experiential education, students also could complete simulations in finance, marketing, organizational behavior, human resources, and operations and supply chain management.

In this new format, students had to provide their faculty mentors with weekly updates in which they reflected on what they had learned and how they might apply that knowledge in the future.Students who completed 80 hours of courses received eight academic credits.

Early in the lockdown, faculty briefly considered trying to arrange virtual internships with companies for students. However, this idea was discarded for three reasons. First, in our experience, virtual internships are rarely successful, because they offer students only limited engagement with practitioners. Second, the learning outcomes of virtual internships rarely align with the objectives of our MBA program. Finally, finding virtual projects for 400 students—with start dates that coincided with those of our SIPs—would have been exorbitantly difficult on such short notice.

As part of their program, our MBA students also complete several projects for disadvantaged populations. In the past, they have worked with prisons to set up libraries; with the Education Promotion Society of India to promote accessible education; and with the Chiraiya Project to teach life skills to young girls in a nearby village.

During the pandemic, these activities necessarily shifted—but became even more important than before. For example, as of April 24, students had distributed 2,400 bars of soap and 1,200 face masks to local residents, as well as 14,770 food packets to approximately 400 migrant workers. They had supplied essential grocery items such as flour and oil to 15 families, and they had delivered biscuits and milk to 1,750 children and their parents—and planned to continue these deliveries for the lockdown's duration.

In addition, they continued to help women in a nearby village maintain their livelihoods by making envelopes using old books and paper that BIMTECH discards after the materials can no longer be used or reused; through this work, the women earn Rs 50 (approximately 66 cents USD) per day. Under normal circumstances, our students help us train the women to make paper flowers and notepads, as well as envelopes. During lockdown, we asked students to focus the training on making envelopes, which do not require further cutting or processing, so that they could more easily maintain social distance. Students also are helping us work with NGOs to provide women with an opportunity to sell produce at local markets.

Throughout all of these activities, students maintained a distance of two meters from others; they wore masks and kept their work areas sanitized.

Soon, BIMTECH students will begin delivering online skill development programs to children at a school in a local village. Luckily, the village's school is equip d wit computers, several smartphones, and an internet connection, which will make it possible for our students to interact wit   ren   m a dis   ce.

Our next session began   June   an   ve   that it is unlikely that we will be able to rec pen our campus sly July-a lower if we can we predict that many students will choose to stay home out of caution. But just as we will continue delivering our courses online for the foreseeable future, we also will refine our post-COVID-19 approach to experiential learning. Even if our students must mainta n soci SUBSCRIBE distance, we believe they can continue to pursue hands-on learning and be of service to their community.

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