

UF-Gainesville Beef Cattle News Corner

How is COVID-19 impacting the academic life – a UF faculty' prospective.

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I have the privilege to call Joy Reznicek from Town Creek Farm not only a great supporter of my research program, but also a friend. She asked me the other day if I can share my opinion on how COVID-19 impacted our academic lives for their Newsletter (available at <http://www.towncreekfarm.com/>). She also allowed me to share this opinion with the readers of the Florida Cattlemen & Livestock Journal.

It is hard to believe that about 2 months ago we were in Spring break and life was normal! (UF spring break was Feb 28-March 7). We resumed classes on Monday, March 9 and by Friday of that week we were advised to start considering moving classes to an online format. By the following Friday (March 20) all UF classes were moved online for the rest of the Spring semester, and the same decision for all summer courses soon followed.

I was lucky enough to be teaching classes that were easy to move to an online format: ANS 3384 Animal Genetics has about 95 undergraduate students, while 8 graduate students are taking ANS 6387 (Genetic analyses of complex traits). While the ANS 3384 has a lab period, it is not a wet lab but involves math problems. The biggest challenge was recording all the class material and finding ways to stay in touch with the students. Yes, we are fortunate we live in a time when so many technologies are available to us, however teaching online is not easy on either the teacher or the student and definitely not when you have to make the transition in a few days! I ended up spending a lot of time on recording extra material (help sessions, instructions for the week, etc.) just to try to maintain contact with the students, and the most challenging part was to transmit the “real” self through the computer in order to provide some normalcy. Although we will be able to finish the semester and the students will finish their classes and get their degrees, we both suffered – I miss seeing the students and having a conversation with them before, during and after class; and I heard from students that is difficult for them to maintain interest and focus. I should also add that I was one of the lucky ones because I have some previous experience as I already teach on online class, so using the technology was not a challenge and I was able to spend more time on “how to do it better”, not on just “making it work”.

Now that we are at the end of the semester and have some time to breath, another issue is becoming very rapidly a big problem. Doing research in the COVID-19 era. Since March 24, on-campus work has been limited to essential services which means all laboratories had to completely close and no work is being performed. My focus right now as research faculty is to make sure my graduate students are healthy, staying safe and maintain a good mental health. We meet weekly through zoom for our regular weekly lab meeting and we also meet one-on-one to discuss their progress. It is a great time for students to engage in professional development activities and working on thesis/dissertations and papers. I try to provide them with resources on managing stress, strategies for mental and physical wellness while staying at/working from home, but in the same time I try not to push them too hard. The biggest worry is with the real research – when are we going to be able to get back to our research projects and restart data collection and planned experiments? We have several funded projects and my group has a very intensive data collection period over the summer (for the thermotolerance research) – everything is right now halted and we are probably not going to be able to work on any of our research projects this year. How is

this going to affect us in the future? It is difficult to say, especially since we are not sure when and how things will return to some sort of “normal”. For now, I was not able to bring two of the new graduate students I was planning to take on starting Fall 2020 (they are international students, and we were asked to postpone all international new student hiring to Spring 2021). The current students will need to extend their programs in order to be able to finish their planned research – and I will have to figure out a way to pay for their extended programs. I also worry about future funding as we are already hearing about state budget cuts and I am sure the federal programs will be faced with reduced funds available for new research projects.

However, as a group, we were fortunate to not have been infected with COVID-19 and we are in a situation where we can continue our jobs (at least some aspects) even if it’s a new online format. Social distancing is necessary to preserve good health, but it’s not good for education and not for research. We are poised to make things work, but there is no doubt that, it least when it comes to research, the tough times are still ahead of us.