



NCCAP AmeriCorps Remote Service Reflections during COVID-19

Charles Buza

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This past week, the Wausau School District closed its schools due to COVID-19. It was rather a sudden change for everyone who works for the school district. Many of us, even the seasoned teachers, have never dealt with distance learning, and I am sure many of our students never dealt with it either. It was a big change for everyone, especially our AmeriCorps team. Since joining NCCAP three years ago, there has not been an instance like this. Sometimes I do feel like we are cut off from each other. At least I have my NCCAP partner from Wausau East to keep in touch with as we try to salvage our Academic Learning Center in the online world.

Speaking of which, one of the biggest changes in routine was saved for Wausau East High School. Because of the closure, our whole school went virtual. Admittedly, I was very nervous trying to keep things as normal as it can be for our ALC students. Since we would not be seeing them in person in the foreseeable future, I felt isolated from those who really benefit from my help. Will they be able to succeed without me physically being there? After the first week, I honestly do not have an answer yet. This first week seemed to be a practice run for the coming weeks. Teachers, students and administration all seemed to try and navigate through the virtual learning world. Teachers were setting up their ItsLearning pages on short notice, students and parents were setting up times to save schoolwork at home (as well as trying to get food for those to whom school was the only place to get it). Administration was keeping in close contact with us to ensure we made a smooth transition. This week was a bit messy, but I believe with practice we can make it through until we can convene in person again. As AmeriCorps members for Wausau East, we made sure that we let our students and staff know that we are still here for them. We set up a Google Hangout to chat with our students, sent copious amounts of emails to them, and set up Google Docs so they can ask questions from their homework. Right now, it is the best we can do without physically being with them individually at their houses. That is the main conclusion I am drawing from this experience. We are doing the best we can despite the circumstances, and I think that that is part of the patchwork of AmeriCorps when crisis comes up.

03.28.2020 -- Strange Experience For All

March of 2020 was certainly a strange experience for everyone involved in AmeriCorps and the Wausau School District, actually almost every school district in the country. With the outbreak of COVID-19 in full force in the United States, everyone seemed to be in a high level of anxiety and stress. I was no different. The thought of Wausau East closing down for an extended period of time left me with a lot of questions. How will I stay in touch with my students? With the faculty? With my AmeriCorps supervisor and fellow members? These questions kept whirling around in my head. Added on to that was my concern for my family, friends, and own future going off to graduate school. How will those factors be effected? Luckily, the former concerns were addressed and the transition into virtual learning in the school district was a relatively smooth one on my end. My partner and I set up multiple channels through which we would interact with our students and fellow staff members. Through the use of email, Google Hangouts, and ItsLearning, we successfully utilized online platforms to keep in touch with our students. We spent the first week using these platforms to remind them of upcoming assignments and tests, and to reinforce the idea that we are still here for them even though we could be miles from where they are. We ended up being praised by our host site supervisor, teachers and AmeriCorps staff for taking initiative and not letting this closure of the school and our Academic Learning Center be some kind of break for us. So I suppose that is as great a story I can come up with despite the circumstances of paranoia.

One little add on to mention, I received "Happy Birthdays" from two of my students I had no idea remembered it. Those wishes made my day and gave rise to the reality that I have formed stable relationships with many of my students, even virtually.

04.01.2020

With the second full week of virtual learning over with, I am fortunate enough to say that things are going rather alright. The actual learning on the students' part has suddenly picked up a bit, with a handful of students actually contacting me for help. That isn't to say that it has been constant. There are plenty of times where the majority of my work during the school day is sending out a plethora of emails to students and teachers to touch base on progress and monitoring those emails. However, just the sign of students seeking help will hopefully bring about a chain reaction. In other words, hopefully next week I will be seeing even more questions and contact from students in larger numbers. This week, my fellow AmeriCorps tutor and I sent out emails to students who we have not heard from in quite some time. These emails contained words of encouragement and reassurance to reach out to us for help and a demand that they stay on top of their classes. Virtual learning causes those students who tend to fall behind to be in big trouble online. That is because if you fall behind in your classes online, it is very difficult to catch up. This leads me to the lesson that virtual learning has taught me. Being a teacher or tutor online can be a mixed bag because there are many times where you keep your relationships with students that you built up for so long. However, sometimes you can lose them because of the distance between you. That is why I hope for the best as we near the end of the school year if this distance learning persists.

Quentin Rickert, WSD

04.02.2020 -- Quarantine Brings New Perspectives

As a new AmeriCorps member from the Greater Wausau Area, I began serving EEA Learning Academy just a week before the recent school closures. I was incredibly lucky to be placed on an amazing team who facilitated student learning through online courses. Yet, even with our technology centered curriculum, we could never have anticipated the transitions we would have to make when the orders of a statewide quarantine took place.

As remote learning began, students didn't think much of the changes. It was still a new situation where the students enjoyed being away from school. It wasn't until after Spring Break had ended when we began to gather as an entire school for virtual advisory circles. It was during the first few meetings that the new perspectives brought about by our students started to appear. Students had not been with each other or our staff for nearly two weeks, and many of them spoke about how they wish they could be back in school again. Some students wanted the ability to be around friends again, some wanted the accountability provided by advisors, some needed the safe-haven and services provided by the school, while others spoke of a combination of these reasons.

Our students have had to endure an adjustment to their routine due to the unprecedented nature of the school closures. Like most young students, they have only ever known the routines from school. They may have even gotten bored of that routine and started to think of this routine as unnecessary. In only two weeks, our students have begun to recognize and understand the important role that school and education plays in reinforcing the social fabric of our community. We may get better at working remotely and contacting each other through digital media. But at the end of this all, our students will have developed a new appreciation for the time that they get to spend in school with classmates and advisors.

Ryan Aderholdt, WSD

The year 2020 has definitely started off with, at the very least, an interesting twist. For the first time, in my memory, the world is communally dealing with a Global Pandemic. I know that this is not the first time there has been a viral outbreak in other countries, but I don't remember them having such an effect on the Earth in its entirety. Because of this, we are all trying our best to come out of this situation unscathed and to continue a sense of normalcy during an abnormal time. But what does that mean for us AmeriCorps members? Well, in my case it is to implement social distancing while also using virtual learning to continue being involved in the assistance of my students. In fact, the day before local community areas closed, I met with my fellow AmeriCorps member, Charles, to discuss our plan of action moving forward. Since then, we have been active every day with communicating with our students. Whether it is been emailing them grade checks, video chatting to go over complicated problems/assignments, or just messaging them via Google Hangouts to let them know about daily assignments, we will continue to provide a positive presence in their lives.