



Belmont Abbey
COLLEGE

*That in all things God
may be glorified*

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Belmont Abbey College: A Resolute Community

BELMONT, N.C. (February 1, 2021)—The goal for Belmont Abbey College for the fall semester 2020 was to be normal in an abnormal time: Keep the promise of a quality education and development enhanced by the interaction with each other and with the faculty. Community is a cornerstone of a Benedictine education. To deprive students of community would not fulfill the Belmont Abbey mission. The college was determined to bring students back to campus even in the darkness of a pandemic. Led by President William Thierfelder, Provost Travis Feezell, and a cross-functional team, the Abbey embarked into uncharted waters.

“Our fall began truly in spring, spring break to be exact. At that time we made the decision not to have our students return to campus but to go remote with all of our classes. The undertaking of this goal was an achievement for our college that has few equals,” said Provost, Dr. Travis Feezell. The Abbey did it. The college converted all classes to an online format and finished the spring 2020 semester completely remote, all the way through finals, even culminating with a virtual graduation. This may not sound impressive in a world in which an online experience is so normal and expected. For a small campus, however, it was a Herculean effort which also provided advantages for Fall 2020 and beyond. The spring prepared the college technologically and pedagogically for the fall semester.

“We went forward in faith knowing that God would bring to fruition His will which we were sure was good for His people, our students whom He had entrusted to us,” said President, Dr. Bill Thierfelder. Going forward in faith did not exclude preparations in anticipation that some would contract the virus. College leadership predicted that, even if the campus was somehow safe, someone was likely to bring the virus from outside. One positive case would multiply, as Belmont Abbey College is akin more to a household than a city. The close quarters on campus were conducive to spreading the virus, but the college was confident it could implement effective mitigating strategies. The plan was simple: Quarantine the exposed, isolate the sick, slow the spread, overcome the peaks.

Communication was the key to success. The college administration consistently communicated updates on cases to the community. There were regular reminders of the guidelines: Keep physical distance, wear masks inside and when in close proximity to others, avoid large gatherings without distancing, wash those hands. Preparations for both on-campus and off-campus housing for quarantine and isolation proved invaluable. As one might expect when friends have been separated so long, students gathered together on the first weekend of classes. This produced an early burst of cases which immediately put the college’s carefully-made preparations to the test.

At its peak, there were 68 positive active COVID cases, and more than 145 students in quarantine. The college’s policy was straightforward and stringent. If you were sick you were isolated for 10 days. If you were exposed,

you were quarantined for 14 days. One suitemate could expose seven others, posing exponential threat. It was this aggressive response which prevented a more serious outbreak.

The spike in cases meant that numerous rooms were suddenly required for isolation and quarantine. Sequestering students from the community meant they needed additional services. They needed three meals, they needed to do laundry, and they needed to keep their sanity while confined in one place. At one point, volunteers were delivering over 100 meals for lunch and dinner, putting stress on dining services and the response team. Faculty, staff, coaches, and monks all helped to deliver meals, prep meals, and make sure those in most need were attended to.

The college established a QEW process: Quarantine, email, wait. If you felt sick or knew you had been exposed to the virus, you needed to follow the QEW: Stay in your room, email BACCOVID19@bac.edu, and wait for further instructions. The email sent the COVID-19 Team into action. Students were advised whether they must stay in their own room, an isolation room, or a hotel. Isolated and quarantined students were placed on a meal delivery list and were advised to await a call from the campus nurse. The nurse determined whether or not a COVID test was needed. For these tests, the college partnered with CaroMont Health, which provided tests as needed, and extra care when warranted.

“The generous cooperation of all constituencies of the college community through the semester was amazing,” said college Chancellor, [Abbot Placid Solari, O.S.B.](#) “The monks offered special prayers for an end to the pandemic, for the health of all, and for a successful semester.” As the number of positive cases fell, students were released from quarantine or isolation and returned to life in the college community. Eventually, the number of positive cases on campus dropped to zero. The college had survived the trial and found itself heading toward the end of the semester, still intact, still a community, still holding classes both in-person and online.

“Balance was how we made it,” said Dr. Feezell. “We balanced the needs of individuals with the needs of the community, academic requirements with a new experience of learning, the value of community with the need for prudent restraint. We learned a lot about our community, about how to manage the unexpected, and how to care for one another.”

As Thanksgiving approached it became clear the college had made it through. The semester was a success. Somehow, despite every challenge, every unexpected turn, every new requirement, the college had come through as a team. That team - faculty, staff, students, and monks - all found their way and persevered through this unprecedented challenge. As the college moves onward to 2021 and the spring semester, the college is resolute, determined to return to a community, more unified, much like semesters gone by, but with a new normal rejuvenated by a goal accomplished—together.

About Belmont Abbey College: Founded in 1876, Belmont Abbey College is a private, Catholic, baccalaureate and liberal arts institution. Our mission is to educate students in the liberal arts and sciences so that in all things God may be glorified. Guided by the Catholic intellectual tradition and the Benedictine spirit of prayer and learning, we welcome a diverse body of students and provide them with an education that will enable them to lead lives of integrity, to succeed professionally, to become responsible citizens, and to be a blessing to themselves and to others. Our beautiful and historic campus is conveniently located just 10 miles west of Charlotte, N.C., and is currently home to more than 1500 students. For more information, visit