

Nathan Whitlock:

Welcome to NEXTcast. A podcast about teaching and learning at Humber College. I'm Nathan Whitlock, a professor at Humber College and an editor at large at Humber Press. This is our final episode of NEXTcast for this season. We're wrapping things up a little early for reasons that are probably obvious. This is also probably my last episode as NEXTcast's host. I want to thank [inaudible 00:00:36] who helped me start this three years ago as well as Kristin Valois who worked very hard over the past couple of years to keep it going. I would also like to thank everyone at Humber College who agreed to chat with me over the past three years.

Nathan Whitlock:

This being my final episode, we're doing something a little bit special. My guest is Chris Whitaker, the President of Humber College. I talked to Chris about how he is handling the current pandemic, about the decision to close Humber's campuses and move all of its programs online, and about how he thinks things are going.

Nathan Whitlock:

Welcome to NEXTcast, Chris.

Chris Whitaker:

Thank you, Nathan. I'm glad to be here.

Nathan Whitlock:

Well, I know that you're very busy. I appreciate you making time for this. I wanted to ask you just before we start talking about the Humber specific questions and the Humber specific issues. How are you handling this very strange time?

Chris Whitaker:

Well, it is strange for all of us, which I think is an understatement. And there's some interesting learnings to be had for all of us, both personally and professionally. And it has been a little challenging because all of us have been very housebound and I think we're into the fourth week right now since I've been working from home for the most part.

Chris Whitaker:

And on the one hand it's good because I'm in the house. There's not a lot to do other than be focused at work. On the other hand, I just think as people we're generally sociable and we have our habits to begin with. So it is just adjusting to the new rhythms of things. But I must say for me, work is keeping me busier than ever on the weekends and into the evenings right now.

Nathan Whitlock:

And obviously the campuses are both closed and they've been closed for a few weeks. When was the last time you physically saw your office and saw your desk?

Chris Whitaker:

Yeah, so I actually did end up going in about a week or so ago because I just didn't have enough technology at home. So I ended up just grabbing my desktop computer, which I never thought I would have to do and bringing it at home just because some of the functionality I realized that it was very difficult for me to do video conferences and access documents on my One Drive for example, on the same device at the same time. So I decided that I need to bring home another screen. So the building was very empty. It's always very strange when you go in there and you could shoot a cannon down the hall and nothing happens. It's just so deserted. But this is what we need to get through.

Nathan Whitlock:

And you mentioned bringing your desktop computer home. And before we started recording we were talking about, we're actually doing this on Zoom, which you said you are new to. I'm fairly new to it myself. What are some new tech skills that you've developed during this weird time?

Chris Whitaker:

Well, it has been interesting and I think being in our business as educators, we're always interested in learning. So, way back, I have Skyped before and I experimented a little bit with a number of other video conferencing platforms. I've used WebEx before. But I must say I've gotten... And this is the first time I've Zoomed and I've also gotten more proficient in Google Hangouts and Teams, which seem to be very popular.

Chris Whitaker:

So a number of different boards and committees that I'm on, which would have historically maybe had, well face to face and or teleconferences. People are moving to the video conferencing now. And I must say, I find some of those platform forms very productive. And actually you're able to run a meeting much more effectively than just a teleconference, which occasionally has people talking over each other and that type of thing. So it's nice to have the combination of video and the chat function in some of these programs.

Nathan Whitlock:

I apologize for forcing you on to Zoom.

Chris Whitaker:

No, it's great. You know what, I have another Zoom thing coming up about an hour after we finish, so this is great. So hopefully I don't mess up.

Nathan Whitlock:

Well this is good practice then.

Chris Whitaker:

Yeah.

Nathan Whitlock:

So I'm wondering just, it's been a month now pretty much since the decision was made to close the campuses, put everything online. I'm wondering when you were having those decisions, those sort of

high level decisions about bringing down that steel door that closed everything off, what kinds of issues were top most in your mind?

Chris Whitaker:

Yeah, well it wasn't a challenging time. And I remember just in the lead up to before we made the call and you could sort of see it coming and you could feel the pressure and you could feel some of the tension because it's the uncertainty. So I think that's the most difficult part is actually before you arrive at the decision. And now when you make the decision, you get on with it and you proceed to implement your plans.

Chris Whitaker:

But when we were making the decision and the leading up to it, what was on my mind first and foremost, were two things. We are an institution that is very much focused and our priority is teaching and learning in the success of our students. And in order to do that, you have to create an environment where students can learn effectively, but also our faculty can teach effectively and we can also provide different wraparound supports, which help our students to be successful and some of those, as we know, are inside the classroom and outside the classroom.

Chris Whitaker:

So top of mind for me was, okay, we know this is not going to be perfect. We know that the priority is the health and wellbeing of our community, both Humber and more broadly defined. We have to do this thing so we're going to make it work and what's the best way to do it. So recognizing that we have hybrid models of learning, we do online learning already, but the reality is that neither the students nor the faculty, I think I can say that fairly, were fully prepared to move at the speed with which we required everybody to move into this online format.

Chris Whitaker:

People weren't ready. And we know that often sometimes you don't have the luxury of time to do things. So there's obviously issues for students who may not have access to technology or may not have appropriate study space. Let alone the fact that our programs are often, what I described as high touch, where we often have labs, they're dependent on collaborative learning face to face. So the type of education that we provide that applied hands on approach informed by theory is one which typically doesn't lend itself to an entirely online platform.

Chris Whitaker:

So all this stuff was going through my mind and we knew we had a huge challenge on our hands. But at the same time, I also know that we have a highly creative and a dedicated group of people and all our employee groups at Humber. And so I knew that once this happened and this was the new reality, which every institution is experiencing, that I was pretty confident that our folks would rise to the occasion and try to provide the best environment possible under these less than ideal circumstances.

Nathan Whitlock:

I'm sure that you're having meetings by the hour with various deans and other people out there, admin people. I'm wondering what kind of feedback you're getting from the deans and so forth about how these classes are going, how the programs are handling it.

Chris Whitaker:

Yeah. Yeah. Well, and you're right. The feedback I'm getting is from various levels. So the academic folks are meeting continually to troubleshoot problems, to figure out how we can... Because we're basically building this thing as we go in many respects. And then also I'm in regular contact with colleagues at the 24 colleges around the province and we're comparing notes and seeing how things are going.

Chris Whitaker:

The other place that we got feedback is we decided just about the second weekend into this that we were going to administer a student survey and we were going to ask students how it was going. We were going to ask them for direct feedback because the only way we can improve... You can get the anecdotal stuff but it's good to actually go out and administer a survey and then we can look at the data and look at some of the hotspots and see how we can address those things.

Chris Whitaker:

So by and large, I think some of the results both from the survey and the feedback that I'm getting are not surprising. As I said earlier, we already have a number of faculty that are using online learning or remote learning, however you want to describe that to a certain extent. And then you have others that aren't so familiar with it.

Chris Whitaker:

And so the challenge is that we do have variation in the type of delivery happening across the board. Because as you know, we have about 200 programs here at Humber and so we can't expect everything to be delivered the same way. We can't expect to have all the faculty up to speed on all the latest and greatest tips or techniques of learning. And we also know that we have a combination of full time professors. We have part time professors and also similar to the students when you're asking people to do this remotely or from at home, some of them have a better environment from which to operate than others.

Chris Whitaker:

So, definitely we knew going in, it would be a challenge for faculty and we had a week to work with faculty to develop plans to see how this would work before we launched. And I think it's safe to say that we just need to approach this with a continuous improvement mindset. The winter semester, we had a few weeks and it's going to be concluding in another week or so. And then we will have four weeks before the summer semester, which we delayed the start till May 19th. So we hope to do a lot of learning and tweaking.

Chris Whitaker:

It's a smaller set of programs in the summer and we've actually identified those ones that didn't require a significant lab content. So the ones that lent themselves best to being offered online are the ones that we'll be doing in the summer.

Chris Whitaker:

So we're learning as we go along to answer your question, the feedback. So I think people are, committed to trying to make this work. But I think the key is just to be honest and transparent and

where we're having challenges, let's talk about it and see how we can support each other to make improvements.

Chris Whitaker:

The student survey was quite enlightening and not surprising either because we surveyed students on a variety of things. Everything from how are you doing question and how are you feeling to what do you think about the program delivery? And we've actually had over 10,000 students complete the surveys that were administered. These are students in the winter semester. And needless to say, there's a lot of students that are struggling and there's various reasons for students struggling and they're not all just related to the new teaching and learning environment.

Chris Whitaker:

I would say the main reason is because of the general anxiety of the situation that we've all been forced into. I think in the case of students and you know that students, and you know this yourself from your contact with students that students have lives as we all do outside of school. And so they have jobs if they've been able to keep them. They have families, they have bills to pay. So I think there's this general anxiety out there. And given what's happened with the pandemic and a lot of people getting laid off, we've got feedback from a lot of people that they've lost part time or they've lost their income. And when someone is worried about how they're going to pay their rent or where they're going to find money to buy food or pay the bills, and we can all appreciate this. It's very difficult to be focused on your studies when you're worried about some of those basic needs.

Chris Whitaker:

So I would say that this is a real challenge for all of us. So when we take this feedback, we look at it and say, "Okay, some of the programs students are struggling, maybe they're not used to online learning or maybe the type of online learning that we're asking them to engage in is something that is not their strong suit." And so you have that and you layer over the general anxieties that I just described and that makes for a challenging situation.

Chris Whitaker:

So what we're doing is trying to look at this data and say, "Okay, what are we already doing to support students both inside the classroom and outside of the classroom and how do we work to one, continuously improve the way we're delivering so the students are more satisfied with what they're receiving online, but also how do we make available the various support services, student support services that we have available." Because students don't currently have access to library services. They don't have direct face to face, they don't have direct face to face academic advising, they don't have direct access to mental health services and counselling. So, we're making those things available online.

Chris Whitaker:

So it's really, in a variety of ways, it's really created challenges for us. But I think interesting challenges because hopefully we'll learn from this and we'll be able to continue to apply a lot of these things just to offer a greater variety of modes of having students engage with these services both throughout the pandemic and as we have to have modified curriculum. And then afterwards when we come out of this as well.

Nathan Whitlock:

That anxiety you identify, it's definitely real. It's palpable in the conversations I've had with students. And I think that student survey was a great idea. And I've heard some of the results from that and you're right. It's not particularly surprising, but it's a really powerful portrait of what they're going through right now.

Chris Whitaker:

Yeah, yeah. For sure.

Nathan Whitlock:

Thinking of that anxiety and I will say that I've always tried to start my emails with some variation on how are you doing, how's it going? But that feels much more real right now. It feels less like just a nicety and feels more like a real question. I'm wondering if you have some advice for students, but also, faculties for associate deans, for Humber staff for how to get through this anxious time.

Chris Whitaker:

I've spent time talking to various people about this as well. And the anxiety can overtake you if you let it sometimes. And we all react differently to these things. So I guess the number one thing that we all need to do, whether we're staff or students is that we have to understand that we're all experiencing this together. So we're all experiencing many of the same feelings at different levels. And we know that whether it's your online delivery or whether you're stuck at home and you can't get out for your groceries or do your regular routine, this is something... We're all in this together and we're separated from each other because we are all in this together. It's just such a very weird circumstance to be in.

Chris Whitaker:

So we need to recognize that of course this isn't perfect, so we shouldn't expect things to go as well as they did before. And so in some cases we need to modify our expectations of ourselves and others. And what that requires is patience and understanding. And I think, sometimes that can be a commodity that's hard to come by when people are under a lot of pressures. And if you look at even what the provincial and federal governments are trying to do in terms of relief and there's questions about the speed of that relief and how much and when.

Chris Whitaker:

So things are coming, it's being recognized that people are undergoing this but we still have to continue because if we're not patient, if we don't try to understand and work with people on this and be collaborative, what is the alternative really? The alternative to that only makes you more anxious and makes the situation more difficult for everyone.

Chris Whitaker:

So, what I say to people is that, we need to be patient. We need to understand that no one's perfect. I think it's important for all of us to be open to any type of communication and that's listening to people that are having a problem for us at the college and for all of our staff managers, faculty, it's, trying to listen, try not to be judgmental about things, try to be supportive. We need to keep communicating with each other because that's the only way that we can actually maintain relationships during this time of isolation.

Chris Whitaker:

And so if we continue to communicate, at least we know where things stand, we have some contact with each other and hopefully with a little patience and understanding that we're all in it together and we need to approach this with the spirit of continuous improvement.

Chris Whitaker:

Hopefully we can get through this. And I shouldn't say hopefully, because I know we will get through this. I know when we're in the middle of it now it's difficult to see any light at the end of the tunnel. But I think we should at least recognize, given the experience of countries that have come out of this and were into it before us and came a little bit earlier than us, that this will end at some point in time. And I think it's that uncertainty adds a level of anxiety as well because it doesn't really feel like it's going to end.

Chris Whitaker:

But I would just say to people, we need to help patients. We need to understand that everybody's doing the best they can with less than an ideal situation. And in terms of the college and our students, we are here to support our students. Although we know that not perfect. So I can tell you that I'm in confident in talking to our managers, staff and faculty that everybody is doing the best they can under this less than ideal situation. Everybody at the college is acting professionally and doing that at the same time as they're all managing their own personal stress and their own families and their parents and their children on their financial concerns.

Chris Whitaker:

So really, we're all experiencing a lot of the same stuff. We just need to be patient and understanding. And I think there's some great lessons to be learned for all of us as individuals and as society after this. And I'm hopeful that when we get out of this, which is in the not too distant future, that we'll all be stronger as a result. Maybe we'll have a better organization and a better world. So that's the other last point is to remain positive. You just got to think positively all the time because it's much better than the alternative.

Nathan Whitlock:

Well, thank you so much Chris. I really do appreciate that. And I think you're right. Patience, understanding, communication, compassion and... That's all going to get us through.

Chris Whitaker:

Yeah, for sure. Yeah. Well it's great talking to you and Nathan, I appreciate the opportunity.

Nathan Whitlock:

Thank you so much.

Chris Whitaker:

Okay. Take care.

Nathan Whitlock:

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