



# Connect Collaborate Innovate

A Newsletter From The Provost's Office



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Provost

## Walls and Windows

In preparation for a SACSCOC Compliance Leadership Team meeting this week, I was looking through photos of past SACSCOC conferences that we have attended. With smiling colleagues huddled together building community (granted, a “proud to be nerdy” assessment community, but a community nonetheless), the photos reminded me that not so long ago we were not fixated on social distance and face coverings. Gazing

at the images, including selfies of groups piled in a taxi to save money, made me feel equally wistful and anxious. It’s been so long that we did these things without fear or concern that it almost seems incredible that we ever located ourselves so close together in enclosed spaces.

In the many years I have spent in higher education, I have never spent more time thinking about “space” and “boundaries” as I have since the

emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. In preparation for the Fall 2020 semester, many great minds were put to work seeing how we could support face-to-face instruction while recognizing social distancing guidelines. We have had to think about classroom “space” in a much different way, with larger rooms becoming more coveted than ever, and with some previously reasonable furniture arrangements revealing themselves to be

obstacles. In more than one meeting lately, I have found myself uttering the phrase (which most certainly would be viewed as woefully uninformed by an architectural engineer) “we need to knock down a bunch of walls.” While my academic preparation on the subject of buildings may be lacking, I believe there may be some merit to the idea that some of our present boundaries need to cease, or at least become more permeable.

I think many of us have a new lens with which we view once familiar spaces. I find that all enclosed spaces feel much “smaller” or “crowded” lately. I think it is a reaction to much of the information coming

forward about viral transmission and concerns about safety in crowds. In full disclosure, I have since a young age have had a pronounced fear and loathing of closed in spaces. I cannot ride elevators, be seated in the back of a two-door car, and depending on the size of the room, need to leave a door or window open in order to not have the compulsion to bolt out of it. Far too many of my colleagues at FSW have become entangled in helping me navigate my claustrophobia, kindly propping doors open for events and meetings, holding the door open at one end of stairwell until I made sure the one at the other end was unlocked,

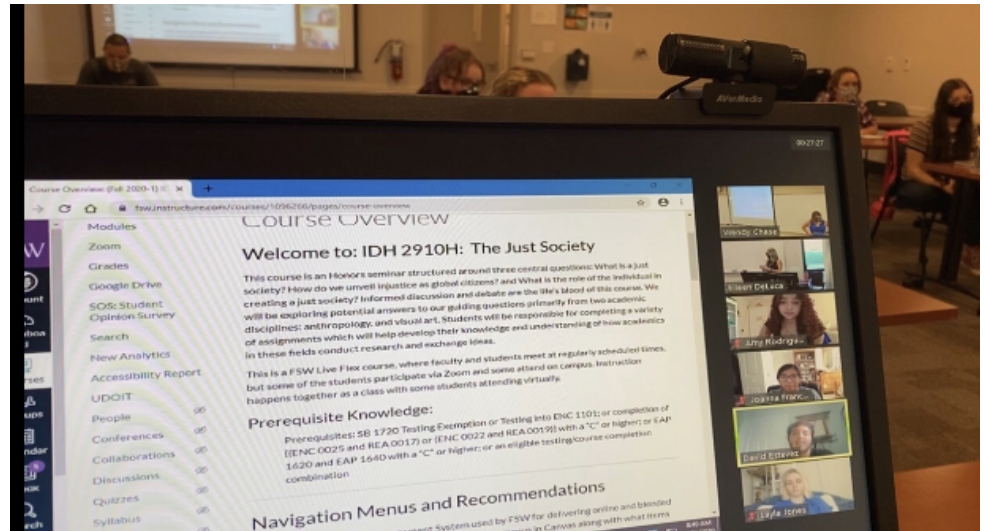
and offering “just in time” words and actions to ease my anxiety in unexpected situations. All of my colleagues that have traveled with me to conferences deserve some kind of medal for the taxing and, at times, somewhat zany situations they have patiently endured due to my issue. Don’t ask, for example, how Dr. Caroline Seefchak and I, in an effort to find a way to change floors without using an elevator, ended up momentarily trapped in an endless maze of service stairways in the bowels of a Denver hotel. No windows, a series of locked doors, no cell phones, and for one part of the journey, seemingly no way out. To say the walls were closing

in on us is an understatement. I say “don’t ask” because you definitely don’t have time to attempt to divine any sense from the implausible chain of events that got us the space where we were temporarily entombed. Just trust, as I do, that she has forgiven me.

In the current partly remote operations at FSW, we all might find ourselves in situations where the walls seem to be closing in on us. When trying to enact the things we used to do in classrooms, in college operations, and in extracurricular activities, we can become frustrated when we hit walls (real or metaphorical) that prevent us from doing what we

once seemed to be able to accomplish seamlessly. We have found “windows” as a way through some of these walls; for example, no matter how fatigued we are with ubiquitous Zoom meetings, this technology has undeniably become the new “space” of FSW operations.

Also, we have made history with successfully employing teaching and learning modalities that give us the best that face-to-face instruction has to offer, without being solely dependent on participants being enclosed by the same four walls. I only have time to teach one or two courses each year, but I am so glad to be teaching in the FSW Live Flex modality this term. The experience has made me realize that technology can provide solutions to the “boundaries” that used to keep us from teaching a live course across different spaces. In conversation after conversation with



*One class, three locations: breaking through walls in FSW Live Flex classrooms.*

members of the Provost's office, faculty, deans, and our CIO, we are seeing the exponential possibility for this modality to advance and perhaps eclipse the strictly traditional teaching and learning model.

Another way that we are “tearing

down walls” is strengthening our cross-divisional efforts towards reaching the college's mission to “inspire learning; prepare a diverse population for creative and responsible participation in a global society.” The transdisciplinary focus of the QEP that was chosen through a broad-based outreach to all FSW

employees is evidence that we all recognize the tradition of teaching in disciplinary silos may not be the requisite model for developing critical and creative thinking. Co-taught and co-requisite courses, faculty and student research projects, and Professional Development “Communities of Practice” have proven to inspire all parties involved. Developing a rich QEP that looks at transdisciplinary communication allows a concerted effort to reshape how we engender communicative competency across subjects.

Many of us have noted that the global crisis has made us all less territorial, and in some ways, communication is better than ever here at FSW. Working together to solve problems necessitates



*View from the Provost Office Window*

tearing down former “walls,” forgetting about structures and titles and saying, how can we work better together to keep moving forward. While that has been one of the “silver linings” of the pandemic, I am seeing many examples of how this sort of

“blurring of the lines” has caused confusion or tension as my colleagues and I moved into and out of each other’s “lanes.” Where there were once “walls” between the College’s divisions, the current situation necessitates at minimum that we open “windows” into each

other's areas in order to innovate practices, while ensuring safety. Straying away from our established hierarchical reporting structures is not an easy task. There is a reason that walls are sometimes desirable. In a physical structure, the walls can provide boundaries that allow multiple different courses to go on in a single building without interrupting others. Similarly, we all sometimes have the need to close our office door to concentrate on a task. If you are naturally introverted as I am, you need to sometimes have the opportunity to isolate in order to reflect and recharge.

So therein lies the paradox. We take comfort in and find utility in boundaries, but walls can also limit movement, engagement and community building in unintentional ways. Technology helps us to navigate this liminal space, but I am beginning to realize that true

innovation happens when we are able to become comfortable with letting our ingrained concepts become more malleable, and our mental boundaries blurrier. This takes courage and patience. This week it became more visible than ever to me that letting go of ideas like "this is my area, that is your area" is incredibly challenging on all of us and at times, dare I say, excruciating. After long days of cross-divisional meetings, I lay in bed each night replaying my words or actions that were not constructive or in some way might have erected an unnecessary wall in between areas in my oversight and another area of the college. In reflection, I realize that when feelings of territorialism or a need to be in "total control" arise, I need to replace those feelings with gratitude that there are so many great minds and great hearts, and that despite the differences in our approaches, we

have the same goal: to support student success and wellness.

In the neighborhood in which I was born in New York City, an essential form of communication to one another was through an open window. This was also the way the entire neighborhood managed the behavior and safety of the children, as any given parent had the right to shout out warnings or directions to protect us all. This was done without any sort of parent to parent judgment, or need to ask permission among families. This activity did not replace the rules and familial structures that were a necessary part of the life of the family within the walls of the home. However, if crisis occurred and one parent wasn't available, through the use of the window, the community stepped in. There was too much at stake not to. Likewise, I need to remind myself that there is too much at stake at

FSW to not let others in “my space” when they are trying to lend a hand or share a new way of thinking about “my area.” None of us can do it all; and more importantly; none of us has all the answers, so we need to listen. I ask all of you to forgive me when I fail to do my best at this. As well, we need to forgive each other for when the process of “carving out the window” and letting new ideas “flow in” proves initially to be met

with some resistance. It takes time for all of us to process the many aspects of each new idea and each new decision, so let’s not give up on each other if initially we encounter opposition. With time and reflection, we will come around if the ideas are sound. Thanks to each and every one of you that have helped me move forward in my thinking, and forgiven my abrupt reactions when at first, I can’t see past my walls. At the very

end of even the most challenging days, I turn away from my computer, look out my window and feel nothing but pride to be part of this community, and the trans-locational, trans-disciplinary, trans-divisional, ever-evolving, and ever-astounding institution of Florida SouthWestern State College.



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