MSU's pandemic-inspired final projects promote community understanding
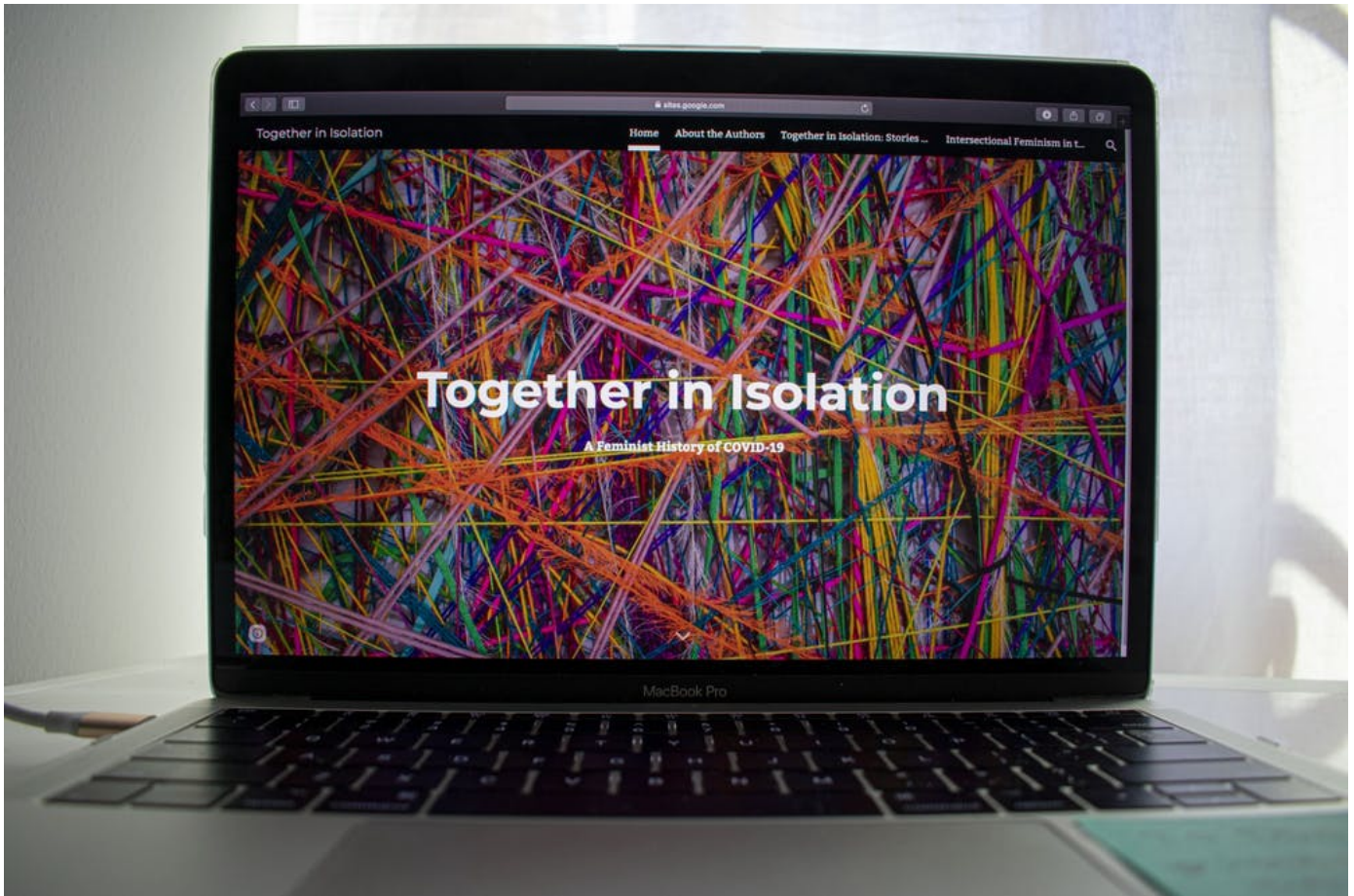
SaMya Overall April 23, 2020

Website designed by professor Erin Graham for one of her four courses. Photographed on April 21, 2020. —

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With the transition to online classes causing a sudden change in students' and professors' daily routines, many classes have changed their end-of-semester projects to incorporate the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some classes, instead of doing a final paper or project to assess their knowledge of the course, are creating websites that document the digital history of the COVID-19 pandemic through personal experiences and current events.

"About a week after we moved to virtual classes, I offered students in all of my classes the option of doing an alternative final assignment," Assistant Professor in the Department of History Erin Graham said. "One of my students ... in my CLS class came up with the idea of writing about their experiences. Then, we talked it through and decided to add the current events component as well, and the website idea emerged out of that."

Graham teaches four courses this semester: Two integrative studies classes, one Chicano/Latinx studies class and one women and gender studies class. Each class has its own separate website that examines the pandemic through the lens specific to that course — migration and Latin America, minorities and immigration or feminism and equality.

"This is really the application of the knowledge that students have learned in their classes thus far," Graham said. "An assignment like this really reminds us that history is not just heroes and holidays. What we are living through today, both in the United States and around the world, is unique. We're really in this very unique time. It's really critical that we are creating contemporaneous records of

this time and, at the same time, that students are using the lenses and theories we've learned about in class and applying those to make sense of this unique moment in history."

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Other classes, like a Lyman Briggs College course where students choose a group of people affected by COVID-19 — such as small business owners, doctors, nurses and minorities — and analyze how COVID-19 affects them personally.

"COVID-19 actually offered an opportunity ... in that what

we wanted out of this last assignment was an occasion for our students to grapple with science as it comes out into the world," Director of Experiential Learning for Lyman Briggs Issac Record said. "That's exactly what is happening all around us with COVID-19. We have a lot of uncertainty. We have different sources of information giving us different stories about what's happening. Different people are focusing on different aspects of the virus and its impact. No one is really certain how this will turn out and in that way, it makes for both a nerve-wracking but also an interesting case to look at."

Record said he collaborated with three other staff members — academic specialists in Lyman Briggs Arthur Ward and Marisa Brandt and Associate Professor in the College of Arts and Letters Sean Valles — to create a broad final project for all sections of the Lyman Briggs course.

Some professors, like Graham, initially had difficulty learning the technology needed to create a COVID-19 website and sharing that information with her students, Graham said.

Other professors had difficulty determining the logistics of the final assignment, Record said.

Students were initially apprehensive about bringing the discussion of COVID-19 into their classes as they were already being bombarded with COVID-19 news in the

media.

"Everything is all on COVID-19, so when they said we were going to do COVID-19, I was like, 'Oh my god, I cannot do more COVID-19,'" biology freshman Tushya Mehta said. "I was already stressed with everything. But then, when I read the whole project and understood why it was happening, I really liked it."

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Graham said it was important to document this unprecedented time while it is happening not only for people today to relate to, but for future people to understand what was happening.

"I think it's important for all of us to have a sense of what other people are going through," Record said. "So this process of documenting helps us to do that. It helps us to exercise our empathy. That's really important in trying times because our tendency sometimes is to close off and to focus on ourselves. Of course, to some extent, we must do that. We must make sure that we are safe and secure, but it's important to have structured ways of reaching back out to the world. This assignment ... provides some of that structure."

Besides documenting history, the websites can help students deal with the isolation that comes from following social distancing mandates in Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's "Stay Home, Stay Safe" executive order.

"It can be a huge mental toll, but at the same time, to each their own. They can learn how to work with what they have to regain that mental stability to keep going and keep pushing forward," Lyman Briggs freshman Dalin Roblero said. "Especially with us students who are having classes online, it is very hard to be in an environment where you can't go out to your classes, you can't go back to your

normal, regular routine. Even when the fall comes, if we can go back to the university, it's definitely going to teach us many things because we can't just snap back to how things were."

The COVID-19 websites foster a sense of community between the students, even though they cannot physically be in the same class, political science senior Erika Ramirez said. Her Chicano/Latinx studies class — which is made up of mostly Chicano or Latinx students — had created a safe space to talk about their struggles and were able to continue doing so with the websites, Ramirez said.

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"It was very much a safe space for all of us to be able to try to talk about the social codes of how we have to [navigate being on a campus that is majority white](#)," Ramirez said. "But also being able to talk about the macro and microaggressions that we deal with on a daily basis. ... So, it was kind of cool to be able to be connected with them still and keep in contact and really just continue these conversations."

The websites are meant to give students the support needed to come to terms with what's happening around them and allow them to contribute towards getting through the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I'm just incredibly proud of all of my students," Graham said. "I think this is a very difficult time that many of them are experiencing, and I'm very grateful for all of them."

Discussion

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