

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



When One-On-One Learning Can't Be Side by Side

A close mentorship is this college's hallmark. What happens when it has to move online?

By *Beckie Supiano*

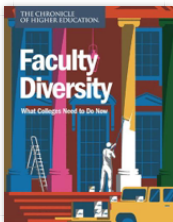
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Morgan Pedroso Curry was looking forward to a summer research trip to the Cedar Mountain Formation, in Utah. There, the environmental-geoscience major at the College of Wooster would collect data for the project that would be the crowning achievement of his college career.

But not long after the Ohio liberal-arts college moved to remote instruction in March 2020, Pedroso Curry got an email from Shelley Judge, the professor who was shepherding his project, co-signed by a colleague who'd been helping her. "The current situation is looking like we will not be traveling to Utah this summer for field work," Judge wrote. "We are disappointed. We cannot express to you how much that just plain sucks."

At many colleges, spending a year on a senior thesis is an option for the particularly ambitious. At Wooster, producing an Independent Study is a graduation requirement. It's also a rite of passage — a capstone to a Wooster grad's education, an intellectual experience many alumni recall years after they've left, and the institution's calling card.

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Reading the message from his hometown, Chicago, Pedroso Curry was disappointed. Utah was a cool travel opportunity — and something he figured would help his resume stand out when he applied for environmental-consulting jobs. But he'd had a hunch it might be canceled. It wasn't like anything else was going according to plan. He had intended to stay on campus for spring break, but instead found himself back home for the rest of the semester.

Judge was dealing with uncertainty, too. An associate professor and chair of the earth-sciences department, she's mentored more than 30 students in her 12 years on the faculty. She knows which aspects of a project are likely to challenge a student the most. She can anticipate many of their misunderstandings and mistakes. She can tell if students are calm or frustrated by how gently — or not — they set down their backpack in her office.

But this year, everything she knew about how to guide students through their projects came with an asterisk.

Because he couldn't go to Utah, Pedroso Curry would have to pursue a different project than he'd planned, and he and Judge would have to hustle to make the change.

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They would also have to try to establish the kind of intensive, one-on-one mentorship that serves as the foundation for a successful project — despite spending barely any time together in person.

Independent Study has been a hallmark of a Wooster education since the 1940s. The program was started by Howard Lowry, the college's seventh president, who'd taught at Princeton University — perhaps the only institution with an older and better-known senior-thesis requirement.

The program was intended to give students “a creative adventure in self-discipline and self-discovery that ought to be the first of such creative adventures throughout life,” Lowry wrote in one version of a document called “[Adventure in Education](#)” that he reworked several times. Self-discovery, Lowry argued, is often farmed out to extracurriculars, but it belongs in academics, too. And every student, he continued, should be “included in the best academic invitation the college has to give.”

The program would also benefit the faculty, creating a real community of learners who could keep professors on their toes. And he mapped out how it would fit into their workload: Supervising eight students, the most allowable, would be considered equivalent to teaching a course. “All this demands a

larger faculty than otherwise would be required,” he wrote, “but it is our belief that no money spent for higher education could be better spent.”

The program is called Independent Study, but working with a faculty mentor has been a key component from the very beginning. It’s something Wooster emphasizes on its home page, describing itself as “America’s Premier College for Mentored Undergraduate Research” and highlighting that “100% of Wooster students work one-on-one with a faculty member on a significant research project (or two).”



MATT DILYARD FOR THE CHRONICLE

In Independent Study, working closely with a faculty mentor is a key component. But

Covid restrictions changed that.

In a competitive market, Independent Study — or I.S., as everyone on campus calls it — provides an answer to the crucial question: How is this place different from all of the other liberal-arts colleges in the Midwest? Even better, the answer is a pedagogically sound one: Senior capstone projects are among the “high-impact practices” research has associated with increased graduation rates and narrowed performance gaps. Students present their work, too — another practice that deepens learning.

I.S. helps set the rhythms of campus life. Students craft project proposals in the spring of their junior year. As seniors, they have weekly, hour-long meetings with a faculty mentor, and I.S. takes the place of a course in their schedules. Many seniors spend their final two-week spring break on campus, writing.

Although some students turn them in early, all of the projects are due right after the break, on “I.S. Monday.” Seniors march through the campus arch, mirroring a procession they made going the other direction as new students. It’s a campus holiday, with food trucks for the seniors and lots of less-official celebrating, too.

Seniors later defend their projects in oral examinations conducted by their mentor and a second faculty reader. Most also present in a public symposium.

Those patterns were repeated, year in and year out, for decades. Until Covid-19.

Once in a while, Pedroso Curry got a taste of what the I.S. experience is usually like. Take the day he spent doing fieldwork at the Fern Valley Field Station, a nearly 60-acre tract of wooded land in Amish country and a 25-minute drive from campus.

It's topographically interesting, with streams, hills, valleys, and ravines. Pedroso Curry's new project would be collecting and analyzing data from what geologists call a slump: a mass movement where the land was shifting, almost like a small landslide, in one of the ravines. He would be able to describe this formation, then offer an interpretation: how it came to be this way, and how it might continue to change.

So in October, he collected data with Judge, another professor, and the department's technician who had come along to assist and work on other projects. But they stayed socially distant: driving to the site separately and wearing masks while they worked.

Pedroso Curry held the Trimble, a piece of equipment that takes GPS measurements, walking alongside Judge — though staying six feet apart.

At Wooster and across the country, Covid precautions had canceled or changed just about every regular feature of campus life. Here was a welcome chance to do something together, in person, in an almost normal way. Pedroso Curry missed the labs that were usually a regular part of his major, and this wasn't just another lab; it was his own project.

Besides, there was no substitute for having Judge at his side, answering questions and cheering him on while he worked. During the outing, Judge talked Pedroso Curry through the best ways to save his data, take notes, and collect as much as they could. Typically, Judge likes to help students explore different ways of working in the field. She'll help determine what they're best at and mold their project to accommodate that strength. This year, they'd have to take what they could get.

Had they gone to Utah as originally planned, they would have spent a lot more time together. The trip would have lasted a week, probably, and in addition to full days of research, they'd have had meals and evening hang-out time to talk geology with other students at the site.

After their day at Fern Valley, the college's Covid policies tightened. Pedroso Curry and Judge got to make only this one visit to the site. They would go some five months without seeing each other in person again.



MATT DILYARD FOR THE CHRONICLE

Each week, Pedroso Curry met with Judge through a videoconference to revise his thesis.

Pedroso Curry had known he would spend much of his last semester cranking out what would become his 36-page paper. He hadn't accounted for how little else there would be to do.

Now, he found himself on a quiet campus with almost nothing going on. In the winter, he went sledding with friends. When it warmed up, he played on the campus golf course. That was about it.

Each week, Pedroso Curry met with Judge through the videoconferencing

platform Microsoft Teams. The thesis would have to follow a specific format, and Judge broke it up into smaller pieces for Pedroso Curry to work on. Each week, they would revise the last piece he had written and start on the next one. Between meetings, he would hole up in the dorm room he shared with two friends and write.

While it was strange not to see her mentees in person, Judge found that the process still followed familiar patterns. Like many students, Pedroso Curry included interpretations in the early sections of his paper. This part, she told him, is where you describe your results. Save the interpretation for the discussion section.

Writing this kind of paper, Judge knew, was a departure for students. Their work went through many more revisions than it would in a regular course. They had to adjust to the conventions of academic writing. And they were working toward an all-important intellectual turning point, moving from consuming knowledge to creating it.

On a Monday afternoon in February, Pedroso Curry went to Judge's lab for their weekly meeting. He was at a key point in the project: Today, they would graph the data he collected at Fern Valley. But Judge would not be sitting at his side, or even able to see his face.

Pedroso Curry got on Judge's computer and opened Microsoft Teams. He could see Judge, who joined from her home office. But she couldn't see him: There wasn't a webcam in the lab. Earlier they had tried having Pedroso Curry videoconference from his phone while he worked on the computer, but

decided this was more trouble than it was worth.

Judge is an introvert, but when she's teaching, she is on. She exaggerates her facial expressions and hand motions, she dances around. This year, seeing how worn down students have been under the weight of the pandemic, she dialed up her energy level to compensate. Even through videoconference, she comes off as enthusiastic.

Pedroso Curry tends to be a bit reserved in their meetings, so Judge has a habit of making goofy asides to draw him out. "Look at us, doing some science!" she remarked after a successful calculation. If he responds to Judge's silliness, even slightly, she knows that he's with her, that they can keep going. If he doesn't, something's wrong. Without a webcam, Judge couldn't see if Pedroso Curry was smiling. But by this point in the semester, she could hear it in his voice. Eventually, if something bothered Pedroso Curry, he would just tell her.

Pedroso Curry seemed to be taking everything in stride. He was comfortable with the idea that his thesis was a work in progress and open to Judge's feedback.

After a few minutes of small talk, they got down to work.

First, they had to deal with a technical hassle. The Trimble pathfinder program they were using to convert the data had recently been updated. That meant they'd have to reset dozens of settings. The process was cumbersome. And because each user had a different account, there was no getting around it:

Pedroso Curry would have to do this himself.

But Judge has a habit of working ahead of her students. She had spent a couple of hours over the weekend prepping for her meeting with Pedroso Curry and had run his data, encountered the software problem, and figured out how to proceed. She'd found a video to help him do the same.

Along the way, Judge offered encouragement. "Good job so far," she said. "There are so many things to click, it's unbelievable."

"I appreciate you walking me through it," Pedroso Curry said.

After cleaning the data some more, it was time for the exciting part. Judge had Pedroso Curry graph his data.

"Tell me what you see," Judge said.

"Perfect elevation of the slope I walked," Pedroso Curry answered.

Then she asked him to do a Google image search for "rotational slump."

When he did, Judge was glad to see the illustration she'd hoped would pop up appear high in his search results. He clicked on it.

Judge did a little dance of excitement. "Now, Mister Artist, you're in advanced drawing right now, aren't you?" she said. She told Pedroso Curry to create his own illustration of the results they'd just graphed — a typical way of

presenting results, but one he'd be able to do particularly well. "This is going to come back to haunt you for telling me all the classes you're in."

The project was coming together — even if it wasn't what either of them had envisioned a year ago.

This year's seniors had to contend with some unusual challenges to write their theses. They also missed out on a lot of the fanfare that comes with finishing them.

Normally, students hand in their projects — in person, at the registrar's office — as they complete them. They receive a button with a number indicating where they fell in the order of submission: first, or 10th, or 216th. Some seniors try to be first or hope to land on a particular number. They also get a Tootsie Roll, a tradition the college's former registrar began in the 1970s.

This year, students turned in their projects by email. The button and a Tootsie Roll came later, in the mail.



MATT DILYARD FOR THE CHRONICLE

Finishing a thesis at Wooster usually comes with fanfare. This year, Pedroso Curry and his classmates turned in their projects by email.

Pedroso Curry and Judge decided to make at least a small occasion of it for themselves. After going back and forth polishing his paper, they agreed in early March, just a couple of days after the target date he had set for himself, that his project was done. They had a rare in-person meeting, sitting at separate tables in a geology classroom so that Judge could be with Pedroso Curry as he emailed an official PDF of his thesis.

Later, he got his button: Number 32.

The college adjusted other traditions. Seniors could book photo shoots with the campus photographer; Pedroso Curry did one with a small group of his close friends. There was still a parade, but it would work very differently to follow Covid policies. That took the meaning out of it, Pedroso Curry thought. He didn't go.

But he did celebrate. He and a small group of friends got together for bacon, eggs, and mimosas; had their photo shoot; hit the food trucks; and found their way to an outdoor party that he thought was designed to stay within campus Covid regulations.

It was a good day for Pedroso Curry. He got to be a college senior, blowing off steam after finishing his project. Still, it was bittersweet. Going to college, especially at a place like Wooster, is all about human connections. "Having this one party for the whole year," he says, "brought me to a window, showing me what it could have been."

Judge was having some similar feelings, though she didn't mention them to Pedroso Curry. In the end, a lot of things went right this year. The creative adjustments she'd made because of the pandemic, Judge thought, had made her a better teacher. She was proud of Pedroso Curry, who showed up ready to work week after week and got his project done. He had shown her a lot of resilience.

When she did have the occasional chance to see Pedroso Curry in person, to get him to smile, Judge, too, felt the tug of what could have been. It was a small thing — no loss compares with all the lives taken by Covid-19 — but

when Judge got these glimpses of the kind of rapport she and Pedroso Curry could summon in person, it made her sad.

Judge adjusted her traditions, too. She usually takes all of her mentees out for dinner to celebrate the completion of their projects.

She and Pedroso Curry would have to let that go. She found out where Pedroso Curry liked to eat and gave him some money to go out, her treat. The next day, he and a friend went for take-out.

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TEACHING & LEARNING

STUDENT LIFE

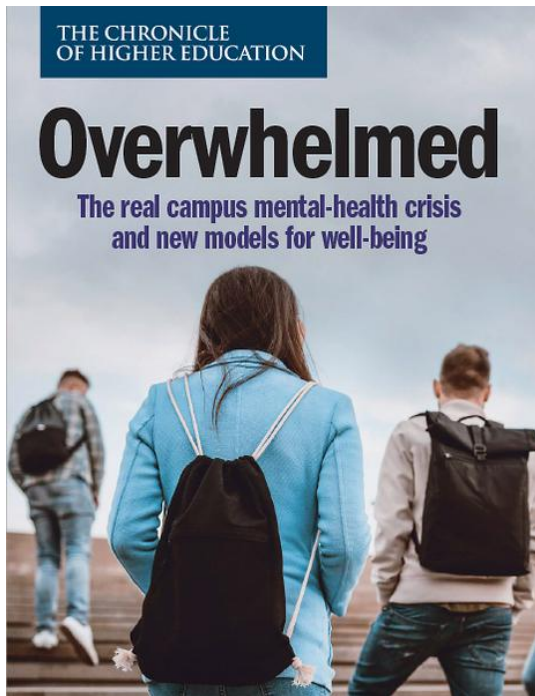
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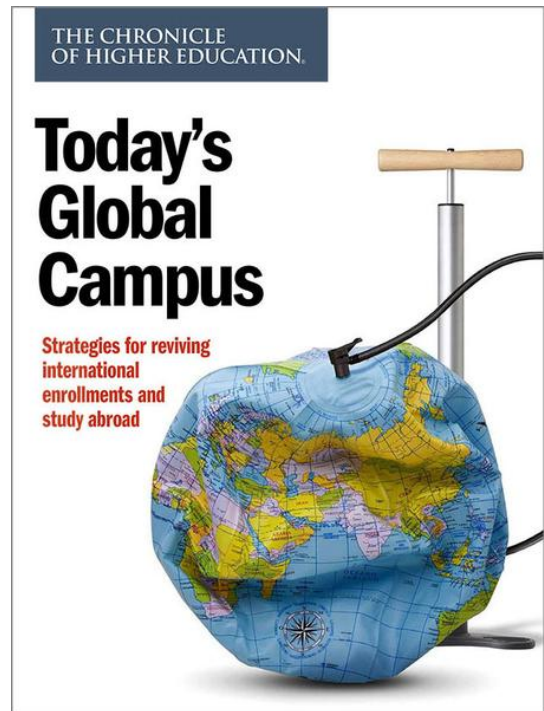
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Beckie Supiano writes about teaching, learning, and the human interactions that shape them. Follow her on Twitter [@becksup](#), or drop her a line at beckie.supiano@chronicle.com.

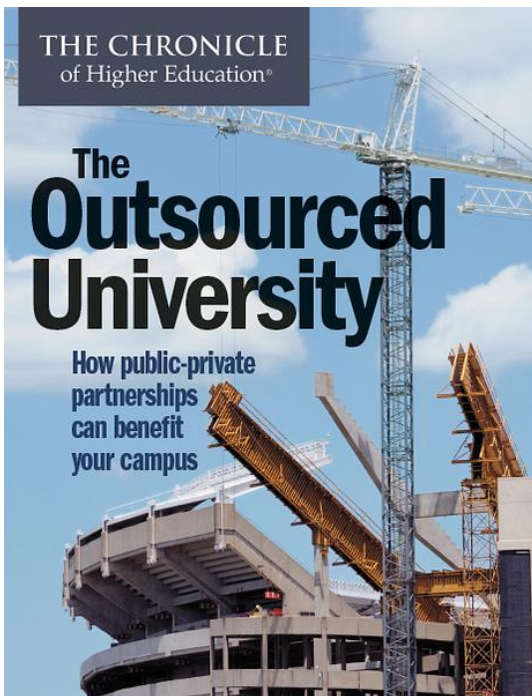
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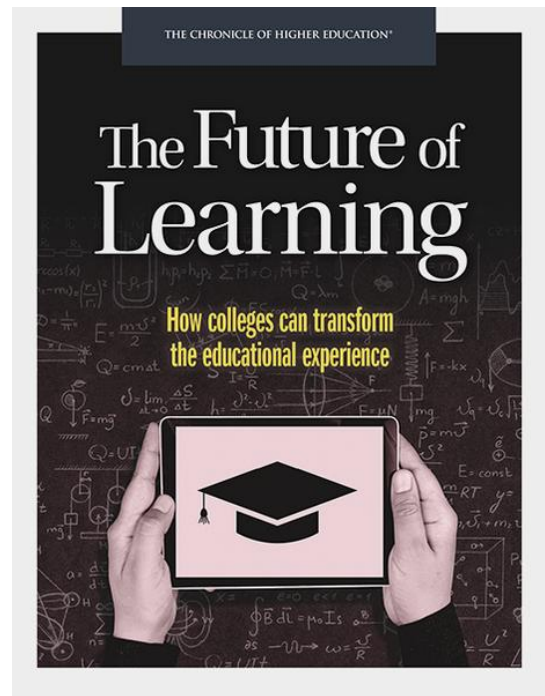
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