The History of VCOM’s Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

March 13, 2020 through March 31, 2021
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Section 1

The History of VCOM’s Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This section is provided for historical purposes as to VCOM’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the medical education of the VCOM students was a primary concern; however, this was balanced with the critically important value placed on student, faculty, and staff wellness and safety.

On March 13, 2020, VCOM closed all campuses, removed OMS-III and OMS-IV students from their clinical rotations, and began with an online curriculum until more was known about the pandemic. On March 16, 2020, all medical students were removed from the clinical environment following the recommendations of the American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine (AACOM) and the American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC), as well as other leading medical associations. The Department of Education and the Commission on Osteopathic College Accreditation issued statements of guidance, allowing changes to the curriculum, including instruction for offering online learning during the crisis.

VCOM removed first and second-year medical students from all in-person curriculum, and were moved online by Monday, March 16, 2020. The ability to be flexible in this situation was from years of using VCOM TV and other online resources to support the VCOM curriculum. As VCOM campuses were closed, access to the campus was restricted to essential faculty and staff to support faculty and student activities. VCOM third-year medical students had approximately eight weeks of clinical rotations and curriculum remaining at the time of the closure. The curriculum was moved online using educational materials, medical simulations, and telemedicine to complete the majority of the following four weeks, and the research course (moved from the OMS-IV year) was also used for the final third-year rotation. These schedule changes were supplemented with additional online educational resources to learn more about patient care for those with COVID-19.

VCOM’s fourth-year medical students were in their final six weeks of their medical education when removed from clinical rotations. Their program was supplemented with an online version of their clinical education and additional education on caring for patients with COVID-19. All students who met graduation requirements by the end of the six weeks graduated in an online ceremony.

Faculty and staff with essential duties that could not be performed at home continued to work on campus while practicing social distancing and following the rules of appropriate precautions. The College provided masks and gloves to all employees. The facilities staff followed appropriate cleaning and disinfecting procedures each night as the few faculty and staff required to work left the building. The dedicated faculty and staff provided creative educational models for virtual education and many excellent models that will be used long after the COVID-19 pandemic is over.
Academic Assistance and Mental Health Services were provided by the Center for Institutional, Faculty, and Student Success and continued throughout the year utilizing virtual meetings. Through the tremendous work of the faculty and staff on campus, including the faculty and staff’s work in the Center for Simulation and Technology (that quickly created robust educational and evaluation models), VCOM students were able to complete the 2019-2020 academic year online successfully. All VCOM events were canceled in 2020, including open houses, accepted student days, graduation, and other on-campus events.

**A Virtual Graduation:** VCOM held a robust virtual commencement for the Class of 2020 on each campus. The online event featured videos of the guest speakers and the Deans conferred the degrees and led the Osteopathic Oath. As part of the conferring of degrees, a speaker read profiles of each graduate. There were also videos of faculty and staff congratulating the graduates. The Military Promotion Ceremony for all three campuses was held the day before the Commencement Ceremony. The videos were available online for the greater part of the year. The virtual event was a success with students and their families attending the online graduation, with over 9,700 viewers playing videos a total of 31,869 times and downloading videos 807 times. The online event was viewed in 45 countries worldwide and the top five countries and territories watching were the U.S., Puerto Rico, India, Spain and Canada. This data consisted of the total views from all three campus ceremonies from May 1-September 23, 2020.

Due to the COVID-19 funds, VCOM was able to assist its students who had been impacted with the additional money for increased expenses from having to move early for self-quarantine. VCOM also assisted with graduation expenses incurred by the students by providing a small stipend to each (in the form of a gift card). All on-campus events were canceled, and the campuses remained closed through the last week of June/first week of July to most faculty and staff. Several other academic institutions adopted the successful model.

VCOM students, faculty, and staff were expected to and modeled exceptional professional behavior to safeguard their health, and the health of the public. The model was accomplished by early recognition of signs and symptoms and taking timely protective actions that include clinical assessment, minimization of transmission of COVID-19 to others, and reporting their situation to those responsible for their learning and well-being. The MyHealthTracer phone application was developed that recorded daily health, temperature checks, and exposures; it was an expectation for all faculty, staff, and students to report information using the app and direct contact with their Campus COVID Officer. Students, faculty, and staff were required to read the CDC information on COVID-19. They were also required to avoid exposure to COVID-19 wherever possible.

The CDC recommendations that VCOM students, faculty, and staff have followed:

1. All campuses were initially closed, and only essential faculty and staff were allowed on campus for essential duties only. Once the students, faculty, and staff returned, the numbers were kept low with altered attendance policies allowing both in-person and online learning, and staggered workdays for faculty and staff.
2. All persons on campus followed PPE guidelines (cloth masks, frequent hand washing, hand sanitizer, and social distancing); and when returning to the clinical setting (surgical masks, frequent hand washing, social distancing, hand sanitizer, and gloves).
3. All faculty and staff who reported symptoms of COVID-19 were screened before returning to campus working with their listed COVID-19 officer.
4. Students, faculty, and staff were educated on COVID-19 including symptoms of infection ranging from mild to severe, how to report, and when to seek medical care.

**Recruiting for the 2021-2022 academic year:** Interviews for new students were rapidly moved online and included an informative video tour of the campus. The Admissions Committees met virtually, ensuring that the Class of 2024 on all campuses was filled. Accepted Student’s Day was also recreated to be provided online. Online interviews continued throughout the academic year of 2020-2021.
VCOM’S EARLY COVID-19 RESPONSE IN PHOTOS: The following pages represent online events implemented across VCOM campuses to replace significant in-person events such as Match Day, Graduation, and “drive-thru” celebrations created with social distancing for students and graduates.
CONGRATULATIONS

to the 502 members of the VCOM
CLASS OF 2020
who graduated remotely due to COVID-19
We salute you!
Safe celebrations let the students and graduates know how much we miss their smiling faces and wanted to celebrate their progress!
Section 2

Reopening of VCOM Campuses in Late Summer and Early Fall 2020
Section 2: Reopening of VCOM Campuses in Late Summer and Early Fall 2020

On-campus classes re-opened following state guidelines in late summer of 2020.

VCOM first and second-year students began their academic program on time; however, the first two weeks were online while VCOM students self-quarantined. The students returned to the Auburn and Louisiana Campuses on July 13, 2020, and on the Virginia and Carolinas Campuses on July 22, 2020.

The students who had increased risk factors from COVID-19 were given individual plans that allowed them to stay engaged in the curriculum but with the least possible exposure. On-campus students were given alternating schedules between the first and second-year classes allowing only one class on campus at a time. This allowed students to be spread across two or three classrooms and allow for social distancing with 50 to 55 per classroom.

Faculty and staff began returning in July using a staggered return. Administration, officers, and essential personnel returned first. Division Officers and Campus Deans determined the appropriate dates for each employee to return. The Campuses remained closed except for essential personnel and students through much of the fall.

Faculty with certain medical conditions placing them at risk to work on campus during the COVID-19 pandemic were provided requested accommodations through Human Resources and allowed to work from home. Employees with difficulty obtaining childcare were also initially accommodated.

In the fall, as employees and students returned to campus, they were instructed to limit their travel avoiding public transit and traveling outside of the state. Travel out of state was permitted for block breaks and holidays; however, a self-quarantine was required for a minimum of ten days before returning to campus. All employees and students were asked initially to avoid restaurants and use pick-up or delivery service, to not attend events where larger numbers of persons gather, to use gloves at the gas stations and other public places you are forced to occupy (bathrooms, etc.), to wear a mask in all public places, to wash hands frequently and follow with hand sanitizer, to avoid touching your face; for holidays to not travel to states where there is an increase in the number of COVID-19 cases. Those returning were to avoid coming to campus for ten days and self-quarantine prior to returning.

The results were tremendous! The number of employees and students who contracted COVID-19 was less than 10 percent, and there were no campus outbreaks!

The appropriate information for avoiding COVID, at the time, was provided by the CDC for institutions of higher education.

1. Face masks were required to be worn by everyone when in the building.
2. Good hand hygiene was followed.
3. Hand sanitizing stations were well positioned throughout the building.
4. Cleaning of the building was done several times per day including common areas such as doors, door handles, stair rails, and other frequently touched items.
5. Employees did not share items such as pens, pencils, and other hand-held instruments as this practice may spread the virus.
6. Strict self-quarantine rules were followed for those exposed and those who contracted COVID outside the institution.

7. All students and employees were informed of the risk and how to mitigate the risk as much as possible.

8. Those faculty, staff and students considered to be vulnerable or at high risk from COVID-19 were asked to notify human resources for accommodations and accommodations were made.

9. COVID officers were used and identified for faculty and staff, and separately for students. Employees and students were informed of the requirement to notify their officers of exposures and of a positive test for COVID-19. Where indicated, the quarantines were placed and all were accommodated.

CLASSES ON CAMPUS BEGAN IN FALL OF 2020

The College altered the classroom and laboratory schedules throughout the year through rotating schedules between classes (first-year classes in the morning and second-year classes in the afternoon).

Laboratory hours were also alternated with first-year students in the laboratories in the afternoon and second-year students in the laboratories in the morning. Lab partners or small alternating groups (not more than 3) were initially used to reduce exposure. Classrooms were cleaned and wiped down with disinfectants between classes from 12 noon to 1 pm. Students were not allowed to change seating during the day. Clinical Procedural Skills (CPS) labs were held in groups of less than 50 and/or by zoom. When held in person, students utilized 6-foot distancing in the CPS labs.

Simulations were done through telemedicine and/or in-person, limiting the number of people in a simulation room to three or less. Any groups waiting were limited in numbers, so the appropriate social distancing was followed.

Faculty/Student meetings were conducted by Zoom videoconference.

A Mission Monday meeting videoconference was established to communicate with all faculty, staff, and students.

In the fall of 2020, faculty and staff delivered the curriculum with an in-person delivery and an alternating online delivery model. The online delivery was prepared in advance to be seamless and avoid interruption of instruction at times of a campus closure.

All faculty from all campuses collaborated on curriculum and curriculum delivery materials to support all campuses’ success. For classes that did not require mandatory attendance, the materials were posted and students could utilize the online format asynchronously in lieu of classroom attendance.

INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL EDUCATION EXPERIENCES were cancelled to meet requirements.

International travel for employees or students was not allowed until further notice.

MYHEALTHTRACER.COM – All faculty and staff became familiar with and used MyHealthTracer.com prior to work each day, which helped identify exposures and limit any further exposures to illness to ensure campus safety.
VISITORS to the building were scheduled in advance and required an escort. Visitors were and remain limited to those that are essential.

CAMPUS RESTRICTIONS: VCOM THIRD AND FOURTH-YEAR STUDENTS were restricted from campus except on a one-by-one basis for appointments, not to impact the total number of students on campus at any time. VCOM third and fourth-year students continued in their clinical sites.

The online library remained available 24 hours per day as before; however, in-person study was initially limited until after 5 pm. Later in the year, a sign-up was provided that continued to limit the numbers but allowed more to study on campus.

BUILDING HOURS were initially limited from Sunday through Thursday by 10 pm and on Friday and Saturday by 8 pm to allow for appropriate cleaning. As the opening of each state progressed, hours expanded again.

RESEARCH developed separate standards that followed CDC guidelines allowing researchers to return to their labs in the fall of 2020. Productivity was limited for a short time; however, VCOM researchers quickly returned to their labs.

CLEANING AND DISINFECTING OF THE CAMPUS.

a. The buildings were cleaned each night and thoroughly disinfected.
b. Classrooms were wiped down at noon each day.
c. Faculty and staff were required to wipe down their desks, chairs, doorknobs, and other surfaces frequently during the day (used items/areas) and each night before leaving and were encouraged to wipe them down several times during the day. Disinfectant wipes were provided.

IMPACT SPECIFIC TO OMS-III and OMS-IV STUDENTS

In the wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic, continuing the medical education of the VCOM students with minimal disruption remained a critical concern by VCOM. This concern was balanced with the critically important value placed on student wellness and safety. On March 13, 2020, VCOM students were pulled from their clinical rotation educational program, including all third-year and fourth-year medical students, following the recommendations of the American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine (AACOM) and the American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC). The Department of Education and the Commission on Osteopathic College Accreditation also issued statements of guidance that included moving to online education temporarily.

The VCOM fourth-year medical students had six weeks of education remaining. They were provided with online clinical education matching the clinical education content that had been scheduled and supplemented with education on caring for patients with COVID-19. VCOM held a robust virtual graduation for the Class of 2020 and assisted the soon-to-be graduates with the additional moving expenses from early self-quarantine required and additional graduation expenses by providing a small stipend (in the form of an expense card) to each from the COVID-19 funding for students. The VCOM third-year medical students were removed from clinical rotations and provided with online education in the expertise of the clinical rotation missed. VCOM remained concerned about the clinical education experiences of the OMS-III students. Therefore, for the remaining eight weeks of education, VCOM
moved the four-week fourth year required research course into the OMS-III year and moved an OMS-III requirement to the OMS-IV year. The schedule was also supplemented with educational resources for COVID-19 education.

Many creative curriculums were developed during this time by faculty and staff. Much of the curriculum will be used after the COVID-19 pandemic resolves. VCOM is proud of the efforts and work of the faculty and staff during this response. Over the next few months, VCOM and other higher education institutions across the country followed the CDC’s best possible advice on the reopening of Institutions of Higher Learning (IHE). Documents with guidance from national and state authorities continue to be discussed in all higher education realms. VCOM continued to follow the local and state health departments’ advice, the governor’s office and the CDC guidance for IHE.

VCOM students returned to clinical education (including clinical rotations) beginning in August 2020. The majority of VCOM’s core hospital clinical learning environments reopened to medical student education and ambulatory educational experiences. Due to the number of COVID-19 patients still presenting to certain environments, VCOM students were restricted from emergency rooms, COVID-19 ICUs and other ICUs/Wards where COVID-19 patients were being cared for, urgent care centers, and nursing homes. The Geriatric clinical education was moved to online for the OMS-III and OMS-IV students. The current year of clinical learning utilized Geriatric IPE cases online.

Ensuring the availability of appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) was an essential key to reopening clinical education. So VCOM initially purchased PPE for the upcoming year with 80 days of KN-95 masks for in-hospital rotations and 80 days of routine cloth masks and surgical masks for outpatient. VCOM also included hand sanitizer and gloves, recognizing the possible shortages in the clinical settings. Additional PPE was provided later in the year.

Rising third and fourth-year medical students were educated on COVID-19 patient care, on appropriate PPE usage before return and managing the psychological effects of COVID-19 for patients, their families, and the students’ own psychological well-being. As the rising OMS-IV students returned to the clinical rotations, the Associate Deans for OMS-IV counseled the students on how to properly frame their disrupted medical education experience when interviewing for residency positions and many other events around specialties and interviewing. This resulted in an excellent match, with all campuses matching greater than 92% on the first match and greater than 99% on the final match.

Under the new clinical environment, the VCOM Curriculum Oversight Committee for the OMS-III and OMS-IV years reviewed and altered the 2020-21 academic year’s curricular requirements. The new requirements will apply to all students including those on altered degree plans, to avoid delay in their programs and ensure the OMS-IV students would graduate at appropriate times to match to residency programs. The third and fourth-year curriculum will be changed again for the fall of 2021, where students will complete ten third-year core rotations and ten blocks of rotations and a written curriculum for the fourth year.

During the 2020-2021 academic year, the elective and away rotations were restricted to meet national guidelines. Clinical rotations known as electives outside of the VCOM core clinical sites are generally discouraged except those required for residency audition rotations where the away rotations are important for learners who have a specialty interest outside of the residencies provided by the VCOM core hospital sites, for military students, or for students who seek residency sites where spouses are
located or childcare will be provided. VCOM students were, for the most part, scheduled for one or two away rotations through VSLO or other means.

For the most part, online interviews for residency were provided. Students sought to interview early in the cycle utilizing the online interview process rather than in-person interviews, which are being discouraged by many. Students met with Chairs, took an interview skills curriculum, and rehearsed for these interviews. Ultimately this led to excellent match results, as earlier stated.

**STUDENTS followed PROFESSIONAL AND ETHICAL REQUIREMENTS** to avoid exposure to and the spread of COVID-19. Students also completed a module on the: **EXPECTATIONS FOR VCOM OMS-III and IV STUDENTS FOR SELF-TRIAGE AND INITIAL ACTIONS TO PROTECT THE HEALTH AND SAFETY OF THEMSELVES AND THE PUBLIC.**
VCOM’S CAMPUS ACTIVITIES IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PHOTOS: The following pages represent events implemented in creative ways across VCOM campuses to replace in-person events.

COMMİTTED TO PROMOTORING SAFETY

VCOM Campuses and Students Practice COVID PRECAUTIONS
SCHOOL SPIRIT
our activities may have changed
BUT WE HAD FUN!
We found so many ways
to be safely together!