When the world locked down, the Schar School stepped up

The email from the executive director of George Mason University’s Safety and Emergency Management arrived on March 10: All university-authorized travel for students, faculty, and staff was being suspended from March 16 “at least through April 10.”

“In addition,” the memo continued, “we encourage students, faculty, and staff to avoid personal domestic and international travel during this time.”

This was serious. The novel coronavirus outbreak spreading throughout the globe seriously complicated the following week’s Spring Break for Mason students, including the 2,000 studying at the Schar School of Policy and Government. If Spring Break could be jeopardized, what else could be affected by this insidious disease?

Well, as the world discovered, everything.

See page 4.
Letter from the Dean
We Will ‘Celebrate’ Next Year

We could dwell on what the Class of 2020 missed—turning the tassel, the hat toss, even the all-too-familiar march of “Pomp and Circumstance”—but that’s not the way we do things at the Schar School. Instead of regretting what didn’t happen, let’s celebrate what did.

When I say “celebrate,” let’s put things into perspective: We’re not popping quarantine Champagne, we are recognizing pride in achievement and the unified effort of hundreds of faculty and staff members and thousands of students who never relinquished their commitment to completing the semester and conferring and receiving degrees.

It is a testament to everyone in the Schar School that dozens of courses and hundreds of classes suddenly became achievable only by remote learning—and they did. The foresight of George Mason University’s senior leadership—led by an interim president, Anne Holton, who is also a Schar School professor—to extend Spring Break by an extra week afforded us the time we needed to make that crucial pivot. The equipment, training, guidance, and communications that were necessary to accomplish this monumental task could not have been done without those extra days.

And we did it.

There were bumps in the road, but they were not insurmountable obstructions. If someone had a problem, we looked inward to those with experience to lead us to solutions. Of all the efforts we made as a team through this historic crisis, one of the most memorable for me is the response the Schar School made to the cry for help from students in peril.

Mason, rightly so, devoted its annual spring Giving Day campaign to focusing efforts on the Student Emergency Assistance Fund, which provided thousands of students in need with an average of about $2,000 to make it through the semester. With the compassionate generosity of an anonymous donor, we had a 100 percent match for any gifts made by Schar School faculty and staff.
Meanwhile, as you will see on these pages, research continued apace; and live events, now charged with topical import, became virtual discussions and attracted thousands of viewers and listeners; and honor society inductions, commemorations, and, yes, celebrations, were convened — albeit not in the ideal manner, but in the way the times dictated. I can honestly say, we made the most of what we had. I am assured the students recognized the effort.

As you turn these pages, appreciate how one small but mighty policy and government school and its students responded to a global crisis, always with its head up, searching for answers, and exploring how to create a better future.

Mark J. Rozell  
Dean, Schar School of Policy and Government  
Ruth D. and John T. Hazel Chair in Public Policy

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The message was clear: You are not alone.
In short order, all on-campus events were cancelled, and eventually Mason would order all classes to be taught remotely. The doors to campus buildings were locked on March 25. The university acted swiftly: There was barely time to retrieve equipment, documents, and books from offices, classrooms, and residence halls.

Announced re-opening dates receded deeper into the semester. Finally, when degree celebrations and commencement ceremonies were indefinitely postponed, hopes for reopening the school in the spring were abandoned.

While they were rapidly adapting to teaching remotely, many Schar School professors found energy and inspiration in the unfolding medical and political catastrophe that was infecting the planet. Professors wasted no time in applying their academic curiosity about the COVID-19 crisis through the lens of their particular fields of study. In fact, just five days after President Trump declared a national emergency on March 13, Schar School neurobiologist James Olds and Nadine Kabbani from Mason’s School of Systems Biology released a study linking nicotine exposure to COVID-19 cardiopulmonary vulnerability. They published a second study five days later.

Other Schar School scholars responded with informed op-eds in international and national publications; others were quoted in broadcast and print media outlets around the world, providing answers to questions that drew on their years of study in their fields.

Schar School experts weighed in on how those in illicit trade would exploit the crisis; how the pandemic was providing case studies for stateless agents learning how to deploy bioweapons; how climate change measures, environmental policies, and power grids protections were being threatened; how violence was increasing among supply-shy Mexican drug cartels; and how countries were responding to the economic and emotional needs of their citizens.

Director of the Biodefense programs, Greg Koblentz, was widely quoted on causes and prevention of pandemics; 2019 Biodefense PhD graduate Saskia Popescu, an epidemiologist for an Arizona hospital system, nearly outpaced her former professor for media appearances, including many national television interviews regarding public safety precautions.

Domestic issues addressed by Schar School scholars focused on the federal response to the crisis, the successful measures launched by state and local officials, the unpredictability of a destabilized economy, and the effect of the pandemic on the coming national elections.
Just as crucially, the public and private policy- and decision-makers counted on the Stephen S. Fuller Institute for Research on the Washington Region’s Economic Future, directed by Jeannette Chapman, and the Center for Regional Analysis, headed by Terry Clower, for real-time data and reliable forecasts as to how the coronavirus lockdown would affect businesses, industries, real estate, workforces, and other key elements of daily life, now and into the foreseeable future.

Zooming In

And as the classrooms went online, so did the cancelled events. Zoom and Webex became steadfast replacements for the Schar School’s venerable Arlington, Va., campus auditorium and multipurpose room, the familiar homes of frequent panel discussions and guest speaker lectures.

The first of many virtual events was a partnership with Metropolitan State University in Denver. MSU’s president, former Undersecretary of the Navy Janine Davidson (also a former Schar School professor), and recently retired Vice Admiral and 2005 Schar School PhD in Public Policy graduate Bruce H. Lindsey discussed actions taken by the chain of command regarding the firing of the captain of the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt and the subsequent resignation of the Acting Secretary of the Navy. Some 150 viewers across the country tuned in for the conversation. (The recording of the conversation is at schar.gmu.edu.)

One of the most ambitious efforts was a week of daily webinars each addressing a different aspect of the crisis and hosted by the dean, Mark J. Rozell. Sitting and former members of Congress, former leaders in the Intelligence Community, a Pulitzer Prize winner (and a Schar School professor), and Schar School program directors and professors participated in discussions ranging from the economic damage of the lockdown and the collapse of the economy to the exposed vulnerabilities of the national healthcare system and the fate of the U.S. Postal Service. A Thursday afternoon session on COVID-19 and intelligence drew some 600 participants. In all, an estimated 1,310 viewers tuned in for the discussions, including members of the press.

Meanwhile, the Alumni Chapter hosted five virtual happy hours for a variety of programs in the month of May. The semester ended with a final virtual panel discussion, Public Policy in the Pandemic Age: How COVID-19 Is Reshaping Our Government, Economy, and Society. Dean Rozell hosted four professors and aerospace physiologist Nereyda Sevilla, a 2017 Biodefense alumna (see her story, “Germs on a Plane,” on Page 17).

More Changes

Unable to conduct monthly all-faculty meetings in person, Dean Rozell turned to Webex for weekly informal “check-ins” and to keep faculty and staff updated on university affairs, including changes in Mason’s administration, of which there were many.

During the lockdown Mason completed its search for a new president, announcing in late February the hiring of Gregory Washington from the Henry Samueli School of Engineering at the University of California, Irvine. Washington’s term begins July 1, when he takes the reins from Schar School professor Anne Holton, who served as interim president.

Meanwhile, Mason’s provost, S. David Wu, announced a late March departure date to assume the presidency of Baruch College in New York City. At the same time, Michelle Marks, vice president for Academic Innovation and New Ventures at Mason, a key department in moving more than 5,000 classes into a remote education environment, announced a July 1 departure to assume chancellorship of the University of Colorado, Denver.
Continuity of Services

Just as Schar School professors began teaching and presenting panel discussions online, the staff members of the Student Services units also took to Webex and Zoom to perform the vital functions of academic advising, career counselling, résumé polishing, internship placements, admissions assistance, PhD defenses, and other services for 2,000 graduate and undergraduate students. Chief Operating Officer Judith Wilde conducted weekly Webex staff meetings, and staff members organized online socials to celebrate birthdays and special occasions.

The Schar School’s development and alumni relations teams responded to the university’s call for donations to a Student Emergency Assistance Fund intended to support students in dire need due to the coronavirus crisis. In fact, the annual university Giving Day in early April was repurposed as Patriots Helping Patriots Day, with all gifts earmarked for the student assistance fund. The alumni board suggested using #ScharSchoolStrong to promote the fundraising effort in various social media and mail campaigns; Dean Rozell announced a benefactor’s 100 percent match of any donations made by Schar School faculty and staff.

In the end, 142 gifts totaling $18,717 — $12,490 from 99 faculty and staff members — was raised for the emergency assistance fund.

On March 19, Mason’s safety office announced that a student enrolled at the Antonin Scalia Law School at Mason’s Arlington Campus — home to the Schar School’s administration and many of the graduate programs and classrooms — tested positive for the novel coronavirus. The student, now fully recovered, had last been on campus March 4, the day of the Schar School’s last in-person event.
By Dixie Downing and Buzz McClain

Public and private leaders in the Washington, D.C., region were desperate for data. Muddled messages from the federal government provided doubtful guidelines for dealing with a global pandemic. Once the economy was shuttered and self-quarantining brought normal life to a standstill, public officials and corporate chiefs needed accurate, reliable, and nonpartisan information with which to make existential decisions.

The staffs at two Schar School entities were called on to fill the information void.

The Center for Regional Analysis (CRA), headed by Terry Clower, and the Stephen S. Fuller Institute for Research on the Washington Region’s Economic Future, directed by Jeannette Chapman, delivered the data that permitted regional leadership to make timely crucial decisions throughout the crisis caused by the novel coronavirus.

Media outlets across the region also have turned to the CRA and Fuller Institute for unbiased, nonpartisan, and accurate insights.

The CRA

“We have three primary roles,” said Terry Clower. “No. 1, collect, organize, and convey available data in a useful, concise format; No. 2, offer our insights and knowledge on the structure of the regional economy that allows government and businesses to better see the breadth and magnitude of the economic impacts of business disruptions; and, No. 3, bring to bear our experience and expertise in promoting business development in the economic recovery phase of this crisis.”

As the virus continues to ravage much of the country, the CRA is providing real-world assessments for leaders and decisionmakers.

“Our focus has been to provide actionable data and information to decisionmakers without getting caught up in public pronouncements projecting specific impact assessments,” said Clower. “In any crisis, be it financial, natural disaster, or health-related, especially a crisis that emerges with such rapidity that we cannot rely on usual sources of data about local economic performance, our goal is to clearly state to decisionmakers what we know and don’t know, and what we can reasonably forecast.”

The CRA’s forecasts will continue to be useful once the economy is reopened.

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“The impacts of business disruptions will cascade across industry sectors the longer this goes on,” he said. “However, the longer the restrictions on movement last, the more we will see businesses adapt to changing and emerging opportunities.

“So, at this point, the impacts are exacerbated by the shock to the system—this crisis took hold in less than one month. A key to our success in recovering from this crisis will be to support the re-opening of surviving businesses and facilitate the creation of new enterprises that will fill the gaps left by those businesses that fail.”

The Fuller Institute

The economic impacts of COVID-19 are expected to devastate the world economy in ways never seen before. The Schar School’s Stephen S. Fuller Institute has been providing the policy- and decisionmakers of the Washington, D.C., region with an unprecedented number of insights as they prepare for what is expected to be a lengthy economic downturn.

“The Fuller Institute is currently focused on quantifying and describing the economic effects of the pandemic in the Washington region so that regional decisionmakers can take action,” said Jeannette Chapman, who was named director of the institute when founding director Stephen Fuller retired late last year.

Using sophisticated forecasting models, Chapman and the institute’s staff analyze the granular data of the area’s gross regional product, tourism and discretionary spending, the vulnerability of the region’s workforce, and the likely fates of restaurants, retailers, and service providers, among other industries.

As the research progresses, it is becoming clear that the economic impacts of COVID-19 will affect the Washington, D.C., area differently than most economic downturns.

“Typically, the presence of the federal government, which accounts for about 30 percent of our economic activity, insulates the region from business cycle downturns,” she said. “However, the current recession is not the result of economic effects tied to the business cycle, but a health crisis, and the Washington region’s economy won’t have the downside protection that it typically does.

“This recession has been unprecedented in its speed and its industrial concentration, both of which create unusual challenges,” she added. “Data that are typically used to measure recessions are no longer sufficient—they are too infrequent or too aggregated to fully reflect the situation on the ground.”

Jeannette Chapman: The Fuller Institute is ‘currently focused on quantifying and describing the economic effects of the pandemic in the Washington region so that regional decisionmakers can take action.’

Photo by Buzz McClain/Schar School of Policy and Government
Studies: Nicotine Exposure Increases Vulnerability to COVID-19 Not Only in Heart and Lungs, but Also the Brain

By Buzz McClain

Five days after President Trump declared a national emergency in March, Schar School neurobiologist James Olds and Nadine Kabbani, an associate professor at Mason’s School of Systems Biology, released a study linking prior nicotine exposure to COVID-19 cardiopulmonary vulnerability. The study analyzed data and research from the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2002 and concluded that those exposed to nicotine are “primed” to be at higher risk of COVID-19.

They published a second study days later revealing similar findings regarding the COVID-19 and the brain.

“Smoking history is germane to how the disease will present in patients,” said Olds, former Director of Biological Sciences at the National Science Foundation. “Understanding the symptoms is important for early detection and management. Asymptomatic individuals may also be at some risk that we still don’t understand.”

Kabbani, an associate professor in Mason’s School of Systems Biology, said the nicotine exposure can come from smoking cigarettes, using electronic cigarettes, vaping, or maybe even second-hand smoke.

“Prolonged nicotine exposure systemically—through various kinds of smoking habits—may thus provide a cellular mechanism for susceptibility to the virus and impact illness severity,” she said. “The activation of nicotinic receptors by smoking is coupled to how the host receptor for the virus, ACE2, is distributed on lung epithelial cells.”

The cardiopulmonary study was published in The FEBS Journal of the Federation of European Biochemical Societies. The second study, published April 1 in the journal Molecular Pharmacology, drew the same conclusions about nicotine exposure and heightened vulnerability in the brain. The bottom line: “Viral entry into the brain now appears a strong possibility with deleterious consequences and an urgent need for addressing.”

The World Health Organization released a statement addressing nicotine vulnerability on May 11.

“If our hypothesis is correct, nicotine consumption in Latin America and Africa predict future health challenges for at-risk populations as the epidemic proceeds,” warned Olds. “This is a new and evolving situation, and we need to be highly vigilant on many fronts.”

Additional reporting by Colleen Kearney Rich.

James Olds: ‘This is a new and evolving situation, and we need to be highly vigilant on many fronts.’

‘Asymptomatic individuals may also be at some risk that we still don’t understand.’
- James Olds
A Race Against Crime: 2-Day ‘Hackathon’ Targets Human Trafficking

By Dixie Downing

It wasn’t how they drew it up, when plans were to have all the competitors for the $3,000 grand prize spend the night in a single building, but the second annual “Hackathon” to combat human trafficking was a success nonetheless, according to organizers.

The self-isolation and social distancing protocols required the two-day competition to move to a virtual environment. Twenty teams made up of more than 100 hackers—along with subject matter experts from academia, law enforcement, non-government organizations, and private sector—devoted a weekend in late March to attacking human trafficking and its associated crimes, and offering viable ideas on defeating the world’s second-most profitable criminal enterprise.

“In the midst of this doom and gloom, we had so much innovation, resourcefulness, and practical solutions that were really inspiring,” said Louise Shelley, director of the Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center (TraCCC) at the Schar School, which co-hosted the event with McLean, Va.-based Blue Compass, LLC. “We had participants who ranged from 14-years of age to mature professionals, and all of them found ways to contribute in exciting ways.”

“In reality, changing the format to a virtual one drew contestants who might not have otherwise entered,” Shelley added.

The participants were almost evenly divided between students and technology and human trafficking professionals. The global $150 billion-a-year enterprise disproportionately affects women and children; the hackathon was an effort to leverage technology against perpetrators and find innovative methods to combat child trafficking and assist victims.

Blue Compass, with support from the TraCCC team, was innovative in moving the large event online without a hitch, Shelley said. According to Jim Jones, director of George Mason University’s Department of Homeland Security Center of Excellence for Criminal Investigations and Network Analysis (CINA), “We’re planning similar events over the coming months, and can use this hackathon as the model for how to move such activities online quickly and effectively.”

“Deriving actionable intelligence from large and complex data sets is the problem of the future, and these students have shown that the next generation is up to the task,” Jones added.

“Within the middle of the COVID-19 crisis, we changed this Virginia-based event to be something much more encompassing with national and international participation,” Shelley said. The hackathon’s 140 registered participants came from 15 states and seven different countries. Comprehensive introductory sessions on Saturday from noted human trafficking and tech specialists provided “so much content and substance,” Shelley added. “We can be teaching and using this material for a very long time to come on both the problems of human and child trafficking and ways to address it.’

‘We can be teaching and using this material for a very long time to come on both the problems of human and child trafficking and ways to address it.’

- Louise Shelley
Ceremonies were on the schedule to induct students into prestigious honor societies that recognize high achieving Schar School students. When university leaders announced in March that all of George Mason University’s on-campus activities would be cancelled for the rest of the year, the Schar School’s Student Services team began looking for another way to celebrate student excellence.

Each honor society sets rigorous standards for student achievement. The Pi Sigma Alpha (PSA) National Political Science Honor Society was founded in 1920 and has had a chapter at Mason since 1983. This spring, 38 students in the top third of their government classes joined the PSA Xi Lambda chapter.

The global honor society for public affairs and administration, Pi Alpha Alpha (PAA), requires a 3.8 GPA and completion of at least half of all coursework for invitation to the organization. PAA welcomed 23 new graduate students from Mason for the 2019-2020 school year.

Associate Professor James Burroughs is the former director of the Master’s in Public Administration program and helped found PAA at Mason. “What impresses me is that most of our PAA members are balancing jobs, families, and school,” said Burroughs. “They have performed consistently well in a variety of subjects and with professors who all have different standards and expectations. Still, in each class they have risen to the top.”

Faculty share similar admiration for students in the Xi Lambda chapter of the political science honor society. Robert J. McGrath, director of the Schar School’s two bachelor’s programs—Public Administration and Government and International Affairs— noted, “PSA students stand out in the classroom for their willingness to lead: to lead discussions, to help their peers with problem sets, and to take their book knowledge and apply it in internships.”

Continued on Page 12
Faculty and staff remained committed to a public recognition of these deserving students’ achievements. The Schar School as a whole found innovative ways to provide continuity of learning using Blackboard Collaborate and other videoconferencing tools. In March, the Schar School Student Services team pivoted quickly to new formats to ensure robust student support. Advisors have been using Webex meetings for PhD defenses and for virtual advising appointments. Webex Teams complements email and phone for efficient communication among staff. Paul Nooney, Associate Director of Student Services, took the lead in mastering various online platforms, and shared his knowledge with colleagues.

For the first time ever, the PSA and PAA advisors joined forces, and a joint virtual honor society ceremony was scheduled for mid-April. During the planning process, Nooney and I, a PSA advisor and Director of PhD Student Services learned that a master’s student had joined the chapter of one of Mason’s smaller honor societies, Nu Lamda Mu—the international honor society for nonprofit management. Including this student in the ceremony was a natural fit, made easier by the flexibility of the virtual platform and the team.

Thirty participants, along with family and friends, attended the April 17th virtual ceremony to induct members into all three honor societies. Schar School Dean Mark J. Rozell participated, as did five Schar School faculty members. The Executive Director of Pi Sigma Alpha, Sean Twombley, was also on hand to welcome the members.

"Being inducted into PAA really reinforced that I could excel in this type of career. To be inducted into PAA means I have accomplished more than I thought I could within this program."
- Master’s in Public Administration student Samantha Brien

Samantha Brien, Master’s in Public Administration student in her final semester, appreciated the opportunity to join a prestigious group, even if the induction was virtual. “Starting the MPA program, I felt a sense of stability—this is what I was meant to do,” Brien said. “Being inducted into PAA really reinforced that I could excel in this type of career. To be inducted into PAA means I have accomplished more than I thought I could within this program.”

“I thought the virtual ceremony was an innovative way to acknowledge our academic accomplishments in our degree programs,” said Brien. “During a time of uncertainty, where it felt like we may not get any acknowledgement, [the Schar School] made it possible.”

Ann Ludwick, Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Academic Affairs, helped induct new members to PSA during the event. “Over the years, Mason’s Pi Sigma Alpha chapter has hosted speakers, career talks, and other events,” she said. “One thing has remained consistent: Members have been class leaders and engaged scholars. I appreciate the contributions of this year’s inductees and am so pleased we were able to recognize their outstanding accomplishments in such a unique way.”

“There is no more important time to be studying and preparing for a career in public affairs,” said Bonnie Stabile, director of the Master’s in Public Policy program. “The pandemic has made clear that well-thought-out responses at every level of government are required to save lives and reduce suffering, and that designing and implementing such solutions is exceedingly complex. Our students of public policy and public administration are honing their skills to meet such challenges.”

\[\text{\textcopyright schar.gmu.edu} \]
Master’s in Public Administration student Darcy Kim can’t self-isolate. If she does, her staff and 230 public mental health clients will suffer.

By Darcy Kim

What does it mean to be a public servant during a global pandemic? It isn’t easy, but it’s important.

I’m a Behavioral Health Supervisor in the Behavioral Health Outpatient Program at the Fairfax County Community Services Board (CSB), responsible for a team of seven clinicians. I am also a graduate school student, a mother, a wife, a daughter, and a friend.

Through the work of my group, the county provides care for 230 people that are receiving treatment for issues related to severe mental illness or substance abuse disorders. We are very much the community’s safety net: If we don’t perform effectively, the community and other public services see large impacts. At a time when resources for local government are stretched, we must continue to support the individuals we serve, as well as our local government partners—such as first responders.

The CSB provides sliding scale care, which allows our treatments to be affordable to those who face hardships in paying. Case management and individual therapy are services we can provide through Zoom or phone appointments during this period of self-quarantine.

But there are some services the CSB cannot provide remotely, such as medication clinic services, including lab work and antipsychotic medication injections. Some clients on specific medications require weekly blood draws and need to be seen in person. We also prescribe and dispense medications like Suboxone, for opioid addiction treatment, which require medical provider monitoring.

To complicate things, those in a psychiatric crisis or those with paranoia/delusions around the use of electronics—yes, it happens—have difficulty with use of technology and online tools. Many individuals we serve don’t have mobile phones, computers, or other types of electronics, and have no way to access our services other than in person.

‘Looking after care providers’ emotional and physical health is critical to providing better service delivery, and this is something I strongly advocate for every day in my job.’

- Darcy Kim

Continued on Page 14
My team is incredibly dedicated to supporting the individuals they serve. As COVID-19 increasingly affects our community, clinicians are most concerned about mitigating the possible damage to our most vulnerable clients. They’re not only concerned about our clients, but also about the transmission to clients’ immediate family members, some of whom may have underlying health issues.

My definition of “community” is inclusive of those we serve, as well as those providing service—our staff. Looking after care providers’ emotional and physical health is critical to providing better service delivery, and this is something I strongly advocate for every day in my job. Ensuring caregivers’ health can easily be overlooked when pursuing the goals of productivity, yet I find it’s really not hard to find a balance once you’ve realized the importance of including providers in the definition of “community.” This balance is critical in managing everyone’s safety and really one of the only ways to ensure providers can continue to provide the essential services we deliver in a crisis.

To be a public servant means being dedicated to the communities we serve by making the best decisions possible to ensure people receive the care they need—especially at a time when individuals may need our support the most.

My job in the Community Services Board requires communication, expertise, advocacy, partnership, patience, experience, calm, self-care, and—for me—chocolate. ✿

*Darcy Kim is a Master’s in Public Administration student in the Schar School’s Northern Virginia Public Service Fellows Program.*

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**The Schar School Student Emergency Fund**

*schar.gmu.edu/ScharEmergencyFund*

Gifts to the Schar School Student Emergency Fund will assist with students in dire need at present. Gifts to this fund will allow the Schar School to respond quickly to the emergency needs of our students for expenses such as housing, food, and other unexpected financial needs. Your contributions enable students to pursue impactful, fulfilling careers without the burden of student debt and financial loss.

#PatriotsHelpingPatriots #ScharSchoolStrong
I wonder if our values will change.

How we work has already changed. Services such as Zoom, Teams and Webex have become lifelines to productivity, forcing us to expand our horizons digitally and deepen our relationships locally. Meanwhile, we are shattering the global economy and retracting the international tentacles of manufacturing, favoring local resiliency over global efficacy.

I wonder if we will, as is usually the case after a crisis, allow government to be further involved in our lives. Will the United States accept that it is worth creating a national health system as a more coherent and effective bulwark against the next pandemic? Will we deride the World Health Organization as a scapegoat of our own neglect? I wonder.

I wonder if we can use the recent demonstration of how government can actually move quickly to address a clear and present danger and unleash the same resources to counter climate change, an issue that is global, is a systemic risk to our economies and health, and requires the nations of the world to work together to create a solution.

I wonder if partisanship can be put aside to spend effort and treasure on converting the world to renewable energy, to cleaner water and air through thriving oceans and regenerated forests.

I wonder if we can change the economic valuation to a human valuation, where the value of our natural resources make it a better choice not to pollute, not to ravage rainforests, not to drain lakes or to extinguish species in pursuit of the short-term economic reward at the expense of our planet’s, and our, health.

The graduates of the Class of 2020 will be forever marked by an invisible force of nature. It has reminded us that everything we do has an impact on one another and on the home on which we live. It shows us that we ignore our impact on the environment at our peril (penning large numbers of different animal species together in cages at the Wuhan “wet market” was apparently the beginning of the chain of today’s pandemic). Each of us will choose how to meet the growing challenge of climate change — by ignoring it, by taking action against it, or by increasing it.

As a member of the alumni community of the Schar School of Policy and Government, you are well-trained and well-placed to move the needle of the compass that determines our future. I wish you well.

And I wonder which choice you will make.

Stay safe.

Colin R. Hart

’93, Master’s in International Commerce and Policy
President, Schar School Alumni Chapter

Colin Hart
Corralling COVID-19 in Dallas: Biodefense Alumna Tam Dang

By Saskia Popescu

Tam Dang started in the biology world, earning her Bachelor's of Science degree from George Mason University in 2008. But it was her course of study in the Master's in Biodefense program at the Schar School that put her on her present career path.

The 2015 degree, she said, “introduced me to the public health field, and offered a unique perspective from a biosecurity and bioterrorism standpoint.”

Today, Dang is an epidemiologist for the Dallas County Department of Health and Human Services in Dallas, Texas. She works in the Acute Communicable Disease Epidemiology Division, helping to lead epidemiological investigations for infectious disease outbreaks or potential bioterrorism events. She monitors local, regional, and state data sources related to infectious diseases, and helps develop outbreak and bioterrorism plans to help support public health preparedness.

Her work is at the intersection of public health and health security, an important field in the modern era.

“I think some significant health security threats we are facing in the U.S. in 2019 are related to the potential for importations or outbreaks of high-consequence emerging infectious diseases, such as Ebola and avian influenza,” she said. “In a metropolitan area like Dallas/Fort Worth, our Public Health Emergency Preparedness division is keenly aware that our proximity to the nation’s 12th busiest airport confers particular risk for international importations of infectious diseases.”

Since joining the epidemiology team, Dang, who has since been joined by fellow Schar School 2019 biodefense master’s degree graduate Stephen Taylor, has found plenty of ways to leverage her biodefense degree. She has developed communicable disease and emergency response plans, facilitated a pandemic influenza exercise for medical students at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, and presented on insider threats in biosafety laboratories to sentinel lab personnel, to name a few.

Her degree from the Schar School’s biodefense program was key to landing her current position, she said.

“It helped me stand out from the pile of applications my supervisor received,” she said. “My biology background and prior employment experiences also played a large part in rounding out my graduate education and narrowing my professional field of interest.

“Overall, past experience and the added education and skills I obtained from the Biodefense program were critical factors in helping me pursue my career goals.”

Additional reporting by Buzz McClain.
By Buzz McClain

Nereyda Sevilla believes she has a way to change how authorities and the public respond to disease outbreaks, such as the novel coronavirus crisis, and especially those perceived to be transmitted by air travel.

If she’s right, it could potentially save billions of dollars in misdirected federal and state money and give millions of air passengers more precise information about infections.

Sevilla earned her PhD in 2017 from the Schar School’s Biodefense program after 10 years in the Air Force, retiring as a captain. She is now a civilian aerospace physiologist for the Defense Health Agency, working as acting director of the Military Health System Clinical Investigations Program. She was awarded the Air Force Medical Service Biomedical Specialist Civilian of the Year Award and the Air Force Meritorious Service Medal.

During her decade in the military, she studied the effects of flying on the human body, whether on a fighter jet or transport aircraft.

When she realized the Post-9/11 GI Bill would pay 100 percent of her tuition for a PhD at a state school, Sevilla came across the biodefense program, “and I didn’t have to go any further,” she said. The accessibility and flexibility allowed her to continue her meaningful employment while allowing her to explore the intersection of science with policy.

Over eight years at the Schar School, Sevilla examined the role of air travel in the spread of diseases, specifically the threat of pneumonic plague as a natural outbreak or bioterrorist attack. While aircraft are indeed moving individuals across the globe acting as vectors and incubators of diseases, Sevilla pointed out that despite the numerous aircraft involved, no one became infected with Ebola on an airplane during the 2014 outbreak.

And yet authorities spent billions on entry and exit screenings, which heightened fear among the general population.

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Sevilla used an open-source model to study what would happen during a possible future outbreak of pneumonic plague, an infectious lung disease that continues to rear its deadly head around the world. The model could be a game-changing tool, said her professor.

“The use of this tool allows Nereyda to go beyond lessons learned from previous outbreaks to proactively develop new public health approaches to containing outbreaks before they become global pandemics,” said Gregory Koblentz, director of the Schar School’s Biodefense program.

The open-source model Sevilla built her plague program on is called the Spatiotemporal Epidemiological Modeler—STEM, for short. The multi-disciplinary, collaborative platform can be downloaded to any computer for use by researchers to compare, refine, and validate scenarios anywhere in the world.

The bottom line for Sevilla? “I’m a huge proponent of communicating with and educating the public,” the Texas native said. “We can instill a better culture of travel preventive medicine practices, such as washing your hands in public places, and not just panicking during a crisis.”

As for catching a cold in an airplane from another passenger?

“I’ve found the airplane is not what’s going to get you infected with disease,” she said. “You’re more likely to get sick from waiting in the boarding area next to someone with a cold.”

‘By November, no one in Virginia will remember the impeachment.’
- Terry McAuliffe

— Distinguished Visiting Professor and former Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe (D) during a panel discussion on Virginia politics with former U.S. Rep. Barbara Comstock (R), moderated by Associate Professor Jennifer N. Victor. The talk took place February 12.
As the novel coronavirus evolved from a scare to a pandemic, Schar School professors addressed the ensuing crisis from a wide range of expertise. Here are highlights from more than a dozen question-and-answer interviews with Schar School experts that approached the political, medical, and moral challenges confronting global leaders.

—Buzz McClain

**Frank Shafroth:** Can states, as Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) recommended, file for bankruptcy?

**A:** Majority Leader McConnell stated: “I would certainly be in favor of allowing states to use the bankruptcy route. It saves some cities. And there’s no good reason for it not to be available.” That is unless you consider the U.S. Constitution to be a good reason. The Constitution provides that “states are sovereign entities, and the federal government has limited authority to compel...,” but especially because the Constitution’s Contract Clause prohibits states from “impairing the obligations of contracts.” Indeed, state defaults on debt are not new. In the 1870s, a number of southern states renounced the Reconstruction era debts. In 1933, Arkansas defaulted on its debt.

If our Senate Majority Leader wishes for states to be able to file for bankruptcy, he would have to lead an effort to amend Article 1, Section 10 of the Constitution, which bars states from declaring bankruptcy.

*Shafroth is director of the Center for State and Local Government Leadership.*

**Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera:** Violence among drug cartels and criminal organizations in Mexico is on the rise during the coronavirus crisis. Is there something related to organized crime in Mexico that we can predict?

**A:** Absolutely. What does seem to be much more plausible is a momentous increase in the levels of criminality and violence in Mexico, due to an anticipated huge economic crisis, very high levels of unemployment, and growing levels of poverty. The economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are already starting to become visible, but I fear that in the near future, other phenomena, such as looting and armed robberies, will multiply due to economic need.

*Correa-Cabrera is an expert on Mexico-U.S. relations, organized crime, immigration, border security, and human trafficking.*
**Philip Martin:** What are the risk factors for African countries facing the COVID-19 pandemic?

**A:** More than 75 percent of the African labor force is self-employed, according to the World Bank. That creates an enormous challenge for implementing social distancing: How can people be expected to stay at home when they need to go to their farm or the market every day to make ends meet? Existing public health conditions are another source of vulnerability. HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, and other endemic diseases remain widespread in Africa despite impressive efforts over the years to contain them. And there is a shortage of ICU-level care in many African hospitals.

*Martin is a specialist in international security issues in Africa.*

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**Mariely López-Santana:** How are countries around the world handling economic stimulus packages?

**A:** As we would expect, there are noteworthy variations across countries in the nature of the programs being launched. While poorer countries are mainly expanding existing programs, the richer countries are introducing new programs and expanding existing ones. It is very likely that in the next few months we will see much innovation taking place. For instance, Spain intends to implement a Universal Basic Income Program to tackle the pandemic’s economic impact. The question is whether these innovations will remain in place after the crisis.

Another interesting trend across richer countries is the coverage of atypical workers, such as those who are part of the “gig” economy, who tend to lack fixed contracts and benefits. Spain, for instance, will provide unemployment benefits of 130 euros to domestic workers. In the same way, Berlin launched benefits for artists.

*López-Santana, director of the Political Science program, has worked extensively on labor market and employment policies.*

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**Louise Shelley:** What is the relationship between COVID-19, illicit trade, and transnational crime?

**A:** Illicit trade may have contributed significantly to the start of this epidemic. The virus seems to have started in the wet markets of Wuhan where illicitly traded pangolins are sold. Pangolins, according to Chinese scientists, may have been the vector of the disease between bats and humans. Pangolins are an endangered species whose scales are highly valued in Chinese traditional medicine. They are the most wildly trafficked mammals in the world and millions die annually as they are shipped from Africa to Asia. Therefore, combatting the illicit trade in wildlife is key to stemming future pandemics.

*Shelley is the director of the Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center.*
**Justin Gest:** What is the role of immigrants during the pandemic?

**A:** They are the firemen running inside the World Trade Center on 9/11, while everyone else is running away. However the government coordinates the American response, immigrants will be an integral part of the herculean effort that will be required to mitigate the spread of this pandemic and contain its effect on our families and friends.

Gest is an expert in comparative politics, immigration, and demographic change.

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**Jennifer Victor:** What role do political and societal leaders play in this time?

**A:** Policy makers, political leaders, and social influencers play a key role in facilitating the coordination that helps people to understand why measures like social distancing are important to heed. In the absence of policy coordination, the spread of the disease would be far more devastating. In this way, the policy makers play a role in saving lives, just using different tools than doctors.

Victor is an expert in campaign finance, elections, and U.S. politics.

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**James Burroughs:** Who are the public servants going into work every day, and what is their role in this crisis?

**A:** The reality is that public service workers are taking risks and risking getting sick to care for the rest of us. At times like this, mental health issues come to the forefront. Even though the courts are closed, the family services arm of the courts is working and is there to serve real needs with families in crisis. We have public servants who can’t always practice social distancing. This is particularly true in police, emergency medical technicians, and fire services. Their jobs and their core work mean that they not only work together but come in contact with the public. The shift work of our public safety officials continues 24/7 so they can respond when needed.

Burroughs is an expert in public management, administrative law, judicial process, and organizational theory.
Signs of Hope

Shortly after the novel coronavirus shut down society and forced Mason to close its campuses, the school’s social media team asked faculty, staff, students, and alumni to create a sign with a message of encouragement. We added the hashtag #ScharSchoolStrong. Here are some of the signs of hope we received.

“We are 6 feet apart, but we are not alone.” Indeed.

—Buzz McClain

The Schar School offers classes at Mason’s Fairfax and Arlington campuses in Virginia. Both campuses are located within the heart of a dynamic region and close to the nation’s capital. Opportunities for internships, jobs, and research are unequaled, as is access to archives and museums, policymakers and think tanks, and diverse career opportunities. With 90 full-time faculty, we offer 13 degree programs across undergraduate, masters, and doctoral levels.

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