

Department of Chemistry

Newsletter, May 2020

Dear Alumni and Friends:

When I wrote at the beginning of January, I had no idea of the momentous challenges and changes that we would start to face only two months later! Now I write to send you the very best wishes of the [Department of Chemistry](#) in the hope that you and your families are safe and well. Our sincere and heartfelt thoughts go to those of you who have suffered personal tragedies because of the COVID-19 pandemic. What can I say? Words are not sufficient to convey the concern we have for our extended Chemistry family!



Photo credit: Dr. David Hewitt '19 PhD 2019

It seems a long time ago that a normal Spring semester was developing. I had planned to attend a Gordon Research Conference near Pisa, Italy at the beginning of March. But two days before I was due to leave, the conference was canceled in response to the escalating health crisis in northern Italy. The situation at Stony Brook quickly changed after that. On March 7, we were asked to start planning for online teaching. On March 10, I had my last in-person faculty meeting to discuss the challenges of putting all our classes online – a not insignificant challenge given that Chemistry teaches approximately 5,000 students each semester!

Spring Break at Stony Brook started on Monday, March 16 and was sensibly extended for a second week to enable us to prepare for online teaching. I had also been preparing my faculty for the likelihood that research labs would be closed, and based on instructions from NY Governor Cuomo on March 15, most employees started working remotely except those needed to maintain essential research reagents. We also quickly implemented a triweekly Google form “check-in” with faculty, staff and students to ensure their wellbeing. This effort was led by Norma Reyes, Chemistry’s Assistant to the Chair, and her “A” team, and they currently manage a list of some 300 people that includes both current and former members of the Department.

Students “returned” to class on Monday, March 30 with fully online classes. The transition to online lecture courses went relatively smoothly, but labs were a challenge. In some

cases, we purchased GoPro cameras and recorded teaching assistants performing experiments. Students subsequently watched the videos and took notes and reported their observations – a key component of any chemistry lab. Now some four weeks later we are inching towards the end of the semester.

Stony Brook has already decided that all summer classes will be online, including labs. For the General Chemistry labs 133 and 134, the plan is to have students buy kits that contain reagents, gloves and goggles so they can perform experiments remotely, in their kitchens.

So, this is where we are. We are all very concerned about the physical and mental health of our students and hope that improvements in testing, together with adherence to social distancing protocols, will enable reactivation of our research programs and a return to in-person instruction. Only time will tell what will happen, but we are planning for these eventualities nonetheless. In the meantime, I am proud to say that the faculty and staff of the Department of Chemistry have met the challenge head-on. Yes, we quickly had to switch gears and step out of our comfort zones to offer spring classes online. However not one of my faculty or staff have complained. They are a remarkable group of individuals, committed to continuing to offer outstanding instruction while at the same time managing the stresses and strains of caring for their loved ones. They accepted the challenge and simply got on with it. I am very proud to be the chair of this department!



Dr. Shabnam Davoodi and Dr. Xinxin Yang

Of course, the immense challenges faced by front-line healthcare workers, including those at Stony Brook Hospital, must be mentioned, and our thoughts are with these professionals who are laboring under incredibly difficult circumstances. There has been a University-wide effort to support the doctors, nurses and other personnel dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, which has included donations and production of personal protective equipment (PPE). In our department, Dr. Shabnam Davoodi and Dr. Xinxin Yang made and distributed more than 250 gallons of World Health Organization [hand sanitizer](#). At 9 am on March 24, we received a request from the Emergency Operations Team that hand sanitizer was urgently needed. Within two hours I had a spreadsheet of all the existing reagents in the Department needed to make the sanitizer and by 5 pm, Shabnam and Xinxin had made 17 gallons! Subsequent production runs have been aided by our friends and colleagues in other departments across campus. We will continue to help where and when we can.

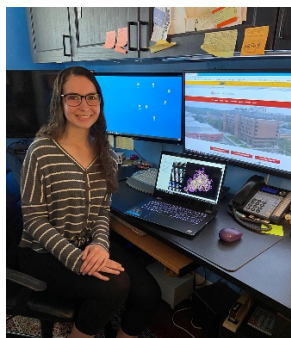
Like millions of people, we now do all our Department business through Zoom meetings. We use Zoom for teaching, faculty and staff meetings, student meetings, PhD defenses and Departmental seminars. This evolution has gone remarkably well and in some cases has also had a noticeable effect on dress code! One benefit, and something that I care about deeply, is that it has made our meetings more inclusive, so that those participants who might not have been able to attend in person can now participate. We can also include colleagues from other institutions, and we recently had a seminar with participants based in different states and even in different countries! We have also started having “happy hour” meetings on Fridays with current and former faculty across the US. It is great to reconnect with former colleagues who spent their professional lives at Stony Brook! We are also planning to have our Departmental commencement online through Zoom on May 22, at which time we will bid farewell and good luck to our graduating classes of chemistry majors and graduate students. Our featured speaker will be Christopher am Ende, Senior Principal Scientist, Pfizer.

Thus, we are all working hard to continue fulfilling the mission of the Department of Chemistry! I want to end with a few specific acknowledgments:



Dr. Maria Nagan

- Dr. Maria Nagan was recently awarded the 2020 College of Arts and Sciences Godfrey Excellence in Teaching Award. This award is based solely on feedback from students and is a testament to Maria’s commitment to the students that she teaches. Currently, she is teaching CHE132, a general chemistry course with nearly 1100 students!
- Professor Surita Bhatia, who is currently doing a herculean job as one of our leading administrators in her role as Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs, was recently elected to the American Institute for Medical and Biological Engineering College of Fellows.



Abbigayle Cuomo

- Abbigayle Cuomo, an undergraduate in Carlos Simmerling's lab, was selected to receive the Dr. Kenneth M. Nicholas Undergraduate Fellowship for Summer 2020. Abby is currently studying the structure of the sugar polymer on the surface of the virus that causes COVID-19.
- PhD candidate [Johnny Lee](#) has been named a 2020 Chemical Abstracts Service (CAS) Future Leader by the American Chemical Society (ACS)
- [Dr. Krupa Haranahalli](#), a post-doctoral researcher working with Distinguished Professor [Iwao Ojima](#) has been awarded the 2020 [Scarborough Postdoctoral Award](#) by the Medicinal Division of the American Chemical Society
- Read how [new findings](#) by Professor Peter Khalifah and his students/co-authors Gerard Mattei and Zhuo Li could lead to more efficient batteries.
- A special shout out to building manager Mike Teta for all he has done above and beyond during this time for the Department! In 2015, Mike Teta received the CAS Staff Excellence Award for his amazing support of our department. Today he continues to provide excellence.
- I would also like to welcome Professor Amy Marschilok, who recently joined our Department as a tenured Associate Professor.

Finally, I would like to end with a special thank you to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Distinguished Professor Nicole Sampson. Our Department's response to this crisis has been aided immeasurably by her clear, calm and thoughtful leadership.

As always, we are grateful for the support of our alumni and friends, as so many of the activities and accomplishments of our Department are made possible through your support. Across the University, many alumni and friends have asked how they can help our many at-risk students during this crisis. At this time, we are supporting the [University's Emergency Student Support](#) crowdfunding effort. Now, your gift will be matched dollar for dollar up to \$100,000 thanks to the Stony Brook Foundation. If you are interested in learning more, please feel free to contact [Christina Rosa-Ragona](#), Director of Development, at 631.632.6078. Thank you.

We hope you will also connect or reconnect with our faculty soon. We'd love to hear your news, hear how you're doing, where your career has taken you, and any life events you

would like to share. And if you haven't already, please join our alumni group on LinkedIn: [SBUChemistry Alumni](#) so that we can stay connected.

Best wishes,

Pete

Peter J. Tonge
Distinguished Professor of Chemistry
Chair, Department of Chemistry