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Leading and learning in a pandemic year – and beyond

By Anna Roussel

December 14, 2021

For more information, contact Ouachita's Office of Communications & Marketing at comm-mark@obu.edu or (870) 245-5206.

Navigating college always has its unique challenges, but doing so in the midst of a global pandemic is a feat that seemed nearly impossible a year ago. When we left campus suddenly in March of 2020, the uncertainty surrounding my college career was enough to literally move me to tears. I had spent my entire life hearing family members and friends tell stories of their time at Ouachita and longing for the day I was on campus, and I did not want to come to terms with my time being cut short. However, in the middle of the chaos, I could still see just how incredible the Ouachita community is.

This past school year, I served as vice president of the Ouachita Student Foundation (OSF) and will have the honor to serve as president for 2021-2022. Because of my leadership role, I was able to serve on President's Leadership Circle (PLC). This newly established group of 165 students enjoyed a direct line of communication with Dr. Ben Sells, Ouachita's president, to make suggestions for how the school could navigate the current situation and be informed and encouraged as leaders of our respective groups. Having that firsthand experience is something we will all value going into our careers.

I heard friends from other schools longing for administrators who truly cared about their well-being. I can say without a doubt that the leaders at our school genuinely cared about how each student was handling the new and changing atmosphere. Waking up every morning to an email from my university president containing Scripture from his personal quiet times and prayers for us as student leaders provided a reassurance I wish all college students could have experienced this year. Dr. Sells provided encouragement during a time when everyone was predicting our failure as a student body to combat COVID-19, and the faith he and the rest of the Ouachita community had in us provided motivation to accomplish extraordinary things.

Entering this year, my biggest source of stress personally was figuring out how OSF would raise any significant amount of money for scholarships without our premier event, Tiger Tunes. We set our fundraising goal for our adjusted event, Tiger Tunes REWIND, at \$10,000 with the thought that not many would contribute large amounts of money to a livestream of recycled Tunes shows. We underestimated the dedication and love of the Ouachita community.

As we sat on the lawn of Cone-Bottoms that night refreshing the donation webpage on our phones, OSF's leadership team was moved to tears as we watched thousands of dollars pour in. By the end of the two-hour event, over \$60,000 had been raised to help our peers complete their degrees at Ouachita. Sitting outside at our first campus-wide event of the year, while honoring one of our school's most sacred traditions, was the moment I knew we would make it through the year.

While creating a semi-normal social atmosphere was a high priority this year, we also saw the sacrifice so many were making to ensure we could receive an in-person education. Many of my professors were at an age that put them in the high-risk category, so the simple act of showing up each day to teach us was a reminder of how well they love their students.

I've never seen a group of people adapt to a new environment as quickly and diligently as the professors at Ouachita. Dr. Deborah Root worked to give our yearbook staff all of the tools we needed to successfully create a beautiful yearbook, and we submitted all of our pages in record time. Dr. Kevin Brennan provided our Model UN team with the resources and encouragement for an incredible learning experience at our simulation, even if it was fully online, resulting in the most awards Ouachita's delegation has ever won at a single conference. The examples are endless. Ouachita students were in the very best hands.

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When people ask me why I think Ouachita was so successful compared to other universities in the nation, I think Dr. Sells described it best in saying, "when we could've panicked, we persevered." Ouachita endured a pandemic, cyber attack, hurricane, snow storm and every other obstacle a student normally faces in their college years. Our community was determined to make an in-person experience happen. With every new development in combatting COVID-19, students took on the changes with a grace and maturity people often think young adults lack.

As I think about returning to campus for the next year, I'm hopeful not only for the return of valued traditions but also because of the character we've displayed through the challenges of this year. I look forward to welcoming people into JPAC for Tiger Tunes and professors seeing their students smile again. My younger friends will finally experience Ouachita at her best. My class, the rising seniors, will be the only students at Ouachita who have experienced a full, normal school year here. I am confident we are up to the task of leading our student body out of a pandemic world.

I felt I caught a glimpse of how this will feel at our campus-wide end-of-year celebration. As I looked around and saw almost the entire school laughing, playing on bounce houses and enjoying an outdoor picnic with no masks, I looked to my friends and said, "This is what Ouachita should have been like all year." Yet, in hindsight, I do not think we would have appreciated the event as much if we hadn't endured the trials of the previous year. We were forced to make hard decisions and sometimes live in discomfort, but it was because of this I've gained an even better grasp on the beauty of the Ouachita community. I've grown up hearing Ouachitonians talk about how there was just "something special" about this university, and I'm not sure there is any better way to prove it than surviving and thriving together through a global pandemic.



Anna Roussel is a rising senior communications & media/strategic communications and political science double major from Searcy, Ark. She will serve as yearbook co-editor and OSF president in 2021-2022.