In the midst of a nation-wide pandemic, the UT Arlington Honors College strove to remain a supportive, engaging community for its students. Their commitment to thriving in an online setting was most apparent through the innovative efforts of Honors Advocate, Nicholas Laudermilk. Recognizing the lack of social interaction to come in the fall semester, he sought to replicate the cozy, inviting atmosphere of the Honors study room by designing a virtual CAB: the online equivalent of the Honors College’s Carolyn A. Barros Reading Room, which has long been an Honors student hub. Now, as an established way to connect with students, this digital server eases the burden of online university and appeals as a popular interface to chat with the Honors College.

After notification that the university would shift to remote learning, the Honors staff promptly began planning on how to translate their resources to an online platform while providing support. Laudermilk noticed many students connect through Discord—a specialized instant messaging app—over the summer and saw its ability to recreate the physical CAB. Through individual chatrooms, the virtual CAB provides a place for students to discuss their personal and major-related topics, as well as connect with the Honors staff. The server also includes a feature for students to ask an advocate for help, and a general channel for any other discussions.

The Honors CAB Goes Online

by Mehreen Malik | Pictured above: the virtual CAB
under one community server, Discord allowed him to build distinct topic sectors where students could go for targeted information, such as the engineering or gaming channel. This gave people access to advice and support from anyone in the college at all times. According to Honors student David Cumbee, “the virtual Discord CAB [assisted] in bridging the communication gap between both new and old members”. Moreover, availability changed from its typical 8-5 schedule, allowing the platform to become an opportunity to seek help at any time from the Honors College.

The server, however, is still brand new and is always looking to improve. Although an outstanding number of students have joined, conversation is sparse due to the awkwardness and difficulty of making friends online. Additionally, the virtual CAB is moderated by all HC staff which hinders user ability to chat freely unlike the physical CAB. Nevertheless, Laudermilk continues his work to revise and enhance the platform. With the desire for increased user interaction, new server channels seem to be a solution. Introducing more discussion areas to pique interests would grant students straightforward access to conversations they find stimulating. Still, the ever-growing base shows promise of the virtual CAB outliving the pandemic. Conceived out of necessity, its constant support to students foresee it becoming a staple for the Honors College. Student Safiyyah Multani even stated she “[hopes] that when COVID-19 is over, the Virtual CAB will still be available.” So while dialogue is stilted at times, the server appears to be a crucial asset to many who choose to use it.

Overall, with record-high cases and another term of online college, it looks like the virtual CAB is sticking around. Laudermilk affirmed that “having a space to be able to easily find and ask questions seems to be giving some relief to the uncertainty right now.” With its accessibility and ease of use, the digital server is showing itself to be the gateway to a more connected and present Honors College.
Anna Laura Harmjanz is a junior Political Science major, minoring in Environmental and Sustainability Studies and Chinese. She has been a member of the Honors College since her freshman year at UTA in 2017. She works as an SI leader for Introduction to Sociology, is involved in the Chinese Culture and Language Association, and is a member of the Leadership Honors Program. Anna Laura originally comes from Germany and has been living in the U.S. for 11 years.

During the initial transition to online learning in the Spring of 2020, Anna Laura, even in the face of difficulty and disconnect from her in-person, remained positive and decided to use her situation for the best. “It was difficult at first not being able to see my friends and classmates in person,” Anna Laura writes, “but I decided to change my mindset on online school as a time to improve myself and appreciate the opportunity to coordinate my schedule more easily. I realized that taking all my courses online required much more planning and efficient time management on my side. I started to plan my day and my assignments more thoroughly.”

Anna Laura has been able to make the best of her personal situation by focusing on the positive things in her life. “For the first time since I started college, I have a good sleeping schedule because I have more freedom to organize my day and evening. I am glad that I don’t have to commute... it saves me money and it’s better for my carbon footprint. Since I have had time for more self-reflection, I have found a deeper passion for my education. I have been able to spend more time doing research on the topics I feel most passionate about and enjoying the learning process. I feel very blessed to have a supportive family, friends, and professors that have made my experience taking online classes much more enjoyable.”

Despite the hardship of these unprecedented times, Anna Laura has viewed it as an opportunity to better herself and more deeply appreciate her education. She may be physically distanced, but Anna Laura has performed an upstanding job of staying connected to her community. She has developed a daily routine that enables her to remain focused, complete her work, and spend valuable time with loved ones. She focuses on the positive and not the negative in order to use her time wisely, and uses hardship as an opportunity for self-improvement.
Established in 1922, the UTA Student Government has since been a vital component in enabling the student body to directly participate in policy-making to improve their learning experience. Like the U.S. Government, the Student Government is divided into three branches: the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial. The Executive Branch focuses on day-to-day operations, the Legislative Branch is responsible for creating, researching, discussing, and voting on policies to create change, and the Judicial Branch mainly settles disputes from the other branches as well as administering campus elections.

As a result of the pandemic, Student Government had to transform the methods of its operations entirely. Dominique Lange, the Interdisciplinary Studies Senator on the Special Affairs Committee during the spring 2020 semester, recounts her experience during the initial virtual transition: "... amid a lockdown, the student government leadership... transitioned proceedings to an online environment. Transitioning to an online setting was extremely difficult... I had to display digital literacy and keep a flexible schedule. The virus forced us to create a modernized approach to an ancient system with decade-long traditions."

The pandemic made the Student Government’s typical operations a struggle and left members scrambling to find a way to continue their work. At the time, Lange was working with a resolution that came across her desk in committee to rename a campus building. "This resolution, along with all other student government activities, was interrupted by the progression of COVID and the eventual shut down of all campus activities," stated Lange. The SG gradually came to a place of somewhat-normalcy as they were able to function again by resuming their work in an online format.

Tony Pham, a CAPPA Student Senator and the Student Affairs Committee Chair, brought an important perspective as an incoming freshman to Student Government in the midst of the pandemic. Pham briefly described his experience during the fall 2020 semester as the following: "we conducted all of our meetings formally online, while the Speaker and the committee chairs meet in-person in order to run the meetings smoothly. Sometimes it is a bit rocky because there was some confusion as to where specifically we were supposed to meet virtually (ie. different channels, meeting links, etc.), but overall we still got things done!"

Despite all the challenges of conducting the Student Government in an online format, these Honors students are cautiously optimistic for the future of Student Government. "I really do hope we get to a 'pre-pandemic normalcy' again," writes Senator Pham, "where everyone can meet in-person together safely." According to Pham, the Senate is much more effective when they have the opportunity to converse informally while meeting in-person. "I am confident that our Student Government will continue to provide support for students," writes former senator Lange, "and maintain a campus presence in these ever-changing circumstances."
Jewel D’Cruz is a sophomore Architecture major. She joined the Honors College in the fall semester of 2020. Jewel is of Indian descent and has lived in Oman for more than 17 years. At UTA, she is the US Green Building Council Student historian, a member of the Leadership Honors Program, part of the University Catholic Community, and a member of several different Architecture Student Organizations. As an international student, D’Cruz was initially impacted much more greatly than most UTA students by the pandemic.

“Initially, the change was very overwhelming,” writes D’Cruz. “I had to move out quickly since most of the airports were closing. I could not go back to my family in Oman and had to go live with my extended family, for more than three months, in India. The time difference did not make things easier since I had to wake up at odd times to attend my classes.”

Once she was able to return to Oman and became more adjusted to virtual learning, D’Cruz was able to see a positive aspect of her situation: more time with her family. “Towards the end of my freshmen year, I was missing my family a lot, and now because of this, I can spend more time with them,” writes D’Cruz. “Being away for so long for the first time helped me see how much I value the time I spend with them. And now I make the most of my time here with them before it is time for me to leave again.”

Keeping in touch with friends while halfway across the globe is certainly a struggle, but D’Cruz remains positive and does her best to stay connected with the UTA community. “The time difference is my biggest enemy when I’m trying to stay connected with my friends. But we do find some time to video chat occasionally. I am introverted and so I’m not very good at keeping in touch with friends. But now I’m trying more than I used to. The different organizations help me to stay in touch with my friends from those organizations.”

D’Cruz’s family and friends are her source of encouragement and support during this difficult time. She has also discovered various activities to help relieve stress while she is stuck at home with loads of work, such as going on long drives or going to the beach. Her personal struggles during the pandemic have helped her to appreciate the small things in life. “You just must make the most with what you have, even if what you have is limited,” D’Cruz writes. Focusing on the positives in her life, like her family, has helped Jewel through this difficult point in time.
With limited access to campus and ever-changing policies to combat the pandemic, Student Government affirmed itself a significant component for the university’s transition to remote education. College of Architecture freshman and Honors College student Tony Pham took this opportunity to represent students and advocate for others by becoming a CAPPA senator. His work to promote public policy that alleviates the struggles of Covid-19 have not only proved effective but allowed for widespread outreach. The university administration is extensive and complex, therefore the endeavors of the student government are seldom spotlighted. This, in turn, prohibits students from understanding how they can receive assistance for problems they are facing. Pham seeks to rectify this by promoting his accessibility to all in his college. His passion to create a dialogue between the college and its students is evident in his encouragement of availability and formulation of policy.

Representing roughly 1300 students, his methods of communication vary to work best for his constituents because, as he states, “ironically in an online scene you are both accessible and inaccessible” at all times. Additionally, his advocacy has given him a seat on the Dean’s Student Advisory Council, where he can support other freshman CAPPA students. Through his help, the college recognized a disparity in classrooms and put on a freshman exhibition to overcome the lack of discourse between them.

One of his most remarkable accomplishments, however, was his resolution Hydration To Go. While walking on campus, Pham realized that due to Covid-19 drinking fountain regulations, free water was no longer available for students on school grounds. So he authored a bill to provide accessible free water bottles —using bottles originally purchased for now-cancelled campus events—to any student requesting it on campus. His resolution quickly passed through all administrations and was approved with a 24-1 vote. The work he did had an immediate impact on students and his policy was positively accepted by many who saw water as a human right.

Overall, Tony Pham became a CAPPA senator to be a lightning rod for the voiceless. His dedication to students and his devotion toward their predicaments make him an important legislator. With a constant motive to better the university, he emphasizes that he is there for the students. “I am one click, one email, one DM away. I am a very accessible senator.”