

Dear Colleagues,

On the heels of the Presidents' announcement regarding the abbreviated timetable for moving to online coursework, I wish to advance a few thoughts for your consideration.

As a preface, I would like to add my own deepest appreciation for your grace under pressure: The response of this academic community has been nothing short of astonishing (and makes me regret somewhat my previous and cavalier use of the term "heroic" for lesser occasions). The leadership group has been obliged to react quickly to developments in real time, making every effort to avoid haste and rely on good data and good sense while also bringing along our whole community in the process. Our imperfect efforts have been met by you with patience, generosity of spirit, and, not least, good humor.

They have also been met with your inspiration: More than I can count among the faculty have volunteered their labor, terrific ideas, and well-developed plans for the transition to online classes. Indeed, the challenge we now confront is how best to articulate the skills and knowledge available inside and outside our community to the group as a whole. How do we quickly develop a *shared* understanding of best practices, tips and techniques, possibilities and pitfalls en route to moving into cyberspace?

To that point, it would behoove us to recognize, as per our discussion in Thursday's Faculty Assembly, that addressing the pedagogical challenges is at least as important as any technical or curricular aspect of this transition. We would do well to start with careful consideration of how each of us might translate the key features of a College of Idaho education into an online medium; by asking ourselves, how do I achieve virtual proximity? Three key ingredients may figure into your thinking.

- **Access:** In-person class meetings transfer fairly easily to online classes in terms of contact time. One hour or 90 minutes in person is, after all, still an hour or 90 minutes online. However, the felt effect of online classes is often thinner and lighter, less dense than in-person time and, as a result, less personal, cutting, and effective. You may wish address this difference by extending access for students. This could be accomplished by substantially extending your "office" hours and by pluralizing the methods and manner by which students reach you. In place of dropping by, they might utilize email, texts, chat functions, videoconferencing, teleconferencing, direct phone calls, etc. Not everyone should or can extend phone privileges to all their students (!), but all faculty members are strongly encouraged to find multiple and overlapping ways for students to access them absent physical presence. Make up for diluted contact by offering more of it.
- **Flexibility:** Many students have already expressed concern that they will not pass difficult courses due to the disruptions in their study routines and the presentation of curriculum. Recognize this concern and the very real influence that these events will have on students' capacity to achieve and demonstrate mastery of the curriculum. In response, exercise whatever flexibility may be appropriate in their learning and evaluation. This is by no means code for diminished rigor! Rather, sustain the rigor of your curriculum but consider flexibility of schedule and due dates, additional modes of evaluation, overlapping opportunities for demonstrating achievement, etc. You may also assure students that we will be making every current mode of support, including tutoring and learning and disability accommodations, available in the online course medium.

- Aggressively project your personal support: Recognize that this pandemic is unique to all of our experience, but that in general our students have far less wisdom and resilience than those of us who have survived more revolutions around the sun than they have. In terms from the vulgate, they may be freaking out over concerns of personal safety, health and welfare of their families, financial issues, toilet paper shortages, and all manner of other worries large and small. In short, they confront the same range of issues we all do, but they may be less equipped to handle them. They are also very likely to be stripped of ready access to their support network of college friends and the opportunity to process concerns in conversation. In response, you might productively expand your zone of discussion to include some of these issues off class time, providing a context for your students to share their situations, compare notes, and generally norm their sense of how to be in the world during a pandemic. Whether you wish it or not, you serve as a role model for them not only relative to disciplinary expertise, but also, in this time of crisis, for how one handles fear, risk, and the unknown.

For those who have read this far, thank you for your indulgence, and please anticipate more concrete resources and suggestions in coming days. If you have such resources to offer, please convey them to me and copy Professor Mee-Ae Kim in her role as Associate Dean for Faculty Development. We will ensure that such information finds its way back to the professoriate at large in short order in the Faculty Resources section of the campus COVID-19 website.

--David



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