

June 7, 2020

A Letter on Accommodations in a Time of Crisis to the Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences

The crisis that is gripping our nation is multifaceted. Some of its elements are new, while others are not. The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has killed more than 100,000 people in this country and sickened more than a million. Efforts to control the virus have thrown tens of millions of people out of work and plunged the country's economy into a depression unlike any we have seen since the 1930s.

Restaurants, schools and childcare centers have closed, and public transport has been largely halted. Every element of our lives has been disrupted, with no certainty whatsoever as to when or if the virus will be contained.

As has so often been the case, the devastating effects of this virus have been borne disproportionately by our black, brown, and indigenous neighbors. In Washington State, Black unemployment rates rose in May, even as the overall unemployment rate dropped. Meanwhile, Black people who are still employed are more likely to work in occupations that are at high risk for exposure to the virus. Black and indigenous people also die at much higher rates from the virus than do whites, highlighting the impact of health disparities on mortality rates. Anyone can be infected by the virus. But its impacts are not equally distributed.

The novel coronavirus, of course, is new. What is not new is the murderous violence and pervasive racism directed at people of color in America. To some Americans, this violence and the racism from which it stems may be newly visible. But it is not new. It arrived on this continent with the first Europeans 500 years ago, and it has never departed. Its consequences have been brought forcibly to our attention yet again by the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Philando Castile, Mi'Chance Dunlap-Gittens, Leonard Thomas, and so many other Black men and women here in the Puget Sound region and across the country. The list of victims is long, and it stretches back centuries. The full impact of these recent murders cannot be understood apart from this history.

For all these reasons, we are now at a moment of crisis, to which we need to respond. Many of our students, staff, and faculty are reeling emotionally, physically, and intellectually from this series of blows. They are trying to work through traumas of many kinds and on many levels. And once again, the burden of the current moment is falling disproportionately on people of color. Much that needs to be done to address this crisis cannot be done quickly. But it must be done, and the College of Arts and Sciences must engage in that work, together with many others. As UW faculty members, however, we can act now to alleviate, modestly, the extreme stress that this crisis has induced in so many of our students.

President Cauce has urged that faculty members make final examinations and final assignments optional for spring quarter 2020. As Dean, I strongly support her call, and wish to suggest the following approach, modeled on one the Foster School of Business has already adopted.

1. Recognizing that many of our students cannot do their best work under the present circumstances, the College of Arts and Sciences recommends that faculty make their final examinations optional. In addition, for students who do take the final, the final exam grade should be counted only if counting it would raise the student's grade.

2. The College of Arts and Sciences recognize that individual faculty members are the final arbiters of grading policies in their classes, but encourages faculty to make their choices in grading with students' best interests in mind. At this moment, compassion is more important than rigor in grading.
3. In weighing admission to capacity-constrained (i.e., competitive) majors, please keep in mind that grades assigned in spring quarter 2020 may not be reliable indicators of a student's academic abilities. Spring 2020 grades should be viewed in the context of a student's overall academic record. Flexibility in GPA requirements may therefore be appropriate in judging admission to competitive majors.
4. Faculty will not be held accountable for their grade distributions (e.g. higher medians) for spring quarter 2020.
5. Faculty will not be penalized for low student evaluations in spring quarter 2020.

I want also to add a special plea to faculty to do whatever they can to accommodate the needs of their graduate students in this time. Please recognize that graduate students are uniquely dependent upon the good opinion of their academic supervisors. I encourage all faculty, therefore, to reach out proactively to their graduate students to determine whether they need extensions of time to complete assignments or other similar academic accommodations for spring quarter. Don't wait to be asked. Take the initiative to ask.

Sincerely,

Robert Stacey, Dean
College of Arts and Sciences