



LESSONS FROM A PANDEMIC

Provost's Perspective

January 2021

Dear Colleagues,

I write today at what hopefully is the beginning of our last semester dominated by COVID conditions. In December, I was involved in a number of discussions regarding lessons learned from our experience over the past year. In the spirit of lemonade from the lemon, or perhaps as a time capsule for reflection at some point in the future, I share with you a few lessons from my own list.

Lemons Abound

First came the COVID pandemic, then the appalling instances of racial violence, and last week the lawless assault on democracy at the Capitol. It is hard to miss the ties among these crises and each in its own right has been overwhelming – a reason to just shelter and forget the world. Yet I have been energized and sustained by colleagues and students who have not done that, but instead the opposite. Both on campus and off, they have protected our health and safety, they have advanced anti-racism and inclusion, and they have been strong voices for the renewal of our democratic values. If you attended the student-led Equity Summit this fall, you know what I mean. As a university, we have made and must continue to make progress by using these crises, and their opportunities, to ready our students to lead in a world of need.

Change is a Team Sport

Our community has done an extraordinary job in adjusting rapidly to incredibly difficult and demanding circumstances. Who would have guessed that the inflexible university could recreate itself in such a short time? That happened because everyone embraced the moment and pitched in as needed – often involving extraordinary efforts in and outside the classroom. In almost every great task that was accomplished – e.g., health and safety, sustained student support, distanced classrooms, remote and in-person teaching, testing, food and housing, ongoing stewardship – it has taken staff and faculty working together beyond their immediate units and responsibilities. We have forged new ways of doing things that will, if we recognize and build on them, serve us well in the semester ahead and in navigating any future change.

Engage x 3

In this time of turmoil, the maxim “you can’t overcommunicate” takes on a new sheen. Zoom meetings and messages among administration, staff, faculty, students, parents and alumni have occurred with an unprecedented frequency. Matching the complexity of the issues, those exchanges were not always easy. However, the information that was gained has been critical in understanding our situation, pooling our collective wisdom, and moving forward together. That engagement has vitally connected us even in a virtual environment.

Virtual Virtues

Our remote experience is not our future but it has provided insights that will continue to be important even after we return to full residential in-person instruction. Consider for example, how convenient it has

been to have outside experts join classes and meetings via Zoom. Folks who might never show up in person are willing to join by video. Virtual internships and co-ops allow students to get experience with organizations in the city and far away even as they take classes at UR. And though not always desirable, Zoom meetings can be more doable and accessible – and hence better attended – than would be the case otherwise.

Residential for a Reason

Students have indicated that, even with the masks and social distancing required, they prefer in-person instruction when feasible and safe. Faculty and staff have done a tremendous job providing in-person, hybrid, blended, and remote instruction. All, however, yearn for a return to UR's tried and true all residential in-person instruction as soon as it safe to do so. Relationships – especially the student-teacher nexus and what we learn from each other in community – are at the heart of what makes a Richmond education exceptional.

Know Thy Self Better

Even more than I could have predicted, I have deeply missed the company of colleagues, friends, and family. The ritual gatherings of each semester, the serendipitous ad hoc conversations from random campus encounters, and social gatherings of all kinds appear now like unattainable mirages in a desert. The one certainty of our COVID circumstances is more time with one's self -- and perhaps the opportunity to gain insight from doing so. I meditate now for the first time in my life (though I am still searching for my "mind's eye"). I have learned that frustration, impatience, quick judgment, and easy mistrust are ever-present sirens of our isolated existence. Perhaps most important, I better appreciate that empathy, generosity of spirit, and an open mind are the most important things we can offer each other (and ourselves).

Our journey during COVID has not been easy and we are not yet finished. Uncertainty remains the dominant theme but we have gained some confidence from our fall term and some optimism from the potential of a vaccine. I have faith in our community, strengthened by our collective efforts through tough times. No doubt you have had and will have insights from your own experience. Those lessons will be important in the months and years ahead: please send yours to grakes@richmond.edu and we will gather and share them.

Take care and stay connected,

Jeff