



July 2020

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for the very helpful information provided regarding your teaching preferences and concerns to your chair and dean and in the Senate survey. Monday's discussion at the Faculty Senate was very useful. Your input and creative suggestions are critical in moving from the plan President Crutcher announced for the fall to implementing an effective semester. Thank you for taking on the serious work we have to do this year and for the time and effort you are putting into preparation for teaching.

The circumstances and uncertainty we face are not a one semester occurrence – they are likely to be with us for the next 12-18 months with multi-year consequences for the University. This is a significant challenge to Richmond's intensive residential model of education and to our community. Fortunately, numerous conversations with faculty and staff reveal a common unifying purpose: safely providing the best possible education for our students. To continue the productive dialogue that will help us realize that purpose, in what follows I try to respond concisely to questions and concerns raised around health and safety, teaching preferences, pedagogy, classrooms, and childcare.

Health and Safety

The health and safety of our community remains the University's priority in all our efforts. The planning and investment in health and safety is ongoing, constantly responsive to new information and circumstances, multi-tiered, comprehensive, and consistent with or exceeding both state and federal guidelines for the re-opening of college campuses. We are fortunate in that we have a small student body relative to our campus size, allowing a variety of safety measures that would not be possible at a larger university.

Some have inquired about the criteria that would inform a decision to move from residential education, as envisioned for the coming year, to full remote learning, as was necessary in the spring. The Situation Monitoring team, which includes faculty representation, is in the process of considering the metrics that would inform a decision to transition to remote education. Among the metrics under consideration are:

External Metrics

- State or local government orders and directives (e.g., Forward Virginia Phases).
- Trajectory of the percentage of positive tests at the state level, using the 7-day average.
- Trajectory of the percentage of positive tests at the local level (Richmond, Chesterfield, Henrico), using the 7-day average.
- Bed and ICU capacity of local hospitals.
- Local hospital access to PPE

Campus Metrics

- Trajectory of the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases on campus, using the 7-day average
- Percent of isolation and quarantine space in use
- PPE supply issues for the Student Health Center
- Access to COVID-19 testing

When the metrics and plan for a transition to remote is finalized, we will share it with the community. Although virus conditions and public policy are subject to continuous change, what will remain constant is our commitment to health and safety, transparency, and a realistic assessment of the circumstances, even if that means the residential learning experience that defines Richmond will not be possible for a further period of time.

Mode of Instruction

Faculty understandably want the ability to determine independently how to deliver their classes in the fall. We recognize this sentiment and at the same time have to balance individual faculty preference for mode of instruction with the collective outcomes that might occur from uncoordinated planning. Students and faculty alike highly value such hallmarks of a Richmond education as individualized attention, classroom engagement, community, and effective learning that comes from an education with small interactive classes among students and faculty whom they see on campus. If students face a schedule this fall with multiple classes where all the course time is remote even if they are in residence, and/or those classes do not reflect Richmond hallmarks, that would be a very different experience. We will have to work together and coordinate faculty preferences with the overall classroom experience of our students.

Looking ahead, the following principles will influence the balancing of these concerns:

- The success of the semester requires us to be in continuing dialogue. The initial deadline for faculty to voice their preferences for their own teaching to be fully remote, a combination of in-class and remote approach, or all in-person instruction was June 26. That was necessary to assign appropriately sized classroom space and make the resulting extensive adjustments to the course schedule for registration by mid-July. However, faculty will continue to have the ongoing ability to configure their teaching according to the best approach to student learning for their subject. So as to be accountable to the collective student academic experience, if reconfiguring involves changes to in-person classroom hours on a weekly basis, faculty must discuss with their chair and submit a request to their Dean.
- Requests for some form of remote teaching will be considered based on distinguishing traits of a Richmond education such as personal attention, engagement, community building, and effective learning. Typically, we associate those traits with in-person learning: that is the UR trademark. In our current circumstances, requests for pedagogical reasons to reduce in-person class time should offer information how the remote approach speaks to those traits and has comparable hours of direct instruction as would happen in the physical classroom.
- In terms of health requests, certification from a physician confirming a medical condition that puts you or someone you live with at high risk in COVID conditions, should be submitted to HR. Such confirmations need simply state that such a condition exists; there is no need to provide personal details.

- Faculty may continue to submit resource requests for items needed for teaching in COVID circumstances, ideally as soon as possible as it may take time to acquire the items.

Pedagogy

Teaching well always requires concerted effort and significant expertise. Teaching this fall -- whether it involves remote, all in-person, or some combination of the two -- will be demanding for professors and students. Your efforts in learning to teach in this changed environment are vitally important to supporting students in residence, students unable to return to campus, and students unable to attend class due to illness or quarantine.

Remote instruction should aim to emulate the traits noted above of the very personal learning experience of our in-person Richmond education: individual attention, interaction with faculty and other students, and easy-to-access office hours. The experience from last spring suggests that courses that did this were favorably received. Faculty also reported that high quality and personalized online learning takes extra effort and time.

Finally, should conditions before or during the semester require a rapid shift, all faculty should have a plan for how they would offer their courses remotely while addressing the need to do it in a way that speaks to individual learning and attention.

Classrooms

While remote learning poses pedagogical challenges, our classrooms this semester will provide their own new challenges as teaching will take place in spaces that have not been used for that purpose before or in traditional classrooms far larger than would be typical for the class size. There is no question faculty flexibility and creativity will be needed.

Faculty will receive classroom and class time assignments from the registrar on July 8. You will have the opportunity to work with your departments and deans in the period until July 13 to resolve any schedule conflicts: this quick work is needed so that that course offerings can be finalized in time for the beginning of extended registration on July 20th.

Once your classroom is finalized and additional spaces have been transformed into teaching spaces, faculty should consider visiting their classroom, working with the technology, and identifying any issues and needs. In coordination with the Faculty Technology Committee and IS, all classrooms will be [specifically configured with technology](#) needed to support both in-person and online/remote instruction. There will be daily trainings on the use of this standardized technology beginning the week of July 27th, and lasting through the last week before classes begin. Training times and locations will be available on Spider TechNet, as well as communicated via Spiderbytes, prior to the week of July 27th.

Your visit to these spaces in advance of your first day of class may generate new ideas on pedagogy for the semester. Likewise, as the semester begins and you engage with your students in the classroom space, you may have further ideas about how to teach best this semester. Again, if adaptations involve a reduction in regular week-to-week in-person instruction time, this should be discussed with your chair and dean.

Childcare

While these are challenging circumstances for everyone, they are especially trying for parents whose children either do not have access to their normal childcare arrangements or when children's schools are not operating normally or have not yet communicated a decision about fall operations. Others may be caring for adult relatives. It is not easy to balance teaching, creative work, and family requirements in normal circumstances and it is especially demanding in a COVID environment. We understand that the situation this fall may limit the time that faculty will be able to spend on campus and that many activities such as office hours and department and committee meetings will need to be online. With respect to the scheduling of your teaching specifically, please do work with colleagues and deans to develop a schedule using the extended teaching hours that best fits your needs. We recognize that additional teaching times do not reduce this new burden COVID has brought, but we hope that for some it might add flexibility to make that burden more manageable.

Changes in circumstances involving additional information about daycare and K-12 school schedules and/or health risks later this summer may require further adaptation, but again please be in conversation with your chair and dean to ensure that we have coordination across the curriculum.

Our situation remains highly fluid and we all need to be adaptable. There remain many tasks and questions ahead: I will continue to work with the faculty, deans and Senate to address them. Your planning efforts, suggestions, and questions throughout these weeks of COVID have been critically important to our process and will continue to be essential as we move towards the start of another academic year. Please do not hesitate to contact me or submit ideas/questions to the Contingency Planning website [here](#). We all share one goal, to safely provide our students with the best Richmond education possible – one I consider, as a result of the dedicated work of faculty and staff, to be among the best anywhere.

Thank you again for the extraordinary work and preparation you have been doing for the upcoming semester.

Sincerely,
Jeff

Jeffrey W. Legro
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