



January 24, 2021

Dear Colleagues,

Spring semester greetings and thank you for your continued remarkable efforts on behalf of our students and our campus community. At the request of the Faculty Senate, and after consultation with the Senate leadership and discussion at Friday's Senate meeting, I write regarding remote teaching options this semester and faculty flexibility regarding choice in options.

As a residential university built around in-person instruction, we have not, historically, had remote teaching as an option. However, given the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic, we worked with the Faculty Senate to modify that principle to allow faculty the option of teaching remotely or partially remote throughout the semester based on individual high risk for serious illness from COVID-19 and/or a plan for pedagogy that provided equal or better instruction, given our circumstances, to in-person instruction. All such requests were worked through in conversation with the relevant dean.

For the spring semester, 32% of student class time is currently scheduled to be remote instruction. That number, which is slightly lower than the fall, appears to be the result of many recognizing that our students highly value in person instruction even with masking and physical distancing and that the classroom has not been a site of COVID transmission.

We all are watching higher numbers of COVID-19 infections regionally and across the nation with a close and concerned eye. The University is responding to higher rates in the surrounding area by increasing prevalence testing, implementing new conduct rules, and as you have seen today, a two-week delay in off-campus traditional undergraduate students joining the on-campus community due to a higher positivity rate in entry testing among this group. The entry positivity rate for students who will be on campus for classes and services remains low. We begin prevalence testing this week and will be carefully monitoring any changes.

Please be assured that faculty will continue to have flexibility in their choice of mode of instruction for the spring term based on an approved request to your dean related to individual health situation risk to COVID-19 or on pedagogy. Moreover, as is usual during any semester, faculty have the flexibility in any particular week, for a reason particular to that class (e.g., a remote visitor, pedagogy for a particular lesson, faculty health that day) to go remote – no prior approval is needed. Please do consult with your deans about anything more than such brief, temporary changes in mode (i.e., remote, in-person, or hybrid) of teaching. For example, given the number of undergraduate

students who will be remote for the next two weeks, some professors may have so few students in person in class, that it is more effective to teach remotely for that period. It would be important to be in touch with your dean about such a shift. Be assured that no one will be penalized in any way for making a request and consulting with your dean.

Communication on this aspect of teaching this year is necessary for two reasons. The first is fidelity to our students that we will offer in-person classes if health conditions allow. In-person instruction is a particular strength of, and attraction to, Richmond and our current students greatly appreciated our fall semester efforts to make this possible.

The second is because individual choice can have adverse collective public health consequences. For example, if a number of faculty decided independently to go remote, a group of students may see little harm to leave campus for a while and, upon return, perhaps raise the virus transmission rate for the whole community. Similarly, if students suddenly have mostly remote classes, there are related mental health concerns of being room-bound, especially if the University is not aware that is the case.

Faculty autonomy over what is taught in the classroom is fundamental. However, in our current conditions the choice of remote versus in-person has major implications for the well-being of the entire University and it is critical we continue to work together in all that is ahead.

Please know our meetings and frequent communication with faculty and staff and their leadership will continue into the semester. We will be watching conditions closely and discussing them constantly and if instruction cannot be accomplished in a manner that protects the health and safety of the campus community, we will not hesitate to make changes.

Thank you again for all your efforts and best wishes for the spring semester.

Sincerely,

Jeff

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