

March 11, 2020

Dear Colleagues,

I write to you with a heavy heart. Today is a trying day for everyone. Our world is suffering and the fallout of COVID-19 is only just being felt here in the US and in many parts of the world. This is the beginning of a journey that will undoubtedly define our generation. Times will be tough. Uncertainty will be high, in fact it already is and we are just seeing the tip of the iceberg. It is time to dispense with attempts to cling to normalcy and accept that the coming weeks and months will be anything but. We must safeguard our own health and wellbeing and that of our families, but also be attentive in our support of students, staff member colleagues, and broader communities.

What matters now is our response to uncertainty and adversity. As epidemiologic experts have pointed out, **social distancing practices** need to be adopted rapidly.

In recognition of this fact, the remainder of this letter will focus on what we, as faculty can do to process change, responsibly adjust practices in support of community wellbeing, and support the ever-ongoing mission of our campus to enrich the lives of our students through education. I have received many emails from faculty around campus and have done my best to get everyone's questions answered. The Faculty Senate rapidly pivoted our agenda this week at our March meeting (Mar 11) to focus on the COVID-19 crisis. We invited leaders, including SVC Sacha Kopp, Director of Digital Learning Jaci Lindberg, VP of IT and UNO CIO Bret Blackman, AVC for Curriculum and Programs Sarah Edwards, and Associate Director of Communications Charley Steed, to address preparedness and next steps for our campus. This group provided excellent information that faculty should be advised of and was gracious to provide extensive time for Q/A with faculty senators. As you might expect, there were many questions. Below, I present some of the points shared at our meeting in a discourse-based FAQ style format. I have made efforts to summarize and paraphrase points shared at our meeting, so while attributed to the primary responder, do not construe the following as direct quotes.

***"When is campus closing?"***

SVC Kopp - We are not "closing" campus, we are [moving to a remote delivery model](#). The primary focus is to move to a mode of operations that practices social distancing and avoids large crowds of people. We want to minimize disruption of academic learning so that students can continue earning their degree credits on time. We recognize that there will be disruption and are attempting to mitigate as much as possible.

There are three scenarios that exist on a continuum.

1. Default (what we are doing now) - conduct business as usual
2. Remote delivery (moderate measure) - Students move to distance education. Some faculty work from home. Activities unsuitable for remote delivery (studio art, research lab work, etc) are conducted from campus, while practicing social distancing.
3. Everyone works from home - All faculty/staff/students except identified essential on-campus personnel work from home.

Academic affairs is currently working with deans to determine which staff should stay on campus. The goal is to ensure continuity of employment for everyone, so everyone can perform their jobs and maintain continuity of teaching as best as possible. Faculty have been testing technology that they are expected to use during remote mode.

***“When do you think we may go remote?”***

SVC Kopp - It is hard to provide an exact date/time, given how quickly things are changing. As of this morning (Mar. 11) there are 100+ universities that have gone into remote education mode. We are not going to wait until there is a mass public health risk, we are going to do this proactively. We are going to act as a community - in conjunction with Douglas County Health Department and the state, not just UNO. The outlook may look different in Omaha than Kearney or Lincoln, but we are coordinating with our sister campuses as well. Some communities (e.g. Omaha) might have different measures in place or begin measures at different times than other locations. We should be prepared to move into a remote education mode at any time in the coming days/weeks.

We must work together with our communities to be effective. Social distancing is most effective when the entire community engages in the practice.

***“When will remote education mode end? Should we schedule summer in-person courses?”***

SVC Kopp - No one knows the answer to this question right now. Plan as if summer is happening online. We do not want to create any more uncertainty for students. If we advertise in-person classes for summer and students feel the class may not be offered, they could go elsewhere or not enroll in it. Summer is a key time for UNO students and for the university bottom line. We are trying to maintain as much continuity of operations over summer as possible.

***“Some students don’t have homes to go home to if we send them home. Some struggle with food security. What about emotional and fiscal student realities? How are we helping mitigate these issues?”***

SVC Kopp - 80% of UNO students live in the Omaha area. We have some international and domestic students that do not have a home outside of UNO. Housing options are being considered on an individual basis. The key is we want to practice social distancing, we are not closing the campus. We are planning to aid students without housing options in Omaha. We have several buildings that are currently deactivated for renovations. We are looking at options where these buildings could be used for quarantine situations as needed. Residence on campus will be handled individually for all students with nowhere to go.

Food security is an issue for sure. We are working to ensure students that make use of the [food pantry](#) and dining services are accommodated while maintaining social distancing efforts.

We are also concerned about the best public health way to have students go home. We do not want students to go home to vulnerable family members - such as elderly grandparents - that might inadvertently make the situation worse. However, we will be focused on social distancing and balancing these competing concerns.

***“What about students who do not have a computer/laptop/internet?”***

Jaci Lindberg - This is a key concern. We have inventoried [available ITS resources](#) and have identified available laptops we can use. We will be working to connect resources to those that need them the most. Obviously connectivity is also a problem. If students don’t have internet at home, they might usually use a Starbucks or other public wifi. As we move forward, that is likely to not be an option. Students may need to come to campus - **again**

**we are not closing campus** - so that will be an option we can work with students on. The good news is that we know from districts like Millard that their student population has 98% connectivity at home.

***“What resources are available to faculty moving their courses online?”***

Jaci Lindberg - There are a wide variety of tools available to faculty. Common ones we suggest are Canvas (every course should be using Canvas and most are already anyway), Vidgrid (for video and lecture-style delivery), Zoom (for meetings, group discussions, live delivery online), Turnitin and Examity (for online examinations and assessments), and Box (for file sharing). We recommend you visit <http://keepteaching.unomaha.edu> for more information about resources for faculty. We also have full-time instructional designers that are working tirelessly to help faculty move to online delivery. They can help with strategies to solve classroom issues or convert in-person exercises to online ones. Please reach out to them. Don't feel like your problem is not one they can help solve.

***“Are we linked to UNL? Or will UNO make its own determination?”***

SVC Kopp - The NU President and Chancellors are in constant communication. We are coordinating with our partners at county health departments and the Governor's office. However, geography matters. One campus might need to close sooner than the other. UNO is leading the way, given our Chancellor's expertise in biocontainment - we are key partners in the discussion of when to move to remote operations.

***“What about faculty caretaking tasks or if faculty get sick? If this delays research activity will RPT processes account for this delay?”***

SVC Kopp - At an individual level we will all have personal events come up. Yes, progress might be delayed. Those conversations regarding RPT will start as they come up, but we do expect there to be some accommodation.

Regarding faculty caretaking, we want to focus on wellbeing first. If you are sick, stay home. If students are sick, they should stay home. If faculty and staff need time to take care of family, they should take it.

***“I teach a hard class that students prefer face-to-face. I do a lot of board work and small group work. What can I do?”***

SVC Kopp - We are not closing campus. We are trying to reduce occupancy on campus through social distancing. We do not want crowded rooms. Faculty will be able to come in and record themselves in lab or in front of white boards - to teach their students. We are working with the deans and department chairs to understand what faculty need access to on-campus resources to make these available.

That said, many class practices can be translated to online delivery. Zoom allows you to have breakout sessions with your students that can achieve similar outcomes to small group work or office hours. Jaci will talk more about this.

***“Why not make the move to remote delivery now? What are we waiting for?”***

SVC Kopp - We have to do this as a community. We need other major employers, government agencies, and schools to be involved. Experts suggest 90% of the community needs to be involved to have significant impacts on public health. We are pushing for these social distancing measures now and working with our partners to assess public health hazards and respond.

***“Many faculty distrust the federal government response. How do their moves affect our campus response?”***

SVC Kopp - We are fortunate to have a Chancellor that is an MD who leads a leading biocontainment apparatus. We are acting proactively and leading in multiple ways - including informing Nebraska State Government, and building coalitions in the community.

*“As individual faculty what can we do now?”*

SVC Kopp - Prepare your classes for distance education delivery. Work with the deans and department chairs to identify any campus-exclusive needs you have and make sure technology is working in advance. Be flexible with your students moving forward.

*“How stable are campus web resources?”*

Jaci Lindberg / Bret Blackman - All campus digital learning tools are hosted on the cloud. If Amazon is up then resources like Canvas, Vidgrid, box, etc will be up. While usage is expected to increase, capacity is available to handle the increased load. We want to point out that all of these tools are available without use of VPN (Virtual private networks). Those that used VPN before for certain purposes will continue to have access. Others that haven't needed VPN in the past will not need it now.

The university has seen increased phishing security threats, but we are actively blocking about 8000 emails a day to prevent most of that from reaching faculty, staff, and student email accounts.

*“What if students get sick and can't attend class?”*

Sarah Edwards / Sacha Kopp - We are asking faculty to be flexible with makeup assignments and course attendance policies. Bottom line is it is likely some students will be sick and unable to attend class. We want to maintain continuity, but not be punitive for something that is out of their control.

(see senate resolution regarding attendance below)

### **Faculty Senate actions and final comments**

Prior to our meeting this week, the Senate has been actively engaged in its normal governance operations. I will report on these on our website if you would like to read through these “normal operations” actions. I do want to report on one resolution made at our meeting yesterday (Mar 11).

We crafted, deliberated on, and ultimately adopted an emergency resolution regarding campus attendance policies. Our usual campus guidance for attendance policies is that individual faculty have the purview to set the attendance policies for their own courses. In this dynamic time with significant disruptive impacts expected, the Senate adopted the following resolution that gives students more flexibility and accommodation during these trying times.

### **RESOLUTION 4399: Temporary Emergency Attendance Policy**

**BE IT RESOLVED THAT** Faculty Senate recommends that UNO temporarily suspend its guidelines that allow individual course instructors to set their own class attendance policies. Senate recommends that UNO adopt a policy that allows students to be absent, if sick, without any supporting documentation. Faculty are strongly encouraged to allow students who are caregivers for, or in close contact with, individuals at high risk from COVID-19 to be absent from class. Faculty are strongly encouraged to work with students in their courses so that students can make up assignments that are missed due to illness or concern about illness.

It is our intent that this guidance will continue during the COVID-19 crisis and then revert to our prior attendance policy as we eventually return to normal operations.

Please pay attention to all guidance from UNO. If you are sick, stay home and contact HR. If students are sick, they should stay home too. For specific guidance from UNO regarding coronavirus see the emergency information site that UNO has established.

[www.unomaha.edu/news/coronavirus/](http://www.unomaha.edu/news/coronavirus/)

I also recommend that you read the following scientific/epidemiological analysis of COVID-19 spread and the value of social distancing. Share this article widely to anyone that doubts the value of social distancing.

<https://medium.com/@tomaspueyo/coronavirus-act-today-or-people-will-die-f4d3d9cd99ca>

As a final note, I want to commend all of you for the work you do. I wish and hope for your safety, security, and wellbeing. The immediate future of our nation and world will be scary and filled with horrors - but if we all work together, we can mitigate as much of the fear and human impacts to our community as possible. My heart goes out to each and every person that is being affected by this crisis or will be soon. We will need to be a support structure for one another in the coming months. Emotional wellbeing is important and we are all stronger together.

As always, feel free to reach out to me personally or the Senate if we can do anything at all to help you.

Hang in there. We will persevere.

Matt Hale, UNO Faculty Senate President 2019-2020