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Provost Message – July 30

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Good day to you all:

At the town hall on teaching modalities on Wednesday, faculty members raised several questions and voiced some concerns. The purpose of this note is to respond to those questions. Please keep asking and please keep working with each other, your chairs, directors, coordinators and deans to find the best answers we can to continue to enrich learning for this fall.

As President Ferrini-Mundy said in the Town Hall on Monday, our primary focus this fall is about student learning. We are all working to find improved ways of engaging students with experiences this fall, whether they are here with us, learning at a distance, or doing both. No one person has all the answers or solutions to the challenges we face. We have been working all summer, together, to discuss plans for safety and student learning. We have 3,222 course sections at UMaine this fall. Each course will have distinctive aspects to it such that we must rely on the ingenuity of our faculty to plot the course for reaching our students. Working together, I believe we will find creative paths that assist our students in learning material this fall as we help each other discover best practices.

The majority of questions from yesterday focused on learning modalities and the “rules” implied.

Face-to-Face/On-Site/Hybrid Courses. One set of questions from the forum focused on how the administration would provide technology and additional assistance for every course offered face-to-face (F2F) this fall. Faculty members are concerned about managing the class and technology.

Faculty teaching in F2F (on-site) classes will need to be aware of the challenges students face in attending classes. Some students will arrive on campus, take their Covid19 test, and await results for 24 to 72 hours; thus, some will miss the first F2F class. Others may be quarantined during the term if contact tracing shows a possible exposure to the virus. We want to encourage students to check their symptoms daily and to stay home if they have any. There is a sincere hope that faculty members are working this challenge, talking with colleagues, benchmarking other universities in their fields, talking with chairs and deans, all to find the best solutions to provide access to their courses when students cannot attend for a prolonged period of time. And, there is a hope that faculty and staff will carefully listen to students and consider their views. A few thoughts:

- **Making a F2F course more available could be based on something as simple as taking attendance and following up.** Keeping students informed can be accomplished very simply, perhaps, by taking attendance. Mindful of using this step to help students stay on track for learning, the faculty member could e-mail those students who missed class and say, for example: “I noticed you were not here today. Please note we covered chapter 3 in the text, and you are to work the even problems at the end of that chapter.” As I learned in a CITL course a day or so ago, over-redundancy (e.g., a lecture, notes, assignments, a book chapter to read, an assigned essay, a discussion post assignment, and a research report all on the same topic) is not necessarily the best answer. For a hundred years or so, students have found someone to take notes, read chapters, and kept up in classes where they could not attend 100% of the time. Strict attendance policies may present problems with having students hide symptoms to attend class; so, this is the time for your judgment, thought, and planning for fall. F2F courses can be conducted and managed in similar ways that have always worked but we hope you are also planning to reach students who cannot attend. Please also note: attendance or engagement is also important for you to consider for your online synchronous, online asynchronous, and blended classes.
- **Hybrid and Hyflex courses use enhanced technology.** In addition to the inventory of classrooms with technology at UMaine, the UMSystem has provided upgrades for 33 classrooms and ten portable carts that will make it easier to do web conferencing with students through Zoom who cannot attend and/or live stream classes. At a minimum, faculty members can take attendance and have a plan to assist students in focusing on the material covered that day. At the other extreme, faculty members can use hyflex or hybrid modalities. Faculty members could use Zoom or live stream the class to include students who cannot attend a F2F class. Faculty can also record classes with Kaltura (which automatically provides captioning to enhance inclusivity and accessibility), and post it all in Brightspace with a video quiz to be sure students have looked at the material. (The video quiz option seems fun to me, but I'm not sure I'll get there for this fall). Hyflex or hybrid options are available to you. UMaine is providing an honorarium for your work this summer to learn how to enrich courses. UMaine cannot and should not tell you what you “must” do to accommodate students who will have to miss class but we can suggest to you that now, under these current circumstances, making it possible for those students to keep up is part of your responsibility. We are trying to be sure you are aware of the issues and know that you have choices and options to meet students where they are this fall and provide viable means for them to keep up in the class if they must miss.
- **F2F/Remote/Online may yield blended courses.** Blended courses consist of students attending class sometimes and working in remote or online modalities at other times. This class may occur if the course is too large (>49 students) to meet on the same day at the same time, or if the faculty member feels that it would benefit students to blend F2F meetings with self-paced work. This type of class may also help students and faculty prepare for the online and remote work after Thanksgiving.

o F2F course enhancements through hyflex/hybrid, zoom, or recorded sessions are options that represent the quality we are reaching to achieve. Students can request changes to a schedule if they will never be able to attend class as there are online and remote courses on the schedule. But, we do hope to provide clear options when students cannot attend a F2F or hybrid course.

o There may be an infinite number of ways to enhance learning for any topic you could name. The gift(s) a faculty member brings to students and to the institution is the ability to discern the best set of options to meet the needs of learners. UMaine faculty have a long reputation for doing this extremely well.

Remote and Online Courses may be asynchronous or synchronous. Online, asynchronous classes have no set meeting times. The thoughts to consider here include the organization of the course to help students manage time and to simplify navigation of course material, assignments, and other tasks; to complete work on a regular schedule, including engaging in asynchronous discussions and collaborations; and, to provide opportunities for student-to-student and student-to-faculty engagement on a regular basis. At its simplest level that can be effective, online courses have faculty members talking over powerpoints and providing assignments and quizzes. At the other end of a technological continuum, faculty members could prepare 5-7 minute videos on the key emphasis points to learn, pair that with discussion questions designed to foster connections between students, reinforce it all with video quizzes, and include other enrichments to the course.

Remote or online, synchronous classes meet at a regular time, virtually (e.g., Zoom). Thoughts for this modality include limits to internet connectivity and methods to manage discussions and foster collaborative work, to name a few. For example, group meetings in Zoom may be more effective than group meetings in F2F modes, if managed well, and that may call for some blended options. Encouraging engagement between students, pausing to ensure understanding, and other steps can enrich the experience for these remote and synchronous courses.

Changes during the term. Other questions during the forum concerned the extent to which faculty can change modalities during the term, when we might pivot to all remote or online in the term, and how those decisions will be made. The hope is that we will continue to talk to each other and that we will work together to find the best solutions to solve the challenges we will encounter this year. We will work with the System and with each other to take stock of the context of the term and make decisions in the best interests of our students and community. There are infinite shades of learning in this situation we now face together. To the extent possible, UMaine is fostering your work to learn Brightspace, new modalities for course delivery, and new ways to enrich learning and connectivity in these classes. There is no perfect course for all learners or teachers. There are only steps on a continuum to help us all keep learning. Contact your Associate Dean, Dean, or Faculty ambassadors, and connect with CITL to consider workshops and seminars on topics of interest to you.

Thank you for all you are doing to make fall 2020 a positive experience for our students. Your work is the reason students choose UMaine to study and complete a degree. Your flexibility and compassion are hallmarks of UMaine. Your skills in enhancing accessibility to course material for those who cannot attend the class or zoom in that day are important parts of this work. Your willingness to add a bit of enrichment to your courses this fall may make all the difference in the abilities of our students to grasp concepts and make them their own. Your choices may determine whether or not students persist to a degree or return to us next fall. Thank you for this investment of your time and skills. Working together, we will continue to learn and enhance the outcomes of our efforts.

Faye W. Gilbert, Ph.D.

Interim Provost

