TO: All Faculty

FROM: Jill Dolan, Dean of the College

RE: Teaching Undergraduates, Spring 2021

January 19, 2021

Colleagues, a few thoughts as the beginning of the teaching semester approaches on February 1 and the landscape of our lives remains transformed. As many of you might have seen or heard, enrolled undergraduate students began arriving back to campus over the MLK holiday weekend. Approximately 2,887 students have signed contracts to live on campus in our residence halls; another approximately 668 students are living locally (which we define as Mercer County/Plainsboro).

These students have signed our Social Contract, which requires them to abide by strict pandemic-necessary behaviors. I urge you to look at the contract, so you’ll be aware of the safety measures we’ll insist students follow when they’re on campus, whether in their dorm rooms, in public spaces, or in campus buildings.

Our goal is to ensure that we maintain a Princeton bubble as much as possible, to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 among our community. Tomorrow, you’ll receive a memo from Sanj, Pablo, me, and Cole that shares a wealth of information about our COVID preparations.

Most teaching and learning will remain virtual this semester, despite the presence of many more students on campus. About 15 undergraduate courses will be taught in a hybrid fashion or will have significant in-person course components. For those of you teaching those courses, you might consult the posted expectations for the safe use of your classrooms (see “Hybrid Instruction”).

For all faculty teaching this semester, the McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning has abundant resources for virtual instruction on topics such as creating community and connection in the online environment, teaching creatively on Zoom, and selecting digital tools based on your pedagogical aims.

Bear in mind that a number of our students—especially our international students—will continue to study in time zones hours different from Princeton’s. This link shares the results of an international students survey conducted at the end of last fall, which indicates their
challenges participating in their classes and remaining part of the Princeton community. Please note their particular needs as you construct your syllabi for this semester.

I also urge you to consider the complications of the ongoing pandemic as you outline your expectations for your students this semester. An op-ed recently published by Ahmed Farah ’22 in the *Prince* decried this year’s shortened spring break, given that students (and faculty) often use the week to catch up and to recharge for the remainder of the term. Because the pandemic requires us to reduce travel to and from campus, we can’t reinstate the full week of break.

Students would appreciate it if, when possible, you adjust your course workload accordingly and avoid setting assignment due dates right after the abbreviated break. You may also encourage your students to seek out academic support from their residential college staff as well as the McGraw Center and the Writing Center.

Likewise, because our revised grading policy will continue this semester, do consider submitting and posting mid-term grades for your courses. Students need strong signals about their academic performance early and often this semester, as they debate whether or not to take a letter grade or to P/D/F. Please make sure you give them ample and clear feedback about their progress throughout the semester.

I also urge you to make use of the online Academic Early Alert System, a convenient way to notify residential college advising staff about a student in your course who might benefit from additional academic support. The advising staff relies on these notifications to help students who may be facing challenges.

For those of you who require coursebooks, Labyrinth will again ship up to two orders via UPS/UPS International to all students studying remotely. Students can start ordering their coursebooks now and are urged to order them early. Due to a systems switch scheduled at Labyrinth this spring, the final day on which students can order coursebooks is February 22, 2021. Late-arriving books or books you’re using later in the semester can and should be pre-ordered before then.

The Faculty Committee on Examinations and Standing has revised the final examination policy for the spring semester. We urge faculty to offer all exams as take-home exams, which students may schedule themselves at any point throughout the exam period, which will begin the day after Dean’s Date. All take-home final exams should clearly indicate how long students should spend completing their work. Timed take-home exams should use the timer provided by Blackboard or Canvas, the course learning management system. Students should not be expected to spend more than eight hours on any course take-home final.
Examinations and Standing also retained the Registrar-scheduled final exam for faculty who request this option. Teaching faculty who want a scheduled final will be required to specify their intentions through the course information system by January 27, 2020.

Athletics programs will be following a phased resumption plan this semester. As always, student athletes are not permitted to miss class because of athletic training or practice sessions. While, because of social distancing concerns, some athletic activities may occasionally take place outside of the 4:30-7:00 time block, we ask that you continue to avoid scheduling any mandatory academic activities during that span.

Just a note, too, since most teaching will remain virtual, we won’t cancel classes in case of severe weather events this winter. Hybrid classes will move fully online.

Finally, by the time the semester begins, the new U.S. president should be securely ensconced in the White House. But the ongoing tensions of the socio-political moment may continue to affect our students profoundly, and might require difficult, complicated conversations. The McGraw Center is always available to help you and your colleagues prepare for these conversations. A forthcoming workshop, “Teaching Responsibly in a Violent Culture,” co-sponsored by McGraw, the Lewis Center for the Arts, and the Office of Institutional Equity and Diversity, will offer faculty strategies for addressing charged topics in a deeply polarized moment.

Although many undergraduate students are returning to campus, I find it difficult to comprehend that most of us continue to teach and work off campus, and that it’s been nearly a year since COVID-19 began disrupting our lives. I miss seeing you all on campus and knowing that you’re teaching your classes around our seminar tables and in our lecture halls.

I can’t tell you how much I look forward to the arrival of the COVID vaccine in New Jersey (more about that in tomorrow’s memo) and its ameliorating effects on all of our lives. Until then, I hope you’re safe, healthy, and in this much revised way, thriving.

Please reach out if you have questions or concerns about spring teaching.

My best,