

To find previous emails in this series, click [here](#)

My courageous and caring colleagues,

Good morning. If we are reading together, even asynchronously, then we have arrived at another Monday together, and in the midst of our grief and fear and uncertainty, this is a sign that we continue to survive and hope and connect. Thank you for all you are doing and being.

For those counting, it's been 40 days since the college first closed in response to the coronavirus. We've stopped and resumed teaching our courses three times or felt the disruptions if we were already teaching online. Despite our efforts to track attendance and engagement, we don't and can't have an accurate count of the students and colleagues we've lost and the loved ones they have lost and are losing. We know this number would be unbearable.

Holding this certain uncertainty within us, we look to our classes for consistency and familiarity in content and structure. We attempt to offer these to our students as we have in the past. We challenge ourselves to be flexible while maintaining standards. We believe in our students' capacities to learn even as absences and incomplete assignments limit what they are likely to achieve before final exams.

This morning, in response, I want to briefly address *flexibility* and *capacity* as principles of resilience and as principles of teaching. I believe that *flexibility* is a critical aspect of resilience as flexibility allows us to adjust and adapt to change while retaining a core sense of self. As one of the four [Resiliency Principles](#) (Stability, Capacity, Flexibility, Community) I use in trainings, for me flexibility is best understood as a continuum, with extremes at either end. Too little flexibility results in behavior that is rigid and like to break under pressure; too much flexibility leads to indecisiveness and a loss of stability. We have been advised to be flexible with our students during the pandemic: might we use this sense of continuum as a guide?

Similarly, *capacity* is often viewed as fixed, and we have heard this message applied to our own capacities just as we have applied it to others. However, if the extremes of capacity are experiencing capacity as fixed at one end of the continuum and unlimited at the other end, what lies in between that might be more resilient?

Recently, I have been asked questions about flexibility and grading, with concerns shared about capacities and timing. For example, how can we best communicate with students who are not turning in or completing assignments or are absent for several weeks? These situations can be difficult during a routine academic term. Now, there is increased urgency to help students complete their coursework and do well. There are increased desires to help students respond to their life crises.

Please keep in mind that too little flexibility in accommodating changes in students' schedules and commitments can set up situations that can damage the development of students'

capacities and their learning. At the same time, too much flexibility is likely to result in confusion about expectations and missed opportunities to develop capacities and learning. In either case, the growth we want students to embrace towards their professional and personal goals will probably remain underdeveloped.

Too often, then, without realizing these middle grounds of flexibility and capacity, we make choices for our students that are inappropriate to who and where they are. We disempower their development with options that are too fixed or too fluid. We exclude students from generating options that do fit their needs and forget that we probably don't know the most important issues they are facing and the resources they with which they most need to connect.

In this spirit, then, I encourage you to consider the following questions:

What is in the best interest of my student(s) and their learning? Think about the immediate consequences as well as those for the next term (if graduating, for the job search, interview, and/or current position as part of an employed team).

What is in the best interests of my class as a whole? Think about where your attention is best focused and the needs of those students who are able to stay with the class and the assignments in balance with the needs of those students who cannot be present and focused consistently.

What is likely to happen in the summer and fall when my students move onto their next classes or employment (including job searches that the current economy may not support)? Think about the skills and knowledge related to your courses that your students will need to be competent in these next steps.

Above all, please keep in mind that **we cannot solve problems that belong to others**. Rather than propose solutions that are too fixed or fluid, we can listen, clarify, share our own lessons learned, and make appropriate referrals.

Remember: We have a [Counseling Center](#) ready to support students by phone. We have [academic advisors](#) poised to reach out to students who may need help to continue their academic work. We have a [student emergency financial fund](#) (much larger thanks to recent donations). We have a [food pantry](#). There is much more. Please make use of these resources to refer students. And make use of your own expertise in teaching and learning to help students plan their next steps in your classes. **Please empower your students by connecting them to the options and assistance they need to make informed decisions.**

In closing, I would like to share a poem for National Poetry Month:
A blessing by our first indigenous Poet Laureate Joy Harjo

“For Calling the Spirit Back from Wandering the Earth in Its Human Feet”

<https://poets.org/poem/calling-spirit-back-wandering-earth-its-human-feet>

AND

Announcements and Reminders:

This week's TLC Open Conversation: Tuesday, April 21, 3pm

Meeting ID: 911-4928-2853

Registration Link: https://zoom.us/meeting/register/tJUsc-CqpjkiH9fIPTS_xElt_EagwVITySiZ

Please remember Ramadan, April 23-May 24 (approximate)

Many of our community identify as Muslim and will be observing Ramadan, one of the Five Pillars of Islam. Please invite your students to let you know if they are observing and remind them to ask for religious accommodations as needed. The links below will assist you in supporting your students (and peers) during this time.

2019-20 Multifaith Religious Calendar

<https://chaplain.williams.edu/2019-2020-multifaith-religious-holiday-calendar/>

New York State Education Law, Article 5 Section 224--a

<http://johnjay.jjay.cuny.edu/files/cunypolicies/NewYorkStateEducationLaw.pdf>

Warm thoughts and gratitude,

Gina

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