



As we wrap up the final days of this very eventful Spring 2021 term, I wanted to provide you with an update about Fall 2021. Chancellor Gallagher and Provost Cudd have indicated their clear intentions for all of us to get back to campus and back to a more normal version of the pre-pandemic lives we were living a little over a year ago. I echo their enthusiasm for our safe and strategic return to classrooms, offices, and the in-person collaborations we've been missing.

I also thought it might be helpful for me to provide some specific information on a topic about which many of our faculty and staff have expressed concerns—the impact the pandemic has had on the education and learning outcomes of our current students, and on the college-readiness of the first-year students who will be joining us in this fall, and for the next few years to come.

First, be assured that my leadership team and I applaud your commitment to our students and share your concerns about their success and wellbeing. We're also taking action. At the beginning of the spring term, John Twynning, Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies and the College of General Studies, and Jessica Hatherill, Executive Director of Undergraduate Studies and the College of General Studies, asked Assistant Dean Liann Tsoukas to coordinate a School-wide effort focused on curricular improvements to the college transition experience.

As Associate Dean Twynning has said, “The global pandemic has laid bare disparities in academic preparation and performance among our students. We know that these disparities, coupled with the move to test-optional admissions, makes it imperative that we review, assess, and refine our current practices and expectations, curricula, and the integration of academic support services.”

While Assistant Dean Tsoukas will ultimately work with faculty in all academic departments and with staff throughout Undergraduate Studies to recommend and implement necessary changes and best practices, she's begun the process by initiating conversations with five academic departments (Biological Sciences, Chemistry, Economics, Mathematics, and Physics) and the directors of our Academic Advising Center, Study Lab and the McCarl Center, and First-Year Programs.

These front-line experts have been generous with information and insights, and from their input, Assistant Dean Tsoukas has identified three pillars of the student-focused approach we'll need as we proceed.

- **Meeting the increased needs of students will require rebuilding their support networks.**

For the many of you already familiar with Study Lab, it will come as no surprise to know that this crucial resource will play a critical role

in helping current and incoming students stay on—or get back on—the path to academic success. Embedding Study Lab tutors in courses with high DFW (Ds, Fs, and Withdraws) rates is one of the possibilities being considered. Since many of the UTAs assigned to these courses also serve as Study Lab tutors, there is already overlap. And having peer subject area experts easily accessible to struggling students will help to remove the stigma sometimes attached to asking for help.

One especially heartening point that Assistant Dean Tsoukas shared during her recent presentation to my leadership team, was the reminder that, though this period of upheaval has been challenging for our students, they are resilient. And instead of fragmenting in the face of difficulties, they have actually united and begun to rely more on each other. We need to applaud that interdependence and find creative ways to encourage it.

- **We must recognize that our rising sophomores are also at risk for negative academic performance and inadequate preparation.** These students who've spent much of their first year of college in remote learning environments have missed out on key aspects of the classroom experience that may not be readily apparent. One example shared with Assistant Dean Tsoukas by our natural sciences faculty members, is the fact that first-year students learn the basics of lab safety as part of standard on-site lab orientations. But without the benefit of those early in-person lab experiences, second year students will be unfamiliar with these fundamentals.
- **Addressing student needs will require all of us to adopt a comprehensive, collaborative approach that reflects the interconnectedness of the student experience.** Simply put, we need to realign our perspectives so they match our students' reality. We must cooperate across disciplines and remove artificial barriers that too often lead us to regard students as “math students” or “physics students” rather than as Dietrich School students.

In the upcoming weeks, Assistant Dean Tsoukas will continue her listening tour. I urge all of you to assist her in this effort. The information she gathers during this process will help us to define our priorities and determine how best to direct resources for Fall 2021.

I know that you've all done quite a bit of heavy lifting over the past 13 months, and that many of you are feeling weary and depleted. Please know that your sacrifices and extra effort are greatly appreciated, not only by me and the school's leadership team, but by our students and their families. I urge you to take time to attend to your health and wellness this summer. Seek out people and activities that bring you joy and remember that you and your contributions are valued.

The pandemic may be coming to an end, but its consequences will be felt for a long time. In the aftermath of this crisis, we have the opportunity to reinvent how we do things for the betterment of our students. I look forward to engaging with you in this important endeavor.

Until then, I wish you a peaceful, healthy, and restful summer.