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Dear UM Faculty:

Congratulations! We have two weeks of remote teaching now in the books, and we now start a third week in this increasingly familiar – but still strange – world of remote teaching. On behalf of the everyone on the Keep Teaching team, I write to say "Thank You!" again for all the work you are doing to support teaching and learning during these difficult and unpredictable times.

Hundreds of University of Mississippi faculty have been part of an historic shift of teaching to remote delivery, with the vast majority of you moving your classes online from face-to-face formats. This shift has included everything from large lecture courses with labs, to smaller writing-intensive courses, to discussion-based seminars. Even though there are plenty of un-answered questions at the end of this second week, there are also many impressive accomplishments.

What does this massive shift in teaching look like? In the first week of online instruction, 91% of all UM students accessed a Blackboard course. When the university reached out to the remaining students, we learned that more than 98% of all students are engaged with their classes in some way (some through technologies other than Blackboard, for instance). The UM network handled increased traffic with aplomb; Blackboard CPU, memory, and database calls did not reach capacity; and the help desk addressed a surge of 368 calls and 495 tickets in the first week alone.

What did we learn in these first two weeks? The Keep Teaching and Keep Learning teams have heard many anecdotes of our students encountering unexpected and unprecedented challenges. Based on feedback we are receiving from them, it is worth considering the following additional guidance as we head into the next week of a semester with remote teaching. Here are some of the key lessons we have learned.

- The first and most important lesson is that students are often unable to participate in our classes at a specific time. Due to challenging living circumstances, varied health conditions, and uneven internet access, students who might have enrolled in a class at MWF at 10:00 – 10:50 before the coronavirus pandemic are not always available at 10:00 – 10:50 on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

- Because of this unavailability, asynchronous course content is much more accessible for students. There may be some unavoidable exceptions, including assessments, but if we assume that students are driving to a McDonald's parking lot to access course while sitting in their cars, we can better understand their challenges.

- When we do schedule synchronous online components for courses (e.g., Zoom or Google Meet), making them optional and during former course meeting times helps to avoid conflicts with other faculty optional Zoom sessions. A good example would be optional office hours.

- Given these access limitations, we will have to continue to reconsider course workloads and revise expectations throughout the remainder of the semester. This is challenging for us as teachers because we have lost a week of class time. We now know, and are being reminded each day, that we cannot assume the same amount of student access to our courses. The Keep Teaching team has identified a few workload calculator tools to help in this regard.

- Many of us are asking students to download or otherwise access new technologies. Although many of those technologies will be supported through the University, new technical challenges for students are likely. How will the time needed to access, learn, and problem-solve new technologies fit into the total time demanded of students?

- At least one student wrote to us with the suggestion that faculty consider sending weekly reminders of what is due and where the assignments can be found. He wrote "It is easy to become distracted outside of a classroom and without face to face interaction with my classmates and professors, it is difficult at times to become motivated and organized to complete classwork. I was hoping that you could suggest to professors that every week they forward students a list of when assignments are due and where we can find them online. [Many] of my classes have assignments that are tucked away in the syllabus, live on one of many online outlets, and without [a] reminder, there is no chance that I will submit these on time, if at all."

- Lastly, please continue to encourage your students to communicate honestly with you about their challenges for participating in your class. They are going to attempt the work you set before them. But they might not be as forthcoming about the challenges they are facing for a variety of reasons. Encouraging them to reach out to you will allow you a better window into their struggles and bolster the feeling of community we all need at this time.

We are facing an unprecedented set of circumstances which no one could have clearly seen at the beginning of the semester. Students and faculty are facing a heterogeneous and evolving set of challenges with personal health, caregiving, living and working arrangements, and internet access. We are all working hard at shifting teaching online and trying to find the right balance between the expectations established in January and what is possible for the remainder of the semester in a new delivery mode. It is only reasonable, then, to assume that we will need to continue to make many adjustments between now and the end of the semester.

To that end, the Keep Teaching and Keep Learning teams are developing new workshops to support revisions to and improvements for your course. We are currently drafting surveys for both students and faculty so that we can better understand where you need help. And if you already have suggestions, please feel free to send them to keepteaching@olemiss.edu. One issue we know we'll address is Zoom Fatigue. As Tanya Joosten, an expert in digital learning at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, recommends in response to Zoom fatigue, "[get] down to the essentials — 'What do I want [students] to be able to do by the end of the semester?' — and [work] backward from there. She thinks the best plan is to put students into small groups — which can interact well on video — and have them work on projects together."[1] Thus the advice Patti O'Sullivan and the Keep Teaching team gave in workshops the week after spring break is affirmed: start with your course outcomes in mind, and work back from there.

We have always been a community based on the personal teaching and learning connections that we build with students. Your students welcome the community your course brings to their lives. Please give yourself and your students as much compassion as you can manage, and remember that we are all in this together!

On behalf of the Keep Teaching Team,

Executive Director of Academic Innovation
Associate Professor of Writing and Rhetoric

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[1] Beckie Supiano, "'Zoomed Out': Why 'Live' Teaching Isn't Always the Best," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2 April 2020, accessed 3 April 2020, https://www.chronicle.com/article/Zoomed-Out-Why/248401.