

FC 9/3/2021

Hello Everyone:

Welcome to our first Faculty Council meeting of the 2021-22 academic year. First, I want to say thank you to the many people who wrote to me about my piece in The Well where I talked about my father's death from COVID last summer. So many of you told me stories about your parents and the grief you carry whether those deaths happened years ago or more recently. It was a moment of connection and community over my computer screen this week and I deeply appreciate it. Thank you.

As we began last year, we begin this year in uncertainty. Last fall, I quoted the William and Mary president who said we were called to live in uncertainty and that the calling was deeply uncomfortable. Truly, I never thought the quote would be so evergreen.

Yet, so far, our campus is functioning, albeit with ups and downs and plenty of worry. I know the Chancellor and Provost will go over the particulars in their remarks, we have plenty of time for discussion, and questions related to our COVID protocols. However, from where I sit and those I hear from, things on our campus are not perfect, but we are not in disaster mode either. I also am very grateful to everyone who writes, asks questions in meetings, and sends ideas and suggestions. As I said on Monday, at the Faculty Executive Committee meeting tough questions are not a bug in our collective life, they are a feature. We should embrace them and allow them to make our plans and strategies for getting through this second pandemic year, better. I see evidence this is happening – testing has been increased, new ideas such as the University of Maryland contact-tracing app, are being investigated and considered. We may not have everything we would want in terms of a vaccine mandate or complete choice in our instructional modes, but we do have a strong mask mandate, we have the flexibility to use technology on an as-needed basis to change instructional strategies, and we live in a highly vaccinated community. There is much to be grateful for. I was appalled to learn that at some universities that have no mask mandates, professors cannot even require that a student wear a mask in their offices! Therefore, I give you that as exhibit A in the things could be worse department.

That does not mean that there is not plenty to be worried about. My son's high school reported its first COVID case and accordant contact tracing last night with no specifics as to grade or who was infected - student, staff, faculty member, etc. There is no information about the level of vaccination among K-12 students or K-12 faculty and staff. I know of colleagues who are quarantining with their children because of exposure in K-12 schools. Disruption will be a constant this semester, as will worry. Those are the realities of our collective life. In addition, truly, I do not think we can escape them. In my view, our best course of action is to keep asking questions and raising concerns, expect our administration to change what they can in the service of both physical and psychological safety, and to have patience and compassion for one another – faculty, staff, students, and administration. Let's stay in our flotilla – not try to go it alone in our respective boats. Please write and call me. I'm here to listen, to advocate, and to help however I can.

We also have other issues to think about today. First on the agenda is the Thomas Jefferson Award. After the award was given last year, people began to call me with concerns. Why were we giving an award named after someone who enslaved people, who had a relationship that by definition could not be voluntary with an enslaved woman? People told me and others in faculty governance that they were unwilling to nominate or be nominated for this award. And, amid the rest of the year's tumult, I did begin reaching out to people about possible ways forward given that this is one of the very few faculty awards that we, as a faculty, have to give.. Here is what I have learned to date. First, the award was created in the 1960s and is given by several universities such as Vanderbilt, the University of Virginia, and six or eight others around the country. The original donor is long dead with no descendants meaning that a bank now controls the funds. This makes it harder to consider a name change, leaving two options: 1) give the money back and no longer have the award to give, and 2) change the language of the award to reflect the historical reality of this person and accordingly what the award does and doesn't stand for. The administration has said that the choice will be the faculty's decision to make, although I want to stay in close communication with David Routh in the Development Office about this. Therefore, I've asked Pat Parker and Jim Leloudis if they will take the first step with the University Commission on Race, History, and a Way Forward to make a recommendation either about changing the language and/or returning the money for the award. While they are doing that, I will be conferring with others about whether the Honorary Degrees and Special Awards Committee should make a final decision, whether this should come to the Faculty Council for a vote, or whether there is another process. Likewise, I would like to confer with other groups on campus such as the BIPOC faculty group that is convened by the Institute for the Arts and Humanities. Therefore, while originally I had hoped we would have something resolved by this year, we do not, yet; but work is proceeding. Therefore, for this year, we are keeping things the same. Yet, we have in our award winner this year, the perfect person to help us think through the legacy of the person for whom the award is named.