

Subject: Welcome to Fall 2020

Date: Monday, August 31, 2020 at 8:59:01 AM Eastern Daylight Time

From: Academic Affairs

Dear Colleagues –

I welcome you to the beginning of a new academic year with profound gratitude for the work that you have done to make this fall semester possible. This year is highly unusual – the new beginning reflects the College’s priority of assuring your safety and the safety of our students, as we start the fall semester with online and structured remote instruction. You will welcome many new students as well as returning students through your computer screens, which may feel different for you, but I know that the connections you will forge with students on the first day will set the stage for developing a teaching and learning relationship that will keep them engaged, intrigued, and committed to their academic success.

I greatly appreciate that so many of you participated in the Structured Remote Teaching program this summer. The work you have completed will ensure that our students have the best online learning experience we can provide. For those who taught summer classes, I commend you for your commitment to our students. We enjoyed the highest summer enrollment we have seen in years. Think of how many students are one course or two courses closer to their goal. Whether you were in a virtual classroom or used the summer to tend to other obligations, I hope that each of you found time for renewal. I know that today you bring your deep commitment to our students, no matter the format.

Normally, I would see many of you during Professional Week, and I did, on my computer screen, at some of the simply outstanding events last week. I hope that each of you had the opportunity to participate in some of the excellent Professional Week presentations, which spoke to the institutional and pedagogical challenges that higher education faces in responding to the pandemic and systemic racism. In his keynote address, author Jeff Selingo described the institutions that will be best prepared to weather not just this crisis but those that will follow. He cautioned that while the pandemic will subside, the economic and social impacts will be felt for years. Colleges that invest in transformative pedagogical change, coupled with developing the integrated technological foundations that will enhance content delivery, interaction, and engagement, will fare much better than those that do not. Mr. Selingo also challenged us to re-think our norms and assumptions that teaching and learning can happen only, or happen best, in the structures that have evolved over time and in which we are comfortable. His observations of student success at institutions around the country have revealed that students need clearer, faster paths to completion and credentialing for employment, especially during a time of economic recovery.

Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab, director of the Hope Center at Temple University, spoke to us about the dire consequences of basic needs insecurities (BNI) – lack of food and housing – for students, particularly Black and Latinx students. Results of a survey conducted in May by the Hope Center, in which more than 3500 Montgomery College students participated, indicate that in our classes, almost half of our students may be facing BNI – 47% of the Montgomery College students who responded were food insecure within the prior 30 days, and 42% were housing insecure at the time of the survey; 41% of the students who were employed had lost their jobs due to the pandemic, and 33% had reduced hours and/or pay. Please read those numbers again and think of the impact of the pandemic on their lives

and about the opportunity we have to make such a different impact. Black and Latinx Montgomery College students are economically impacted most severely by the pandemic, which is consistent with national data. Dr. Goldrick-Rab discussed the practical challenges for students who need employment to manage work and college over a 15-week semester: the most economically vulnerable students often cannot sustain the effort, dropping out to get the work hours that they need to provide for themselves and their families. You can read the full report of the Hope Center's survey of Montgomery College students [here](#) and view her presentation [here](#).

Summer and fall enrollments have borne out the statements that these national experts have made. We saw the highest summer enrollment over the last five years, with an 11% increase over last summer. There are currently 5,500 fewer enrollments in the 15-week sessions (-10%) compared to a similar date last year whereas there are 500 more enrollments in the 7-week sessions (+ 15%). Our student success data shows that students are successful in shorter-term courses offered in summer, winter, and half-semester sessions. This is not an anomaly. National studies echo these findings. You can read more about the success of students in shortened terms [here](#). Students are telling us that at this time, they need to have more flexibility in their course scheduling to manage new responsibilities and challenges, including the insecurities discussed by Dr. Goldrick-Rab.

To serve our students and to maintain enrollments for the economic health of the College, we must challenge our assumptions that the ways we have structured the academic year are the only or best ways that students can learn and earn credentials. We must embrace innovation in many forms, not only in the classroom as Montgomery College faculty and staff have always done, but also in our operations and policies. Through careful planning, we have made progress on the goal of providing scheduling certainty to students and avoiding last-minute disruptions to faculty assignments. To date, we have reduced the number of canceled sections by 40% compared to Fall 2019, impacting 63% fewer students. Our goal and our role must be to anticipate what our students need and demand, and to deliver it.

At this time when it seems that everything familiar has changed radically, I know that you will be challenged. What has not changed is your commitment to supporting our students as they navigate uncertainty. Your unwavering dedication to their success – as students and as fellow travelers on this journey through a pandemic – remains a constant. I look forward to hearing from you as the semester unfolds.

Sanjay