

Dear Colleagues,

I hope you will all forgive yet another note, but in conversation with several colleagues, there is still some uncertainty about how best to approach the next six weeks in terms of revising syllabi, course assignments, and assessments for the rest of the semester.

In our conversations on academic continuity, there is agreement that with students being in multiple locations, teaching synchronously will be nearly impossible. It also seems likely that with the adjustment to learning online, we may very well lose some instruction time. Distance learning also presents challenges in terms of secure, closed-book exams, so thinking through ways to allow for alternatives may also be necessary. Some colleagues are paring back aspects of their courses, from removing a reading, or modifying or dropping a paper assignment, rethinking group-work and presentations, and so on. In my own case, I had a revelation from my experience with the Russian education system: oral exams at the end of a course are a standard. I plan to set up telephone conversations during finals week with each of the students in my Soviet Food Culture course. It will be open book, open note—but it will require careful preparation on students' part to offer an articulate discussion of what they have learned. I've had to revise that course considerably, given that a core element was cooking in the (now closed) Global Kitchen; I'm still working on that, and my home office now includes my kitchen, where I'm busy filming cooking techniques, with the goal of at least offering my students some practical instruction while lecturing about aspects of Russian food culture. This is but one example; I urge you to consult with your departments and colleagues across the College as you prepare.

I raised this question in our Chairs' meeting today, and have also consulted with Executive Council members. We are in agreement that faculty should feel empowered to scale back expectations, revise course assessments, and find work-arounds to aspects of the course that are no longer feasible in an on-line format. I offer below the note I will include in my revised syllabus, along with guiding principles as developed by Brandon Bayne, a religious studies professor at UNC - Chapel Hill, and which appeared recently in the Chronicle.

We also want to emphasize that you should do what works for you, and find your own individual approach to teaching your courses. There is no one-size-fits-all method, and we encourage you to consult with colleagues in your department, division, and across the College as you work to adjust your teaching on-line. And if you find strategies that work, please share!

Finally, I want to reach out to our early career faculty members: please feel free to contact me or your divisional or at-large representatives on Executive Council at any time with any questions you may have, about any issue that you are facing. We are committed to supporting you as you negotiate this very difficult time.

I wish you all the very best as we begin the second half of the semester.

Sincerely,

Todd Armstrong
Russian
Chair of the Faculty

Special Note: I am fully aware that the conditions for this course are unprecedented for all of us, and I hope we can all be patient and generous with each other as we all face the challenges outside of class in the coming weeks. I'll hope as well that this course will provide a virtual space for us to join together in solidarity in pursuing knowledge and fostering our Grinnell College community. I have never taught a full course on-line, and I am eager for your regular input, ideas, and creativity as we commence, and I'll try to provide regular opportunities for your feedback. Further, our course will be informed by the following principles, as developed by Brandon Bayne, a religious studies professor at UNC - Chapel Hill:

Principles

1. **Nobody signed up for this.**
 - Not for the sickness, not for the social distancing, not for the sudden end of our collective lives together on campus
 - Not for an online class, not for teaching remotely, not for learning from home, not for mastering new technologies, not for varied access to learning materials
2. **The humane option is the best option.**
 - We are going to prioritize supporting each other as humans
 - We are going to prioritize simple solutions that make sense for the most
 - We are going to prioritize sharing resources and communicating clearly
3. **We cannot just do the same thing online.**
 - Some assignments are no longer possible
 - Some expectations are no longer reasonable
 - Some objectives are no longer valuable
4. **We will foster intellectual nourishment, social connection, and personal accommodation.**
 - Accessible asynchronous content for diverse access, time zones, and contexts
 - Optional synchronous discussion to learn together and combat isolation
5. **We will remain flexible and adjust to the situation.**
 - Nobody knows where this is going and what we'll need to adapt
 - Everybody needs support and understanding in this unprecedented moment