May 7, 2020

To: Faculty and staff in Dedman College of Humanities and Sciences  
From: Thomas DiPiero, dean  
Re: Plans for summer and fall

Everyone will have seen the communication from President Turner announcing that we will be welcoming students back for the fall semester, 2020, and that a number of groups are working on determining how to do that while staying within governmental guidelines and adhering to models for safety and security. President Turner also indicated that most SMU employees will be working remotely through May 18. Surveys have gone out to students, faculty, and staff to help determine what we need to do to make our transition back to life on campus safe. Additionally, the Task Force for a Healthy Opening Fall 2020 (of which I am a member) is reviewing information to determine whether in-person instruction should be offered for the Summer 2 session (July, 2020).

Among the possibilities for fall semester instruction are hybrid classes (partially remote and partially in person, perhaps with cohorts of students alternating between the two modes); fully in-person (most likely for smaller classes that meet in appropriately sized classrooms); and fully online. It seems likely that virtually all classes will have a remote component for such eventualities as international students whose arrival to campus is delayed or students who cannot attend in-person classes either because they are ill or for other unforeseen reasons. This hybrid model will also be valuable for faculty members who may be unable to offer in-person instruction for short intervals or for longer periods of time.

Returning to in-person instruction will also mean being sensitive to a number of changes in our student body. Some students will have faced—or will be currently facing—challenges connected to COVID-19. Additionally, because of some changes in our admissions policies, we will have more students on need-based aid and/or who are first-generation college students. Those students might require additional attention or help adapting to the rigors of university-level work.
Dayna Oscherwitz and Patty Alvey presented information to Dedman College about the transition from the University Curriculum to the Common Curriculum, which is currently taking place (so the CC will be in effect beginning this fall semester). They shared documents concerning the CC and the transition to it, which can be reviewed at:

https://smu.box.com/s/txbd1vfy0ulw6hebwh6ehc7sst3semzn

SMU has a well-deserved reputation of excellence in teaching, and we want to maintain that reputation in our courses offered remotely and in hybrid mode. Additional training is being offered for faculty to improve their remote teaching.

An upcoming two-day event, entitled “Remote Learning: From Survival to Exceptional” will take place on May 11–12. Developed by OIT, SMU GO, and SMU Libraries, the program features faculty across the university, including, of course, Dedman College faculty. More information on the event can be found here. The Center for Teaching Excellence offers a course entitled “Face-to-face (F2F) to Remote Course Design training,” which offers valuable, advanced tips on building remote courses (available at https://www.smu.edu/Provost/cte).

As of this writing, the number of deposits the university has received—deposits guarantee accepted students a place in the first-year class come autumn—is virtually identical to what it was last year at this time. Deposits to Dedman College are almost what they were a year ago (down 1.7%); deposits to Cox are up slightly (3%). Over the summer we typically experience melt—students withdrawing, most often because they’ve decided to attend a different university—and right now we have no real way of knowing what this year’s melt will look like given the unprecedented nature of the pandemic.

Tuition funds most of the University’s operations, and the business office is currently developing different financial models to reflect our economic situation with different levels of student attendance in fall of 2020. Additionally, as a result of canceled programs and students moving back home, there was a budget shortfall this semester. While we do not yet know the full extent of the pandemic’s financial impact on us, it is clear that we will be facing significant spending restrictions through at least the next academic year.

We are living and working in unprecedented circumstances and we will surely see a great deal of change as new policies and procedures develop to respond to the pandemic. I think it is safe to say that how we have done things in the past will not be a reliable indicator of how things will work going forward. However, we have been remarkably resilient in the face of the challenges we have faced so
far, and people have demonstrated the innovation, resourcefulness, and ingenuity we are known for. Our faculty and staff’s willingness—perhaps eagerness is a better word—to learn new ways to do things and to share ideas for improving on existing practices has been inspiring, and our students’ ideas for coping with being shut in at home have been galvanizing.

We will continue to share information with you as we learn of new policies and procedures.