

June 3, 2020

Sent to Academic Senate and Academic Federation Members

Subject: End of Spring 2020 Guidance for faculty, Including Resources to Address Racism

Dear Faculty,

These are difficult times. The COVID-19 pandemic has been all-consuming, and the unrest to address unjust killings of African-Americans continues to grow. For some, this unrest is confusing. For others, its eruption is an expected outgrowth of situations related to racism that have been experienced for a lifetime.

Regardless of our different backgrounds, we are now living in a shared reality in which the destructive power of racism is evident all around us. We have learned that our students are experiencing significant stress. We have learned that within our student body there is hurt, compounded and complicated by grief, fatigue, anxiety, depression, illness, and trauma. We know that we have students who have had family members die of COVID-19. We have students who are currently dispersed around the country, or abroad. Some are living in areas where protests are heightened and may experience power disruptions and the constant sound of helicopters and sirens. Internet connections (which have been challenging everywhere, even in Davis) are inconsistent. This is an unprecedented time. We have to take unprecedented action.

Recognizing the compounding stress our students are experiencing from the pandemic and racial unrest, the Academic Senate voted to authorize the faculty to offer undergraduate students the alternative of receiving their course grade in Spring 2020 classes based on work completed by the last day of instruction (June 4), provided that those students who wish to take the scheduled final exam are allowed to do so. We hope you view this flexibility as helpful as you finalize this quarter. We recognize that some of you will determine that a required final is essential for your course. In such cases, we encourage you to consider accommodations on a case-by-case basis and let students know how to make such requests—some students may not feel empowered to initiate these conversations. We also encourage you to remind students that the additional flexibilities the [Academic Senate approved for Spring 2020](#) to help students make academic progress can be utilized, as we understand that there is trauma associated with both COVID-19 and the racial injustices:

- **Undergraduate students** have until the last day of instruction (June 4) to opt for P/NP grading, or revert back to letter grading; courses taken P/NP during Spring 2020 are exempt from P/NP units caps for graduation; and advisors have been encouraged to be flexible with late drop requests. This online [FAQ](#) can help students make decisions about whether to take a course P/NP.
- **Graduate students** have until the last day of instruction (June 4) to submit a [Grading Option Change request form](#); they can take a greater number of courses S/U; and advisors have been encouraged to be flexible with requests for late drops.

- **For both undergraduate and graduate students**, you may also consider approving requests for an [incomplete](#), giving students an additional year to complete the work, or additional time to achieve research or project milestones.

We also recognize that some of you are seeking guidance on what else you might say or do—whether in the classroom or lab with your students or in conversations with graduate students, staff or other colleagues—as an ally or as faculty concerned over the well-being of our community, especially our black students, faculty and staff. Chancellor May’s message on George Floyd affirmed that the events of this week caused him to believe even more strongly *“in building an inclusive environment that recognizes and respects people of all backgrounds and experiences.”* While reaffirming his own commitment to the same, Chancellor May urged each of us *“to do what [we] can to eliminate racism, sexism, and other negative influences on our progression as a nation.”* *“Perhaps higher education,”* he hoped, *“can be that positive influence on lives beyond an education. Perhaps here we can create a way forward. Perhaps here we can breathe.”*

We do not think we can offer one universal message or a set of universal prescriptions on what you might say or do to build an inclusive environment or to contribute to a more equitable society, although we offer a few examples of what your peers have shared on what they have said or done or committed to do in the spirit of being helpful. We recognize that as faculty, our lived experiences and our context situates us differently along a continuum of views and values that can lead us to feel more or less distant from the ways some of colleagues and students experience or view race in the U.S. Because of this, we offer a few pointers instead of what to keep in mind as you decide how to engage in the inevitable conversations and decisions you will need to make during these difficult times.

In conversations with your students or other colleagues:

- **Reconsider staying silent:** Sometimes the discomfort of not knowing what to say, not wanting to offend, the fear of being perceived as racist (for disagreeing with issues such as riots as an appropriate response or the role of police in society) or the perception that race is irrelevant to the subject in the course can lead faculty to prefer simply to stay completely silent on the issue of race. Understand that when you do this, you run the risk of being perceived as either perpetuating the status quo or being complicit or simply tone deaf or indifferent to students’ (or colleagues’) pain or lived experiences.
- **Be genuine and exercise humility:** When you do speak, is okay to acknowledge your fears or discomfort around the issue. It is okay to tell your students, for example, that you wish to try to stay as neutral as possible on the issue in the classroom and why. If students are disappointed with you, work hard at not getting defensive. Understand that students’ emotions and views on the issues right now are raw. Simply tell them you understand their disappointment. It is also okay to share with students or colleagues your own pain and reactions to the situation, especially when it is personal.

- **Demonstrate empathy:** Choosing not to engage on a debate on race in the classroom (assuming it is not directly relevant to what you're teaching) should not mean you should not acknowledge students' pain. You can always acknowledge this and show flexibility in course requirements in response to this pain. If you feel comfortable, and the students feel comfortable, invite them to engage with you outside of lecture time. If they do, be open to listen more than talk. If you disagree, do it with grace and respect. Do not argue for the sake of arguing, especially not right now.
- **Consider engaging in discussions of race during lecture:** Choosing to engage directly on a conversation of race during lectures or discussion sections – in any subject – is not only okay but necessary, especially when students raise the issue in the context of the class and the topics being covered. Especially now, if you want to be an ally, keep in mind faculty of color or equity-minded faculty do this work at UC Davis all the time. When they are the only ones to do so, this work is not only burdensome but can also render faculty of color vulnerable to critiques in student evaluations based on perceptions that these discussions do not belong in academic settings. Also, be careful not to overburden students, especially students of color, with having to bear the burden and responsibility of carrying these difficult conversations. If issues get heated and students feel offended from the conversation, listen to their concerns. If you do not know how to address it on your own, turn to others for help. The Center on Educational Effectiveness and the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion are here to help you.
- **Support your colleagues of color:** Faculty and staff of color, especially your black colleagues, may not be in a frame of mind right now to wish to engage in conversations to help you and the institution figure out how to address race. The conversation of race also cannot fall solely on the shoulders of those burdened by it. Before you participate in faculty meetings where issues may be addressed that could be painful or hard for your colleagues right now, take the time to approach them first privately and ask them what they would like to see and whether they would welcome your support in elevating those voices. When they do speak, and if you are moved to support them, speak up to show your support.

As faculty, we came to this profession because we love learning, teaching, inspiring curiosity, sharing research, discovery, digging into literature and data to build upon existing theories, and using our growing knowledge to make improvements. As part of our mission to serve our students as part of a community, we must recognize that while we have pledged to be their teachers, we, as professors, cannot forget that we are also together in journey of life-long learning that calls for embracing these profound moments of disruption and discomfort as opportunities for individual and collective growth.

Please encourage students to take care of their mental health and use available resources such as <https://shcs.ucdavis.edu/>. DEI has also developed a new page to provide additional assistance: <https://diversity.ucdavis.edu/resources-racial-trauma>

Finally, some of our colleagues have provided examples of words that they have used in their classes:

*"Before we move on, I want to say that I am horrified by this week's events and know many of you are suffering, perhaps even fearful for your own lives. Sadly, the murder of an African American, this time George Floyd, by a police officer is not a new occurrence. And the incident with a very white Amy Cooper filmed by African American birder Christian Cooper isn't either. And while phone recordings reveal these horrific instances of murder by those whose job it is to protect, instances of white people, white women who think they're "woke" and yet knowingly weaponize their tears, imagine everything happening that is not caught on camera. I might be Latina but I recognize my fair skin gives me white privilege, and I have to say that I am barely holding it together this week. I can't imagine how our POC brothers and sisters are doing. So I wanted to begin our final meeting today with a call for acknowledgement, advocacy, and justice for communities that have been persecuted for centuries by a culture of hate, knowing that our government and various overseeing institutions need to be dismantled and rebuilt to embrace the people it's supposed to serve.*

*Here are some resources I wanted to share with you ..."*

*Associate Professor, College of  
Biological Sciences*

*In one of my classes on Friday, I spent the first few minutes saying that I felt like it was important for my students to have a refuge from what was going on so I'd only speak on what was happening for a few minutes before getting to the science and the help they need for their final projects ... I spoke about the centuries of murder of black people and how the rest of us only really know about it due to cell phone videos. I said that some of my ancestors came over on the Mayflower and almost certainly participated in slavery and the decimation of indigenous people. I said that it was essential for me to make space for all of my students in my class to be the best that they can and find a productive path through life.*

*Professor, Geology*

**Thank you for your hard work, and thank you for working together to address equity.**

Sincerely,

Renetta G. Tull, Ph.D.

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