July 22, 2020

Dear Colleagues:

I hope that you and your family are remaining safe during these unusual times. The challenges we are facing today are unprecedented in our lives. However, we must address a number of issues for the fall. Our students are asking for answers to the basic issue as to whether or not we will be open this fall. We have made the decision that we will indeed be open this fall albeit with modifications. We have made the promise that, barring any changes, all face-to-face classes will be offered in a blended/hybrid model so that density can be reduced while still maintaining at least weekly in-person contact with their professors and classmates. Naturally there remain questions as to what is a hybrid model. How will we comply with the need for social distancing? What type of accommodations will we make? The terms hybrid and blended are interchangeable. State guidelines define a hybrid/blended course as: "A course in which a majority (more than 50 percent but less than 85 percent), of the planned instruction occurs when the students and instructor(s) are not in the same place." Although these are State minimum guidelines, our stated goal for the University is to provide weekly direct contact with our faculty. When students asked how we were going to open in the fall, we promised that we would provide weekly contact. We intend to honor this commitment, because based on that information, the students made decisions as to enrollment, leases, and work schedules. To change that now, without a direct mandate from lawmakers or other circumstances beyond our control, would be analogous to bait and switch.

However, there are some classes that are not suited for a blended model (e.g., some labs, clinical supervision, etc.). We have informed students that these classes would be exceptions. We are also allowing exceptions for some doctoral and/or masters level classes with small enrollments. These classes can handle social distancing without resorting to a blended model. Although there will be some variation in blended formats, the intent is to offer a significant portion of the course in person. Therefore, a model offering only 15% direct contact will not be approved.

Although we are committed to providing direct contact, students may request permission to attend completely in a remote fashion. Unless we receive a directive from the System's Office, that decision is left to the instructor. I have been asked why students get a choice and faculty are denied this option. Since students pay tuition to have in-person instruction, they are free to opt out of it by choosing the remote option. However, as faculty we are paid to teach in person and therefore the option of entirely remote instruction is not open to us. Although I think it is the professors' prerogative to allow a student the option of remote attendance, I am opposed to the instructor giving the class the option of going completely remote as a whole. If a person of authority makes such a request, students may feel pressured into a delivery method that does not fit their individual needs or preferences.

Although we are taking steps to reduce density on campus, social distancing is not possible on a
college campus at all times. While we are all tasked with doing what we can to reduce contact and social distance, it will not be possible to meet CDC guidelines to the letter in all situations. We are splitting our classes into cohorts with students rotating between face-to-face involvement and remote delivery. We are trying to direct movements within our buildings. We are marking furniture to remind students as to the need for social distancing. We have increased our cleaning of the buildings with the use of long-lasting disinfectants. Most importantly we have instituted a policy mandating the use of facial coverings. We are currently looking into securing face shields that you could use while teaching. At all other times, facial coverings will be worn.

There has been some confusion as to what type of accommodations are open to faculty. At this time, telecommuting is only available to staff and only if their supervisor believes that they can function remotely. Faculty and staff can apply for medical accommodations through HR. This requires a statement from a physician that you are physically unable to teach. Being at risk does not qualify. If there is no physical limitation, there may be some specific reasons to modify how you teach. Such requests typically begin with your immediate supervisor. Ultimately, any request will have to be approved by your Dean and Provost.

I realize the pressure we are all feeling. The fears are real. I wish they were not. Fortunately, the University is not letting any faculty go or reducing salaries via furloughs at this time. The steps we are taking are being done to prevent that condition. I am also concerned about our students. Students report missing their interaction with you. They often report that the interaction that they have with their instructors is what separates SHSU from other institutions. Without such interaction, they may opt to stay out of school and may find it too hard to resume their education. Sadly, I do not see the situation changing in the near future. If the situation worsens, we may have to revert to an emergency remote model similar to what we did last spring. But at this time, we intend to proceed with the hybrid/blended model. I urge you to do what you can to help our campus meet the current unprecedented challenge.

Sincerely,

Richard Eglsaeer, Ph.D.
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