

Dear Cate Families,

Perhaps you are familiar with Winston Churchill's famous admonishment that we should "never let a good crisis go to waste." I'm not sure, candidly, what a "good" crisis is. The current one doesn't qualify. So much has been written about the far-reaching impacts of this disastrous season, but in truth we know very little yet, beyond the immediate adjustments we are all making, of what it all means.

One of Churchill's contemporaries, psychologist Victor Frankl, who also knows a good deal about crises, coined the phrase "tragic optimism" to capture the posture that leads any of us in times of great challenge to face our adversity with informed hope. It has been our operating ethos here on the Mesa throughout this unprecedented spring, and it guides us as we work with our students who – like all of us – are looking for the familiar, surety of some sort, clarity on what the future holds, or when the world will turn the corner on this viral threat.

While we at Cate can't help with the last two, we can give our students something resembling the familiar, a chance to connect and to continue their cognitive and relational journeys, an opportunity to build the confidence they need in themselves. We can inform their hope. Because of that very priority, we have taken a good deal of time to consider the question of assessment – a weighty issue for all students – and the manner in which we can best further student momentum without distracting students with unnecessary worries about grades.

As Director of Studies Lisa Holmes wrote recently in a note to the faculty, "The loss of in-person learning has shifted the way we think about our educational principles – curiosity, knowledge, communication, determination, and compassion – and how we define the most important intellectual experiences and challenges." Especially in this trimester of remote learning brought on by this worldwide emergency, our goals for our students transcend cognition.

An Update on Grading & Assessment

We have elected to dispense with our traditional grading practices for the third trimester. Instead, we will implement a skills and content assessment rubric similar to one developed for the progress reports we record in the first trimester of the year. Under this system, students have the opportunity to demonstrate degrees of mastery in their coursework so that teachers can chart momentum and growth and potentially adjust a year-end grade upward in response. The students do not face any downside risk with respect to their grades of record.

In subsequent communications, Ms. Holmes will be sending information on the assessment rubric as well as operational details on how the data regarding student understanding will be gleaned and how it will be used. Because the vast majority of our offerings are full year courses with a single final course grade appearing on transcripts (except in the case of single trimester courses), we intend to use the trimester grades for the fall and the winter in such classes as the principal markers for student achievement and contributors to the final grade. We also hope and expect the experience in

the spring trimester and demonstrated understanding achieved therein will allow teachers to chart continuing student momentum and honor student insight.

Here are the key elements of the assessment process that students and parents should understand:

- The grade of record for full year courses will be based largely on achievement through the winter trimester, with beneficial consideration given for skill development and content understanding demonstrated in the spring trimester.
- Teachers will track growth in the spring trimester using effort marks, a checklist that rates student skills and content knowledge, a student self evaluation, and a narrative comment that addresses both the skills ratings and the student evaluation. The course checklist to assess skills and content knowledge will use the following ratings: Exceeds Standards, Meets Standards, and Approaching Standards.
- We expect students to engage and do their best work given the circumstances in which they are learning. While we will give effort marks and utilize skills ratings and a self evaluation, students who struggle with the online learning format or have family situations that limit the time they can commit to school work will not be penalized with a course grade that is lower than the grade earned in the first two trimesters.
- Senior electives that are one-term spring trimester courses will be graded on a High Pass/Pass basis with the understanding that students must complete course work to pass a course.
- Skills and content ratings will be used to identify: 1. skills and content that need to be addressed in the design of next year's curriculum and 2. students who may need targeted remediation or summer work.
- Placement for honors and advanced courses will take into account student skills and achievement through the winter trimester and in appropriate cases, demonstrated growth and interest through the spring trimester.

Examinations for the Third Trimester

We have also decided to forego examinations at the end of the trimester regardless of whether we are still delivering our program remotely at that time or finishing out the year on campus. Classes will end for all students as originally scheduled: seniors on Monday May 18, and everyone else on Friday, May 29.

We remain hopeful that we can hold Commencement Exercises on schedule as well, though we are looking at options in June or even August if circumstances, travel restrictions, safety, or health hazards compel our continuing agility.

Adjustments to the Virtual Learning Program

With regards to our evolving virtual learning program, we have benefitted immensely from the feedback we received through a host of surveys administered to students and faculty last week. Those returns are linked to this letter [here](#). Our department chairs are working on a number of

specific adjustments which will be itemized in Ms. Holmes' follow-up letter.

The substantive changes include a later start to the teaching day, an opportunity for students and teachers to hold a second synchronous class or discussion section each week as long as there is a corresponding decrease in allotments of independent student work, changes in the use of office hours for student question and answer sessions (currently offered in the evenings and during the academic day), swapping of synchronous class placements to ensure math and science are at the beginning of the week, and access and timing adjustments for students living overseas.

Boarding Students' Personal Belongings

With respect to materials from dorm rooms that students need - books, clothes, technology, a favorite teddy bear, etc. – we intend to ask advisors to be in touch with each student over the course of the next week to learn what they would like sent home. We have an 18"x18"x18" box that students' advisors can fill with whatever possessions the students would like. In many cases, we expect advisors will Facetime with students from their respective rooms so that students can guide the advisors to the items they want or need. The boxes will then be sealed and shipped to you.

We are mindful, of course, that even at the end of this very long letter, there is much more to discuss. 'Tis the season of questions. But time will afford us access to answers. We will trust in that.

In the meantime, we look forward to the next few weeks of virtual Cate, confident that there is opportunity even in this crisis.

Servons,
Ben

 [Faculty & Student Survey - Online Learning.pdf](#)



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