



CATE SCHOOL
commitment | companionship | scholarship | service

March 27, 2020

Dear Cate Families,

The header of one of this country's most iconic documents reads, "The unanimous Declaration of the 13th united States of America." A discerning reader will wonder why the "u" in "united" is lower case. Each year the class Mr. Newsome and I teach on the Language of Lincoln begins with that question. Our students raised it when we met for the first time on Tuesday, via Zoom.

It was strangely gratifying - especially in this new context - to be doing something so familiar, to listen to our student's voices and feel their energy, to begin the trimester and imagine all that lies ahead. Much has changed with respect to how we connect. But the more important stuff - the motivation behind our work, the shared character of it, the aspirations that impel our students, even the personal character of our outreach - they remain.

Reflections on the First Week of Virtual Cate

We've had a good week, which at this time with all else that is happening in the world is immensely gratifying. We will survey our students next week and gather what we hope will be extensive feedback on their experience with our distance learning program. We expect our program will evolve in response to such feedback and to our own experience. But we are pleased with the cohesion of the efforts on campus by our faculty, by the thoughtfulness of the design, and by the level of student engagement. Our "U" - especially as it relates to the commUnity of the School - is most certainly upper case.

Plans Through Friday, May 1

That very priority informs our intentions, as well, as we look ahead. We noted in our last missive that we are looking at this trimester's work in chapters. The first was intended to take us from the genesis of our distance learning program to Sunday, April 5. We have now committed to extending our remote learning efforts to Friday, May 1. That means that we will not hold our Spring Family Weekend as originally planned, but we are examining ways for faculty and parents to connect virtually at that time and to share insights on the year to date.

Commencement Exercises

We remain hopeful still that May will see us together again on campus, and that we can send our seniors off in a manner that befits their incredible contributions to the community. To that end, we are

also considering how and when the year might end. We have the opportunity in this unprecedented environment to re-imagine our closing.

And given our priority on holding some form of Commencement Exercises, we are looking at dates for such an event beyond our traditional Memorial Day celebration. Much as we have over the course of the last six weeks, we will use the information that becomes available to us over time to inform the path we chart forward.

Assessing Student Work

We are doing the same when it comes to the manner in which we assess and account for student achievement in the third trimester. A host of schools and colleges have already drawn conclusions about coursework and grades: some going to pass/fail only, some maintaining historic grading practices, and some choosing hybrid structures of one sort or another. We are considering all of those possibilities, but we are focused at this point on the foundational understandings and expectations that must support our practices.

Our program is built to enable the greatest possible growth for each student. Grades are one expression of achievement and one measurement of growth, and we have applied them objectively throughout our school's history because we have been able to understand and to a certain extent control the context in which our young people are working. We provide the schedule, the structure, the meals, the lodging, the coaching, the instruction, the mentorship, even the recreation for our students. And in that created environment every student can bring him or herself fully to bear on our program.

Yet we are no longer in that environment. Many of our students are finding themselves with a host of responsibilities at home and lack control over their schedules. Some are caring for siblings or grandparents, have limited access to technology, or are living in time zones that do not allow ready access to synchronous classes. All are dealing with confinement of one sort or another and a new and frightening threat to health and well-being.

So what is our responsibility to our students in this new context and in this moment? With our attention still focused on student growth, we are mindful that such growth this trimester may well come in different forms, some of which do not lend themselves to quantitative assessment. No student, therefore, will be numerically disadvantaged by the current circumstances. GPA's will not go down.

We are finalizing the structure and standards under which those very intentions are fulfilled, and will share those in our communications next week. You'll recall, too, that our messaging about these first two weeks of online work indicated that there would be no assessments of any kind. We will stick with that commitment, trusting that a patient and thorough deliberative process will deliver the most supportive and productive conclusions.

In the meantime, it's all hands on deck here as we seek perpetually to bring Cate to all of you. One of the great byproducts of adversity is the lessons it teaches us about the value of various things in

our lives. COVID-19, frightening and disruptive as it is, reminds us how important human contact is, how critical our relationships are, how much we treasure our moments with each other.

Last night, in support of that very community-minded intent, the seniors and faculty gathered to hear [our first online Servons Speech, given by Carol Cai '20](#). She spoke about the many flavors of life, acknowledging the “sourness” of the current moment. But she found the sweetness in it too, in the efforts we make when life is challenging, and in the hope we all have for the moments yet to come. Leave it to a Cate senior to send us all the messages we most need to hear.

Servons,

Ben



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