

3/11/2020 [Allunit] MSP Response to COVID-19 Developments

Dear colleagues,

As our campus makes major changes to adapt to the public health threat of coronavirus, we are inspired by the way our members are coming together to support each other and our students. We want to keep you included in the discussions about issues that affect faculty, staff, and students.

First and foremost, we are concerned about your health and that of your loved ones. Our hearts go out to the many members of the UMass community who have already been affected by COVID-19. We recognize the great stress that our colleagues and students from China, Iran, Italy, South Korea and other affected countries have been facing in recent weeks. Many in our community are worried about their loved ones and uncertain as to when they will be able to return home. Please know that we are thinking of you and we will support you in any way we can.

The Chancellor has suspended in-person classes through April 3 at least. We do not believe that the situation will be significantly better by April 3, and so we recommend that faculty prepare now to teach remotely for the remainder of this semester.

MSP is distinguishing between “remote” teaching and learning, on the one hand, and “online education” on the other. Current circumstances require that we move our teaching to remote systems now. We cannot expect faculty to make the shift to online education in a week or two; teaching online well requires substantial time and support to develop, skills, create pedagogically sound activities and assessments, and build the course. What we are doing now, in response to a public health crisis, is shifting to a “remote” model so that our students can finish the semester. MSP is committed to ensuring that any changes happening now are considered temporary responses to a crisis situation, not “the new normal.”

Some of you have extensive experience with teaching online, while others have none. Some courses are effective in online formats, while others -- art studios, lab courses, clinical teaching -- are difficult if not impossible. Given the tight timeframe, we should keep our expectations realistic. To teach remotely, you need to be able to do three basic things:

- a way to contact your students
- a way to exchange files with your students
- a way to assess your students' work

We can assure you that all of the protections of the MSP contract remain in effect. The MSP contract protects our intellectual property whether we post materials online or teach in person, and we have specific language in the contract to protect remote teaching.

MSP members have many questions for the administration about support for remote education, and about the labor that will be required as we adapt to new systems this spring. We are making the following recommendations:

- Spring break should be extended for an additional week, to continue through March 27, to give faculty, librarians, and IT staff a chance to prepare for remote learning.
- The administration must provide easily accessible resources to assist faculty with the transition to remote teaching. This includes help with Moodle, Blackboard, Zoom, and other technologies; hardware support, including laptops and microphones; examples of how to teach different types of classes effectively, and how to adapt assessments such as exams.
- FMLA (Family and Medical Leave Act), Sick Leave Bank, and other sick-leave provisions of the MSP contract will remain available to faculty who are sick or are caring for children or household members. As more K-12 schools close, many faculty and staff will be responsible for caring for children and/or sick household members, and will need workloads adjusted accordingly.
- Faculty and librarians should get credit for our additional efforts this semester, as we do the work to create remote teaching and learning systems, including covering other colleagues' work if necessary.
- Faculty and librarian evaluations must acknowledge the unusual circumstances this year. No one can be penalized for canceled conferences, work that is suspended for public health reasons, or teaching evaluations that may be adversely affected. Faculty and librarians should be assured that these disruptions will not affect their evaluations, tenure, or promotion decisions now or in the future.
- We are in solidarity with staff (professional staff, classified staff, maintenance and food service staff), graduate and undergraduate employees, and other workers on campus. As many staff as possible should have the option to work from home. Vulnerable populations should be especially protected, and no staff should be penalized for working from home.
- Faculty and librarians should be encouraged to pursue professional development in any way that works for them. Travel that must be canceled will be fully reimbursed, and professional development funds can be spent on webinars or other opportunities that do not involve travel.

We have heard from numerous faculty and librarians, and we share their concerns:

- Will UMass IT systems be equipped to handle the traffic as thousands of students and faculty use online systems?
- Will IT staff and other campus resources have the capacity to answer our questions, provide resources, and handle support needs?

- How will we support students, faculty, and staff whose computer and internet access is insufficient?
- How will we take care of students who cannot go home or do not have access to adequate food and housing? If public schools close, how can UMass support families in the community?

We met with the other staff unions and administrators this afternoon, and we hope to get answers to our many questions soon. As always, we work in solidarity to advocate for our students, faculty, staff, and community. Our world faces many challenges, but we are in this together, and together we are strong.

In solidarity,

Eve Weinbaum for the MSP Executive Board

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