Dear Folks,

The last couple of weeks have seen a lot of activity and a lot of information-sharing. Let’s begin with the library. I mentioned in my message from a couple of weeks ago that work was beginning on increasing access to library materials – perhaps it will help stave off desperate situations like this. The UW Librarian, Beth Namachchivaya, has now provided a timeline for these services:

- Phase 1 (starting this week): curbside pickup for materials from Dana Porter and Davis Centre Libraries; see here for further details. I believe that Conrad Grebel will also be providing curbside pickup as of this week.
- Phase 2 (depending on how Phase 1 goes, perhaps mid-July): curbside pickup for materials from the other UW libraries (AFiW; Musagetes; Optometry; Pharmacy).
- Phase 3 (TBD): physical ILL; pickup for materials from Guelph and Laurier (currently the only holdings available for Waterloo users are the Waterloo-owned items).

In addition, throughout July and August, the library will be working on digitization where possible to support Fall term course reserves and expanded research access. Some publishers are being quite flexible around providing temporary free or low-cost access to restricted items because of the COVID situation; others are not. We will also have digital access to a number of non-digital items in the UW collection through the HathiTrust Digital Library Emergency Temporary Access Program (yes, I know, “digital access to non-digital items” doesn’t make any sense – just work with me on this). Best to check with your liaison librarian for details on any and all of this.

This past week saw our virtual convocation (I put up a congratulatory lawn sign for our graduates; I would take a picture of it and show you, but then you would see how awful my lawn looks). While I know it was very disappointing for our students not to have the real live event, there was certainly a lot of good feeling generated by and among those who chose to attend the “virtual live event” on the Arts Facebook page (the videos were taped,* but the chat was live). Kudos to Phoebe Wong, Jen McCaig, and the Stratford team of Katherine Prospero, Micah Brenner, and Mark Byerley – you folks did a great job, and the event was a lot of fun! And thanks so much to all of you who took the time to film* your congratulations! Hats off to all our grads (and the Wonder-Chicken is real)!

(* Vocabulary items a function of age. I also dial numbers on the telephone.)

Dominant among the discussions on campus these past few weeks have been the violent and tragic incidents affecting Black and Indigenous people, both in the US and Canada, the implication of police officers in many of these incidents, the public outcry and demands for change, and the University’s response. I expect that you’ll all be aware by now of the problems around the framing of the University’s initial anti-racism message. Members of our Black
community were not consulted prior to the publication of the message. This lack of consultation is problematic enough in and of itself, but it was compounded by an ignorance of how academic scholarship, research creation, and pedagogy engages with racism, not to mention the lives and culture of BIPOC communities in general. The message’s focus on "the n-word", and its prohibition of its use anywhere on campus under any circumstances, resulted in an unforeseen – though not unforeseeable – breach of academic freedom, a breach that had a chilling effect on Black academics in particular. After a frank discussion at Senate last Monday, that first message has been withdrawn and replaced with a statement that addresses the need for the University to respect the spirit of free inquiry. I realize that this retraction does not fully address the pain and anger caused by the first statement, nor do any statements mean anything unless action is also taken.

On that note, I thought I would share with you some of the proposals that I’ve received for how we can do better. I was pleased to see a lot of passionate suggestions expressed by the students in particular, but I have also heard from faculty and staff. The individual suggestions are too many to include here, but at this point I thought I could at least give you a generalized summary (in no particular order):

- UW needs to begin collecting demographic data.
- We need greater diversity among our employees, especially in senior roles.
- BIPOC and anti-racist education and programming (at a variety of levels, for a variety of audiences).
- Support for anti-racist student groups and initiatives.
- Creating safe spaces (physical/mental/emotional) and safe avenues to call out racism.
- Addressing the traditional Euro-centricity of many/most of our programs.

I’ll be consulting with numerous people moving forward – I would urge any of you to get in touch with me if you want to talk about anything, and please continue to make suggestions as you think of them.

I struggled a little these past couple of weeks to find something good coming out of COVID (I had resolved to try to find one good thing a week). Maybe it had something to do with me feeling somewhat Teamed-out (as opposed to timed-out). I do find the endless virtual meetings more tiring than being with people live, where you can do the energy vampire thing and get invigorated by the presence of others. And it’s hard to stay focused when you’re watching those people who are getting just a little too comfortable with Teams, or who are perhaps unaware that their camera is on, and who go foraging in their ear and then check out their finger to see what kind of treasure they got (yes – I observed this firsthand – not making it up. Just be thankful I’m not providing the link to the video). So where I ended up on the “something good coming out of COVID” theme this week may not seem like a very happy place because, well, it isn’t. But “good” doesn’t necessarily
mean “happy”. One thing that I think absolutely has to come out of this is a radical change to our system of elder care. COVID has painfully exposed the dreadful shortcomings of our nursing and long-term care homes. This just has to change.

I want to remind staff that we are going to have a virtual Staff Town Hall this coming Wednesday, June 24th, at 1:00 pm. Since most staff are not members of Arts Faculty Council, we thought it might be a good idea to have a gathering and talk about the current situation, as well as any questions or concerns you might want to bring up. If there’s something you know you want to talk about already, please by all means let me know – that way we might be able to provide a fuller answer when the time comes.

And finally, video choices this week? Well, I’m quite taken with Andrew Cotter, the BBC sports announcer, and how he’s been keeping busy honing his game during COVID. And just in case you’ve been finding that your life these days is monotonous and routine, this might spice it up.

Signing off for now, and wishing you all a good week that offers the things you need, whether those be relaxation, time with loved ones, productivity, home repair, cleaning out the garage, coming over and mowing my lawn, mastering that new Pilates movement, watching more John Oliver, successfully teaching the cat to step cheerfully into the outdoor harness the way the one in the photograph that persuaded you to buy the damn thing in the first place did, or really anything whatsoever.

Sheila

PS. Thanks to David Welch for the library article.

PPS. Thanks to Lynne Taylor for the dramatic surprise video.

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The Faculty of Arts acknowledges that we are living and working on the traditional territory of the Attawandaron (also known as Neutral), Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples. The University of Waterloo is situated on the Haldimand Tract, the land promised to the Six Nations that includes six miles on each side of the Grand River.