

BOWDOIN COLLEGE

SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT AND DEAN FOR ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

July 15, 2020

Dear colleagues,

At this moment, we face two principal challenges: 1. the abrupt emergence of the coronavirus pandemic, which has necessitated a shift to primarily online learning; and 2. the sharpened reality of the corrosive and deadly effects of systemic institutional racism, which has necessitated our genuine commitment to education in service to its eradication.

“Much of our world has changed since March 6, 2020—a massive loss of life and jobs, the imperative to remain at a physical distance from each other, and the growing recognition of the appalling inequities and injustices that have long shaped life around the world. These changed circumstances demand— from everyone at Bowdoin—fundamental alterations in how we think, move, teach, learn, live, and identify. The prospect is daunting. It is also an unprecedented opportunity to rededicate ourselves to a common good that is truly and unrestrictedly “common” (Continuity in Teaching and Learning Group (CTLG) Report, p. 5).

Bowdoin has long expected of faculty a commitment to excellence in teaching. Now, more than ever, we must link that expectation to the challenges we face and the aspirations we share. In the fall 2020 semester, our teaching practices will necessarily differ, sometimes substantially, from the forms they took in the past. Online teaching itself requires extra and different work of faculty. The amplification of existing societal inequities requires a heightened commitment to the practice of inclusive teaching. The context of our lives and work demands that we engage in the hard work of dismantling institutional racism, as President Rose has called for all members of the college community to do. We face complicated and overlapping challenges, yet with support from the Academic Affairs office, the guidance provided by the report of the Continuity in Teaching and Learning Group (CTLG), and the resources of the Bowdoin Online Learning Team (BOLT), we are confident that our faculty can maintain and strengthen their commitment to excellence, inclusive excellence, in teaching.

Drawing from the CTLG Report and Clayton’s call to the community, we in academic affairs offer the following set of expectations which detail our shared understanding of teaching excellence in the context of the challenges outlined above. By no means do we expect this memo to take the place of a careful reading of and reliance on the CTLG Report, but we do wish to highlight some of the many salient principles laid out by the CTLG. Please return to the full report to see the ways in which these principles, and the accompanying recommendations, are articulated. And please note that many of the efforts that mark best practices in online teaching also mark best practices in inclusive excellence.

- 1. Start with Learning Goals:** Begin your work in a purposeful manner, with an examination of and commitment to the learning goals of your course. Because online teaching is different, it’s imperative to start with learning goals to ensure that the methods

of instruction are driven by this critical question: what do I want my students to learn in this course?

2. **Embrace Change:** You will have to structure and deliver your courses differently than you have in the past. Be open to that, and to the many types of support provided for this extra work. The CTLG Report quotes a faculty member who discovered the positive side of this change: “I feel like I suddenly have much more insight into what I want to achieve, and so of course I have all kinds of ideas for how I can intentionally try that in an online classroom. It’s such a sense of liberation!” (CTLG Report, p. 5)
3. **Be Purposeful in Your Commitment to Change:** Reflect on your growth in fostering equity through your teaching, and then build on it. Inclusive practices consider differences among students, including differences in life circumstances, ways of engaging, and identity as students and as learners, in course design. If your department or program has developed an antiracism statement, and/or if you are a majority faculty member thinking about the relationship between your teaching and white allyship, please commit to making this effort concrete in the fall.
4. **Exercise Flexibility:** In the words of the CTLG Report, we must be flexible, caring, and responsive toward our students and colleagues. This includes, first, flexibility in scheduling the particular components of individual classes. The fall semester Time Blocks were designed with guidance by the CTLG to ensure that we can provide equitable access to synchronous activities for students with widely varying schedules. Please refer to the [Time Blocks video](#) in advance of thinking about how you might use the three assigned time blocks for your individual classes. Flexibility must remain a guiding principle not just in course design but throughout the semester, as students adjust to their classes, the new approaches to online teaching that you will employ, and the continued challenges of living and learning during a pandemic and through their engagements with and resistance to institutional racism. We will also need to exercise care and flexibility with ourselves, the staff who support faculty and students, and each other. As the CTLG states, “Flexibility is key. We learned from the past semester that students who ran into ‘rigidity’ on the part of the instructor within a course had the hardest time engaging, and many of those students dropped the course.” (CTLG Report, p. 21).
5. **Seek Support:** Success in the fall is a collective responsibility. Familiarize yourself with and incorporate the training and resources provided for this extra work by the Bowdoin Online Learning Team (BOLT), a group of faculty, staff, and outside consultants who will offer webinar trainings and support for Bowdoin faculty. BOLT’s offerings will begin on July 17 and continue through the summer and fall. As was the case in the spring, academic technology liaisons will also be assigned to each department and program.
6. **Employ online and inclusive teaching best practices, including the following:**
 - a. Use our Learning Management System, Blackboard, as a frame for your course. Using the same platform for all courses will help to reduce the cognitive load for our

- students. Familiarize yourself with the various features that will be built into your Blackboard course shells.
- b. Commit to both synchronous and asynchronous components in your teaching. All courses must include a mix of synchronous and asynchronous elements and some small group discussion times to accommodate time zone differences and to foster student learning.
 - c. Abide by the principles of universal design to ensure accessibility for all our students. Accessibility must be at the forefront and not an afterthought of planning.
 - d. Learn about how stress and trauma affect learning, and adjust your teaching practices accordingly. One important approach is to foster student agency so students can feel they belong and then develop the confidence that they can succeed. As the CTLG Report explains, “We found that classes that had students take distinct leadership roles in facilitating discussions, form ‘smaller learning communities,’ or work on group research projects and presentation[s] not only freed up faculty time, they transformed remote instruction from managing a stopgap emergency situation to an acceleration of student initiative, skill-building, and resilience.” (CTLG Report, p. 24)
 - e. Provide structure and set clear expectations. Students will respond best to clear guidelines for class components so they know what they are accountable for, how they will be assessed, and why. Be as transparent as possible.
 - f. Give regular, performance-improving feedback. Design and implement frequent, low-stakes assessment practices, including some ungraded assignments. This is especially important with our return to a standard grading system.
 - g. Communicate expectations for attendance and for etiquette, including having students turn on their video during synchronous meetings. Be transparent about the links between your rules of engagement and student learning. Ask students to help you establish and maintain an inclusive and supportive online learning environment.
 - h. Hold regular office hours. One noteworthy element of the CTLG survey was how often students cited the importance of office hours to online learning. Faculty can schedule their office hours through a Blackboard link to Microsoft Bookings, which links to their Outlook calendar.
 - i. Communicate with students: Given the critical need for contact between faculty and students, we ask that you send out comment cards (think of them as “check-in cards”) to each student during weeks 4-6 of the semester.
 - j. Solicit feedback. Just as your students will benefit from feedback in an online environment, so will you. Many faculty already invite mid-semester student feedback. For this semester, we ask that everyone engage their students in a feedback process even earlier than that. To make this process easy, a brief and anonymous student

feedback form will be loaded onto all Blackboard courses on September 15. The results will be available only to individual faculty.

- 7. Finally, Connect!** Our students' concerns about the fall semester include a range of aspects of living and learning during these turbulent times, but one concern stands out: they miss the close contact with faculty, the affirming ways you get to know them, the support they feel from you, and the ways they benefit from your expertise. We know that you too benefit from your relationships with our students. Get to know them. Share some of who you are. Acknowledge that the times are hard. Let them know you care.

We feel certain that by following the guidelines above and remembering why we do what we do—and the joy it gives us—we can have a terrific fall semester. On behalf of everyone in academic affairs, thank you in advance for your hard work and dedication.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jen". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Jennifer Scanlon