



2019-2020 House Interim Committee on Education

May 29, 2020

Good afternoon Madame Chairperson Alonso Leon, Vice-Chairs Helt and Neron, and members of the House Interim Committee on Education,

My name is Avinnash Tiwari and I am an Instructor of English and the Acting Director of Black Studies at the University of Oregon. As a Career Instructor, my work is teaching. I spend the majority of my time in the classroom, working with undergraduates from across the globe and across this amazing state of Oregon, including many first-generation students.

During our 1-week Spring Break, UO faculty worked through the week in order to transition to remote learning. A number of factors played into how well folks were able to adapt their classes for a remote environment. For those that faced either or both technological or pedagogical challenges, many units and departments pulled together to help one another with our discipline-specific needs. Our Teaching Engagement Program, part of the Provost's office, offered and continues to offer a wide-range of support for faculty, from technological nuts and bolts to engaging students across a wide-range of pedagogical needs.

And in thinking about our equity lens, I must acknowledge that much of this transition and preparatory work was accomplished by Career Faculty members, including, in my own department, 17 Career Faculty members that faced non-renewal for next Academic Year and have currently received partial-FTE (full time equivalency) appointments. Because Career Faculty focus so heavily on teaching, many are well-versed in various technological modes of pedagogical delivery and are also fluent in the latest research on teaching and pedagogy. Career faculty were then able to support their faculty colleagues, especially those uninitiated to technologically savvy pedagogical innovations. Career faculty truly stepped up even as over 200 of them faced a severe and uncertain financial future while their lack of job security was also forefront.

I want to highlight a particular focus of what I would call our faculty's innovative practices for bringing the UO's world-class education to students and also allows me an opportunity to address issues of equity for students during this time, as well. For those students that have been traditionally marginalized in higher education, those differences of social belonging, access, and choice are still at play. I am currently teaching a required Writing course with primarily first-generation students. This means that I have students who are not able to sit in a quiet place where they have robust broadband service to make use of video-recorded lectures, or different online activity modules. My students have brothers, sisters, and vulnerable family members to take care of because they are at home. I have

students who are not safe at home because of who they are. I have students in rural communities in our own State that must drive or walk to a good spot for cellphone coverage that may allow them to use their smartphone or use a landline for Zoom. For those sharing internet access, at times there is simply not enough bandwidth to allow for video streaming or the sharing of presentation materials.

I am fortunate. In my class, we read, think together through discussion and shared writing, then students take on their research projects. I did not have to lean on all kinds of technology to make the class work well. We actually talk quite a bit, in small groups and as a class, even without video. I do spend an increased amount of time working one-on-one with students on their work as well as simply acknowledging their anxieties and trying to build community; we've even started a conspiracy-theory club for some "light" engagement on our current moment. But in our conversations, one thing comes up quite frequently, and has been echoed by both students and faculty: we need each other. We need to see one another, talk to one another, be in one another's presence. And while yes, this is something most living things desire and need, it is especially important for learning. Learning cannot happen in an anxiety-filled environment; learning happens when we can be open and receptive to the world around us, and certainly when the world around us is scary, learning goes out the window.

Thus, one of the most innovative practices I've witnessed has been the extraordinary commitment of teachers to their students, to adapt to their individual and class-based needs, to offer continuous support, and most importantly, acknowledge things have changed. We learn together to sit in the not-knowing, to understand more than ever that simple dogmatic answers to complex questions bring us no comfort, peace, or bring us closer to one another. We have a truly "innovative" opportunity to not simply connect on a deeper level with one another, but in so doing, value one another with greater respect and charity.

The ability of excellent instructors to adapt to the needs of the institution while still prioritizing students has been and will continue to be the backbone of undergraduate education at Oregon. I close my comments by acknowledging some issues we face moving forward:

Students, faculty, and staff are rightly concerned about re-opening safely. I'll be frank: there are simply no mechanisms in place, or could be, to *enforce* students comply with safety protocols.

Those lowest-paid and first-cut faculty members will do the heavy lifting when it comes to technological and pedagogical innovation in the Summer and Fall, as they did this Spring even as some of those folks see their 42,000.00 yearly paycheck cut in nearly ½.

We faculty are incredibly concerned about the mental health issues our students have faced and will continue to face in this new environment, and as noted above, it will be incredibly difficult for students from marginalized populations to survive, much less thrive, in their education under circumstances where social inequalities are intensified. No amount of technological innovation can replace the personal relationships formed between faculty and students, mentors and mentees, necessary to see first-generation and marginalized students thrive in higher education. Any significant loss of faculty will simply mean less support for students, and those students that have

support outside the U will continue to succeed while those marginalized in Higher Ed will simply fall to the wayside. Thank you all for taking the time today to listen and thank you for your continued work on this most important committee.

Respectfully Submitted,

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

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