



Washington University in St. Louis

BROWN SCHOOL

Message from Dean Mary McKay, March 18, 2020

Dear Brown School Community,

I am reaching out to each of you today, grateful that you have chosen to contribute to and advance the professions of social work, public health and social policy. Your commitment to protecting the health and safety of each other, supporting and connecting in times of challenge and uncertainty, and your willingness to be flexible, patient, calm and positive in a crisis demonstrate a set of shared values that is inspirational.

Service and Competence

Over the last several weeks, I have asked myself a set of key questions: What skills, qualities and values are needed to respond effectively to the serious public health threat of COVID-19. How can I reassure our students, faculty and staff colleagues that we will center our decisions on putting the health and safety of our community as our first priority? Then, how can we minimize the unavoidable impact of this unprecedented situation on members of our community? And finally, how can we contribute to this emergency situation beyond our school and university boundaries?

Even as I lay these questions out, I acknowledge that they underappreciate others parts of our lives that are severely impacted by this public health crisis. Many of us are juggling the responsibilities of caring for children, made even more complicated by school closings. Others are experiencing real threats to their housing and food stability. While others are trying to support loved ones with health vulnerabilities, including aging parents who may be close by or a world away.

Responsibility and Compassion

No one is exempt from the impact of a pandemic. Like each of you, I am deeply concerned about the safety and well-being of my family. Should my 91-year-old mother-in-law remain in her senior living facility? (She is now at our home.) How do I comfort my son who had to call over 100 restaurant workers in New York City to tell them that the place was closing indefinitely and everyone was losing full-time work and health benefits? (This was made even more difficult by overhearing their children in the background of many of the calls.) How do I best protect my daughter who is pregnant with my first grandchild? I know that each of you is facing your own unique challenges, and worried about your family, friends and the future. These personal concerns are made even more serious for those already struggling with resources, exposure to

toxic stress and managing past and present trauma, including those associated with discriminations in all its forms. **Please consider sharing your personal story with others and get and give support.**

An additional message to each of you is, **please care for yourself and others.** In this time of social distancing, we need to be connected and help each other as this situation is unfolding rapidly. The threats to health and safety are real. The hasty transitions, constant new information and unexpected change will be jarring over the next days and weeks.

Stewardship and Learning

Next, as a school community, **we will do our best to keep our commitments to each other.** Half of our students aim to graduate seven weeks from now. They are finishing their coursework, and field hours are almost complete (with some having a plan into the summer). The virus cared little for the sacrifice that hundreds of Brown School students have made to get this far. I am so very grateful that our staff and faculty fully embraced the opportunity of putting classes on-line and creating field options that have our MSW, MPH and MSP candidates able to receive a degree this spring. In fact, over 90% of our faculty colleagues have already attended multiple technical and academic assistance sessions to help them get their classes in a virtual format (and it is only Wednesday).

Many may be anxious about the start of classes next week using alternate formats. This response is reasonable. At the same time, I humbly request that you enter next week with openness, flexibility and grace. Again, our faculty are taking advantage of academic and technology supports in numbers that demonstrate their serious commitment to student learning. Without a doubt, there will be challenges this first and second week after an extended spring break. However, if we collaborate, reach out for and offer help and dig in, we can keep our promise to our graduating students that a graduate degree will be theirs.

Dedication and Equity

Next, the professions of social work, public health and social policy require a set of personal and professional qualities that too often do not exist in what is referred to as the “real world.” **In any crisis, members of our community and the communities we serve are disproportionately affected.** That means that a community like ours cannot assume that all students will easily make the transition to remote learning or that factors related to their work or living circumstances will make them even more vulnerable. Thus, our student support team and staff continue to work with students to be sure that they have the computing and internet resources that they need. In addition, thus far, every student worker employed by the Brown School continues to have the opportunity to earn income. Further, Bear Bites and other resources are being maintained with plans for expansion. We will continue to try to make decisions with equity as a guiding value.

Unity and Adaptability

Whether you expect to graduate this May, December or a year from now, **know that you will be called on to address the serious consequences of this pandemic.** Those affected by already

large income inequality gaps will be further harmed. Identity and the related experiences of racism, xenophobia, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia and all forms of oppression will likely play even larger roles in influencing challenges and struggles. As professionals and individuals, we have been called to address and eliminate these disparities. This is exactly why members of our community continue to turn their attention to addressing the needs of our local governments, community-based organizations and most vulnerable neighbors. They seized on the opportunity of putting our student workers and those in need of practicum hours to create new supports and enact positive change within our region. Our professions, local community, nation and global contexts will change as a result of this crisis. I am counting on all of us to be the leaders of change that those most vulnerable need us to be.

Communication and Gratitude

Please pay close attention to communication from us. Students, please note the town hall meeting via Zoom tomorrow (Thursday) and then two additional hours with the dean and team on Friday (students, you will be receiving an invitation from Canvas to join these sessions rather than doing them via Facebook Live). Faculty colleagues, please reach out to get any additional resources and support needed to contribute your knowledge, skills and talents via alternate classes beginning next week. Staff, whether on-site or working remotely, we are so grateful that you chose to have our school community benefit from who you are, as well as what you know and do.

Be well and know that we are learning, growing, responding, contributing, humbly making mistakes, apologizing, and doing the best we can together.

Sincerely,

Mary McKay
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