

Message from FAS Senate Chair at October 15, 2020 FAS Senate Meeting

The current crisis and Our Responsibility as Educators

It has generally not been a pose of the FAS Senate to do much sermonizing, but a few colleagues and students have asked us to comment on the current sense of national crisis and our response to it as educators. This is not a partisan issue, by the way—it ought to be a matter of universal concern that we are not assured of a smooth and peaceful transfer of power in the coming election, that its results might be questioned or even rejected, that white nationalist terrorist groups have plotted to kidnap governors in two states that we know of and are likely on the prowl even now, that polling itself and the aftermath of the election might be attended by violence, and on top of it all, there is an ongoing threat of foreign interference in our politics *and we're in the middle of a pandemic*. None of this is business as usual, and there are many plausible scenarios one might dream up that do not end well. None of us asked for these things to be happening in our country, but we all did ask to enter a profession that leaves a lot of young people under our care and guidance. It is important to know that our students are freaked out by the layers upon layers of crisis; but some of them are all the more freaked out in perceiving silence, avoidance, denial, or complacency in the elders who surround them. One student wrote to me,

I think that all professors should pause their coursework and be able to acknowledge, talk about and/or apply the topic of the political shit show to what they're teaching because everyone regardless of race, religion, SES status, sexual orientation, gender, etc. is impacted by the election (now more than ever in college students' lifetimes). Being able to talk about the trauma and stress ... is the bare minimum that schools should be doing and sadly some schools avoid a conversation altogether or neglect to discuss how marginalized groups in this country feel the impact to a greater extent. Expecting students to carry on without helping them explore their feelings or educate them on the many, many layers of damage due to our national crisis and how this damage bleeds into affecting mental health, the health care system, education, economics, international relations (the list goes on and on) is a huge part of the issue. It teaches younger generations to sit on anger or become passive during times like these. UNIVERSITIES NEED TO SPEAK UP I think is my point. [That was a recent grad.]

This is a moment that prompts the highest ethical, pedagogical, and caretaking responsibilities of our calling. I urge all of us—individually and collectively—to think about and enact the necessary conversations, whether in the classroom, in department town halls, in the residential colleges, in communications from the deans and other administrators, in teach-ins and programming. We cannot promise our students that everything will be fine; but we can promise that we hear them, that we are continuing to listen, that we share their concerns and fears and also their hopes, that we are all in this together, that we will have their backs as best we can, and that—as history shows—our shared and collective studies are among the antidotes to such periods of social and political travail. On a more quotidian and practical level, you might consider avoiding

assignments and exams too close to the election and consider giving extra allowance for students who are struggling. Onward!