May 21, 2020

Dear Colleagues,

We are closing a chapter in the coming weeks on what may be one of the most unpredictable and unprecedented semesters of our lives. I am grateful for all that you have done to make this semester successful. As we cheer on our graduates, I hope that you will take a moment to celebrate what we all have accomplished together. My deepest gratitude to all of you.

While Governor Baker revealed his plans for the reopening of some industry sectors yesterday, looking toward the fall, there are two factors that are still uncertain for our college and our community.

Currently, there is not a clear indication as to where education falls in the Governor’s plan. The college and university presidents across the state will be receiving some form of guidance from Secretary of Education James Peyser. We have already begun the important task of communicating with our state partners in regard to the governor's plan and its impact on Bristol.

Secondly, it is important to understand that in Bristol County cases of COVID-19 are still rising. You can follow the daily data at Mass.gov. We monitor the pandemic daily and continue to prepare for a gradual reintroduction of face-to-face instruction and services at the college. As I continue to say, the virus drives decision-making, not our desire to return to work or the classroom. Safety is our top concern, and sadly, Massachusetts has been one of the most COVID-19 affected states in the union.

We plan to make a decision about the fall semester soon so that we can adequately prepare for a successful term. Looking ahead, I want to begin to shape your expectations about what fall might look like at Bristol Community College. It will be quite different from past falls, and we will need to limit the number of people at each of our locations and in each of our classrooms. As we work with state government and Secretary of Education Peyser, we are getting a clearer picture of the factors that inform our decision for bringing back students and employees to our campuses. Some of them include:

- The number of employees and students that are at a higher risk for severe illness. A relevant number of individuals on campus are in the age group that the CDC considers to be in the high-risk category in relation to the COVID-19 virus or at a higher risk due to health issues.

- The possibility that K-12 schools may not be in full session this fall. Some schools are looking at ways to reduce seat time at school and increase learning time at home. This may put a strain on family childcare needs.

- The availability of safe, available daycare. This could cause our students and employees to experience additional childcare challenges.

- The availability of public transportation throughout our communities.
• Social distancing guidelines. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has put out a statement that social distancing will be necessary in schools when they open, but there are no established guidelines at this time.

• The need for special materials and supplies. We will need an abundance of supplies in order to have greater numbers of people on campus. Schools, colleges and businesses will all be competing for PPE, hand sanitizer, cleaning supplies and building supplies for distancing, etc. It is still difficult to get supplies, and price gouging is another element we are facing; however, we will hopefully be able to leverage buying power by working together with other institutions of higher education in Massachusetts.

• Testing and contact tracing are factors that need to be considered if we are going to be successful. We will need to know the requirements for voluntary testing and screening of students and employees for symptoms as well as tracking a history of exposure. We do not know our state’s capacity for testing at this time.

• The lack of treatment and a vaccine. Speculation is that the earliest a vaccine may be available is early to late winter, possibly as late as 2021. There is no proven treatment to prevent or cure COVID-19, although some therapies are taking shape.

Although we are up for the task, each one of these factors presents challenges for us. The combination of these factors, however, provides a very daunting situation. It is likely that we will need to keep the number of students and employees on our campuses as limited as possible. We are taking into account every aspect possible and considering an overarching phased plan that will best suit the college for the long term, while receiving daily updates from government and health officials that will continue to impact our plans and underscore our safety measures.

We did receive some good news yesterday. We learned from Governor Baker that allied health students who could not finish their curriculum due to the face-to-face nature of their training will most likely have the opportunity to return to our campuses as part of Phase 1. We have been proactively working on plans that will enable our students who were unable to finish their clinicals and practicums to complete their programs this summer so that they can graduate, transfer or enter the workforce as soon as possible. Safety for our students, faculty and staff is our number one priority and plans with proper protocols are already underway. As early as next week, the college should receive templates from the state to aid in our planning.

Regardless of what fall will look like, we will strive to have as few people as possible at our locations this summer. To achieve this, the staff and faculty have been working extremely hard to keep our college operational. Instruction this summer will be 100% online. Student Services and Enrollment Management continue to work with new and returning students, advising them by phone or online. Placement testing is operating with special online proctoring. New student orientation will take place using a new online, on-demand platform. And there are a host of innovative activities taking place to draw in new students and capture new student markets.
You may also be wondering about our athletic program. We are expecting a decision about fall sports from the NJCAA in June. Currently, we are projecting a few different scenarios. The first is to start season practice on time (August 1) for fall sports with strict protocols in place. The others include delays by one or two months. Derek Viveiros, our Athletic Director, is assessing the college sports situation at both local and national levels so that we can make the best decision for our Bristol Bayhawks.

The new normal. In closing, I leave you with more questions than answers of what our new normal will look like this fall and into the future, but I am certain that we will come together to find our own unique and innovative ways to serve students. I can promise you that I will share with you as much information as possible as soon as we can. I also take very seriously the responsibility that the college has in keeping our students, faculty, staff and community safe. I am grateful and humbled by the dedication of our faculty and staff who have worked tirelessly to meet the new normal for our students. We are moving into the summer months and hopefully better outdoor weather. It is important that we all find ways to recharge ourselves. Please take time to be with your families, and please stay safe.

With heartfelt gratitude,

Laura L. Douglas Ph.D.
President