July 9, 2020

Dear Colleagues:

I hope this message finds you safe and healthy. July 2020 marks not only the beginning of the new fiscal year at Mason but also the beginning of the term of our 8th president, Dr. Gregory Washington. I hope you had an opportunity to watch one of the meet and greet sessions with him last week. As Faculty Senate Chair I had the opportunity to moderate a session with Faculty Senate members and President Washington. While we have extraordinary times ahead of us, we have a President who will build on the hard work of Interim President Anne Holton (welcome back to the faculty, Anne) and who stated unequivocally that his expectation is that shared governance is a cornerstone for how the University will move forward.

Many of you have written to me the past few weeks about course preparation for the fall semester, shared governance--both within the context of Safe Return To Campus and beyond, the financial situation of the University, as well as the ongoing challenges we face because of the pandemic. Today I want to address course preparation, intellectual property and the July 21 town hall. I will discuss how our faculty have played an integral role the Safe Return to Campus in a future message, and will discuss how the budget affects us after the BOV annual meeting.

The Stearns Center has developed a number of resources to assist faculty in developing exceptional online courses (synchronous, asynchronous, or hybrid) for the fall. I strongly recommend that you look at these resources even if you are planning to teach face-to-face as health conditions in the area may require a pivot to fully online as they did in the spring. We all hope that is not the case, but I encourage you to look at those resources in case they may be of assistance.

Some faculty volunteered to participate in cohort-based training for online course development as well as having one-on-one instructional design support. Some of the instructional designers are employed by Mason and others are employed by outside contractors who were able to supply over 40 instructional designers to support our faculty in less than a week’s time. As faculty working with these instructional designers were developing coursework outside of their nine-month contract, the Stearns Center contracted with the faculty members to provide them a stipend as compensation for their time this summer. These contracts and this compensation has led to a robust discussion around whether works produced in this manner meet the definition of directed or traditional works as per University Policy 4002. Dr. Deb Crawford, Vice President for Research, Innovation, and Economic Impact, penned a recent column in the Provost’s newsletter addressing concerns around copyright and these faculty contracts.

One specific concern raised about these contracts focuses on the language of “directed” versus “traditional” works as per University Policy 4002 and the possibility of the open-ended license to use a faculty member’s work. The university is assigning copyright to faculty creators for course materials they created, with terms identical to those for traditional works, where faculty creators always maintain copyright and the university can use the course materials if it needs to for the continuation of the university’s mission.
As this is a matter of critical importance to faculty as we operate more in the online space this fall, I invite you to attend a virtual town hall at 2 p.m. Tuesday, July 21 that I will moderate with Vice President Crawford, University General Counsel Brian Walther, and Associate Provost for Academic Administration Renate Guilford. This town hall will allow faculty to ask questions and get clarifications on this revised policy prior to its implementation. Meeting details for the town hall will be shared in the Provost’s newsletter on July 15 and in The George on July 17.

I hope you are finding ways to take care of your whole self even as you are taking care of others, including our students for whom you are preparing this fall. You are important. You are the backbone of the University. Please take good care. I look forward to seeing many of you at the town hall.

Sincerely,

Shannon Davis

Chair, Faculty Senate