

October 2, 2020

Dear Faculty, Staff and Students,

In a letter dated September 26, I offered to communicate to you by today a final decision on plans for the spring 2021 semester. As you may recall, my previous correspondence addressed a report shared with the Board of Regents outlining potential changes to the spring calendar, which included:

- Start January 25, 2021 (one week later than originally scheduled)
- Eliminate Spring Break
- End May 14, 2021 (as originally scheduled)

At the time the report was made, conversations had taken place with several groups on campus, such as, but not limited to, Student Government Executives, Faculty Senate, Deans, Chairs, the Emergency Response Team (ERT), and others. However, based on comments and questions presented during and following the Board of Regents meeting, I stated that we would continue to work with campus constituencies this week to determine what, if any, adjustments could be made to the calendar within the confines of what had been shared with the Board of Regents.

First, I want you to know that the guiding principle in all of the discussions I have had over the past few days centered on how we can best provide a healthy and safe on campus learning environment for the entire campus community. While online learning is always accessible, the resounding sentiment was the preference for an on campus experience as much as possible. With this guiding principle in mind, I gathered feedback from many groups, and consulted with Executive Staff and the ERT, to develop the following spring calendar:

- Start January 25, 2021 (one week later than originally scheduled)
- **No Class February 23, 2021 (added Reading Day)**
- Eliminate Spring Break
- **No Class March 17, 2021 (added Reading Day)**
- No Classes April 2, 2021 (Designated Holiday as originally scheduled)
- End May 14, 2021 (as originally scheduled)

In creating this calendar, we took into consideration the input of Student Government, Faculty Senate, Professional Staff Council, CTS Staff Council, individual members of the university community, and others. Additionally, Executive Staff met three times this week to discuss this topic and the ERT was convened in a special session too. The plan was also communicated to the Cape Girardeau Public Health Center, which supports the change as an effort to help preserve the health and safety of our University and greater Cape Girardeau community.

In the feedback that was shared with me, students and faculty noted the importance of spring break and the time it gives them to visit family, catch up on work, and reflect/reassess how the semester is going. A majority of individuals also conveyed an understanding of why a change may be necessary. I acknowledge the concerns of having a spring semester that does not include

spring break; however, one of the things we heard from the feedback was a willingness to work through the semester if the University could add days to the calendar to allow for some time off during the semester. The final plan outlined above is in direct response to this suggestion.

Throughout this week, opinions persist that a decision on the spring semester now is premature. As stated in my previous letter, we are monitoring what other schools in Missouri, the Ohio Valley Conference, and across the nation are doing; and Southeast is not alone in its decision. There were also comments about a pending vaccine and whether that may alter the University's plans. While much work has been done in this area and the scientific community continues its research and development, a vaccine is not guaranteed. It is also not clear what may be expected of colleges and universities by state and federal authorities with regard to distributing or requiring vaccines. Lastly, some have asked if a decision on spring can be postponed to a later date. With the onset of advising and other planning for the spring that is scheduled to begin October 5, there is potential for disruption and inconvenience the longer we wait to announce our plans. Additionally, we wanted to provide as much time as possible for faculty to plan their courses and finalize their syllabi. There are also requirements from the Higher Learning Commission, the U.S. Department of Education, and other governing bodies that we have to be mindful of in our decision making. With all of this in mind, I felt a decision now was appropriate and is one that allows all of us – students, faculty and staff – to fully prepare for the spring.

Under the new spring calendar, University offices will be open the week of March 15-19, 2021, 8:00 to 5:00 p.m. Because of the impact this will have on staff, eligible employees will accrue and retain the PTO hours that would have normally been automatically assessed to cover the 4:00 to 5:00 p.m. hour the University is typically closed during spring break. This will allow eligible employees to use five hours of PTO at a different time during the year consistent with existing University Business Policy and Procedure.

In closing, I want to thank all of the groups and individuals that provided feedback and made suggestions on this topic. I very much appreciate the thoughtful discussion that transpired. This process has reaffirmed to me that we all share the same goal of a healthy and safe on campus learning experience for everyone, even if we differ on how to accomplish that. Thank you for your commitment to that goal. These are challenging times, and I appreciate your help and input as we navigate these changes together.

Sincerely,

Carlos Vargas
University President