

From: A. David Trubatch, President of the University Senate, 2016–2020

Subject: Report to the Board of Trustees – As Prepared

Date: June 3, 2020

When I last reported to you, just this past December, I am fairly certain that none of us imagined the circumstances we now face.

In meetings of the Trustees between now and last December, you all have heard reports of the rapid transformation of the University’s operations, including an almost complete closure of the Campus, and a mid-semester switch to an online-only mode of instruction, as well as most services, all on an emergency basis. While the extraordinary work of the front-line Faculty and Staff has been lauded previously, their work still bears particular notice and recognition.

The end of the Spring Semester, the apparent passing of the first peak of COVID-19-related illness (at least in our region), and the approaching turnover of the University fiscal year, together indicate the beginning of a new phase in the response of the University to the Pandemic Crisis. Now that we are no longer consumed by our reaction to the surprising onset of the Pandemic, we have some opportunity to think and plan ahead as we address the challenges that persist.

Fitting the position from which I am reporting to you, I have, in my previous reports, emphasized both the value of shared governance to the work of our Institution and the role that the Trustees can assume in assuring and supporting good-governance practices. The COVID-19 Pandemic and the many changes driven by the current Crisis do not obviate the need to cultivate and practice good governance. Indeed, the need to address a range of connected, complex problems with creative, non-routine responses, that enjoy a broad base of buy-in and support, makes organized deliberation (including the collection of input and feedback), as well as effective communication, more important than ever. Thoughtfully organized, and adaptable governance is needed to address the challenges and questions we now face.

The institutional picture, even in the broad strokes that are publicly visible, is daunting to say the least. I will not review the details as I am confident that you all have the full picture. Nevertheless, we – the people who constitute the University– have no real choice but to forge ahead, not only to see the University survive the Crisis, but to keep at our multifaceted mission as effectively as possible.

Going forward, the first consideration is the health and safety of all members of the University Community, and members of the public who come into contact with the University. The special Health and Safety Advisory Committee to the President of the University will formulate protocols that comply with applicable laws, regulations and guidelines, and that are necessary to keep risks at an acceptable level. While these measures will provide a critical basis for operations of the University, they will not, in themselves, constitute a complete plan. The protocols developed by the Advisory Committee will define the “container” in which we operate, but they will not specify what we can, and must, do to provide the best possible academic program within the given constraints.

Looking ahead, some central questions are:

- *How will we develop a robust, yet flexible, plan for executing the diverse academic programs, which constitute the core of our mission, and for re-opening the Campus this coming Fall?*
- *How can students be prepared to adapt and thrive in the new reality we face?*
- *How can the necessary academic and student-service planning happen while the protocols for operations in the Fall are still in development?*

The expertise which is the basis for the design of academic programs lies with the Faculty, and the front-line staff who work closely with them. The same holds for the expertise which is the basis for academic-advising and student-support operations, with the Staff having, collectively, a somewhat larger proportion of the expertise.

In contrast, by design, the Health and Safety Advisory Committee is a collection of individuals with particular expertise organized in order to specify and recommend steps for implementation of risk-mitigating protocols. That is, notwithstanding the academic credentials of some its members, the Advisory Committee is not a forum composed of constituent representatives that span the range of academic and student-support backgrounds comprised by the University.

Because students move between the Colleges, Schools, and Departments of the University, we will require a complex set of generally applied and program-specific, yet consistent, practices for the many academic programs. Hence, the Faculty and Staff are called, more than ever, to share their knowledge and expertise among themselves, and with the Administration. Despite the somewhat unpredictable evolution of circumstances, the needed re-design of the academic and student-support operations will require substantially more preparation, further in advance, than is necessary for a typical fall semester (which is only incrementally different from the previous year). *Thoughtfully organized shared governance, centered by Faculty and Professional Staff, provides the essential means for the necessary collaborative deliberation.*

In our system, of which I believe that none of us are among the original architects, members of the Faculty not specifically teaching summer-session courses are expected to be self-directed from the end of the spring semester through the end of June, and are not engaged by the University during the months of July and August, except for specifically designated assignments for some individual members of the Faculty. While this arrangement may work for the individual preparation of courses in the familiar, established milieu and mode of operation, *how will the University be well-prepared for an evolving, but almost certainly unprecedented, reality in the upcoming fall semester?*

I emphasize that I am not asking you all, the Trustees, to answer these questions. Instead, by necessity, these questions must be addressed collaboratively through effective shared governance that fosters organized deliberation, while incorporating input and feedback from the many corners of the University. The Board has a key role in assuring that systems of shared governance are in place in order that these critical questions are addressed as best as possible.

Before closing, I want to briefly note that this is my last report to the Board of Trustees as President of the University Senate. The healthy exercise of term limits brings a new Senate President, and elections bring a new Senate Executive Board with a strong mix of new and continuing members.

I am very encouraged by the ability and commitment of my colleagues who continue, or have stepped up, to serve on the Senate Executive Board, including the new Senate President. I expect that you will continue to receive valuable reports from the University Senate, and look forward to further engagement of the Board of Trustees with the University Senate as the central, University-wide body for shared governance at Montclair State University.