

DISPATCHES FROM THE DEAN:
*Meditations on the value of WOU's College of Liberal Arts & Sciences
on a socially distant Sunday morning, March 2020*

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While savoring my coffee and gazing out the window on this beautiful yet isolated Sunday morning, I pondered the challenging situation we find ourselves in as we face the coronavirus pandemic. Like everyone, I've been experiencing a range of emotions since all of this hit: fear, anger, sadness, disappointment, frustration, you name it.

Yet in the midst of all that, it dawned on me that there are many reasons for gratitude.

I am grateful for the many doctors, nurses and health care workers worldwide who are putting themselves on the line, and for those who are bearing witness from the hardest hit zones in an attempt to build awareness and prevent further loss of life. I am grateful for the service and care workers who are risking their own health by staying on duty. As someone with an underlying health condition, I am understandably grateful for those who realize that, despite considerable inconvenience, there are times when moving apart can be the most powerful way to come together. I am also grateful for the scientists who are working round the clock to develop vaccines and treatments.

My thoughts then turned to our own scientists here in WOU's Natural Sciences & Mathematics Division—our highly skilled biologists, chemists, earth and physical scientists. Scientific illiteracy has been growing for far too long; given that, a crisis was bound to happen. Yet despite some public skepticism, our science faculty have persisted in their efforts to foster scientific literacy in the next generation. I'm especially grateful for the crucial training they provide to our nursing and pre-med students, whom the world needs now more than ever. I'm also grateful for our colleagues in the Math Department. These past few days have reminded us how crucial math is for helping us understand what "exponential" really means. Three cheers for those who have devoted their lives to understanding and explaining complex concepts that, despite the common adolescent resistance to algebra, turn out to be of critical importance in our daily lives.

How would we visualize this important data, let alone provide it across distance in real time, without the computer and information scientists in our Computer Science Division? I am grateful to those who can wrap their heads around the critical fields of programming and data analysis, who have participated in developing the technology that allows that data to be effectively communicated. Not only that, it is the technological expertise in their field makes it possible for us to work and teach remotely rather than shutting down altogether.

Then there is the stress placed on all of our psyches: What are the keys to resilience? How can we as families get along well while confined in close quarters? How will we cope with the effects of the pandemic on our mental health? Considering questions like these, and more, instills gratitude for our psychologists. As we ponder the effects of our actions on our older citizens, I

am especially mindful of the debt we owe to our elders, and of the important insights we gain from the work of our gerontologists. I am grateful to our colleagues in the Behavioral Sciences Division.

While health is presently the predominant concern, another major threat we face is to our economy. It will not be enough to survive the pandemic physically; we must also ensure that we have a well-functioning economy, a stable supply chain, a thriving business community, and workable economic and business policies. This pandemic reminds us that economic survival is essential. I deeply appreciate the vital work of our faculty in our Business & Economics Division.

And what is the point of survival if without a sense of meaning and community? Like many of us, I felt revitalized this weekend by the joyous sounds of quarantined Italians singing together through windows, despite the walls separating them. I also enjoyed the soothing sounds of the cellist Yo-Yo Ma, who has started the #songsofcomfort project, and the variety of streaming media performances of dance, opera and theatre, along with virtual tours of the world's finest art museums. I am grateful for the dancers, artists, musicians and theatre specialists in our Creative Arts Division.

At times of crisis, I always find inspiration in poems, stories and essays, whether newly written in direct response to the current crisis or across the centuries. (As an English professor myself, I especially appreciate the timeless wisdom that literature has to offer.) I also find wisdom in the philosophical, ethical and religious explorations of our finest thinkers, as well as in the current analyses offered by our communication specialists. The global nature of a pandemic (the Greek word root "pan" meaning "all, every, whole, inclusive") also reminds me of the importance of communicating across cultural and language barriers. We would all do well to study another language. Whether or not we achieve fluency, language and linguistic study help us understand that others view the world from a different perspective, and that we all share a common humanity. It is precisely the lack of such understanding that has fueled so many of our current problems. I'm grateful for our communication specialists, literary scholars, writers, linguists, philosophers, religious scholars, and language teachers in the Humanities Division.

I am also grateful for those in our Social Science Division, who at times like this help us all to assess impacts and forge solutions. Our historians gain and share insight from studying how crises have been managed and mismanaged in the past, in hopes of building a better future. The work of our political scientists and policy specialists helps us develop paths forward, through ideological differences and power differentials. Our sociologists provide vital information regarding the consequences of inequity and the social impacts of crises beyond the individual. Our anthropologists provide insight into the variety of social structures we might create, tools for understanding cultures comparatively, and the importance of cultural and linguistic variety. Our geographers map patterns of human interaction and the relationship between humans and the physical environment, while developing strategies for long-term environmental sustainability.

Sadly, we do not live in Utopia. Even as we notice ways in which this pandemic is fostering cooperation, some are taking advantage of this moment to do harm to others. Such behavior is not unique to this moment; we have always struggled against those who operate outside social

norms and endanger the lives and well-being of others. Here I am grateful for the work of faculty in our Criminal Justice Sciences Division, who work diligently to develop humane and effective criminal justice systems.

The College of Liberal Arts & Sciences is of course part of a larger whole, Western Oregon University, and I am grateful for everyone outside our college as well. We work in tandem with our colleagues in the College of Education, and we depend on every other unit and support structure on our campus. We would not be able to function without everybody—and by that, I mean everybody, not only those with academic training.

For if there is anything this crisis is teaching us, it is that we are *all* interconnected. There is no “ivory tower” from which we in academia are perched, safely watching the “real world” unfold beneath us. In fact, there is no “real world” separate from us; we are part of the real world. No walls divide us from our surrounding community. No barriers protect us from the challenges we collectively face.

Nor are there walls between our communities. As this crisis makes clear, human-made borders, while necessary in many respects, cannot solve every problem. Natural phenomena such as disease, for instance, do not honor human borders. Scapegoating our problems onto “them” (defined, in various ways, as “not us”) does not solve them. To get through this crisis, we must work together and proceed as “we.” That does not mean abandoning our own cultures, identities and loyalties. It means that across whatever differences we may have, we must still work together, in the process becoming more deeply aware of our shared humanity.

As a university, we have the collective brain power to address a range of problems. As the crisis shakes out, we will have many opportunities to share our expertise in order to help the world recover. We may not be a large campus, and we may not be famous. Yet the work we do here is vitally needed, and as we go forward, our contributions to the world will be critical.

We must also remember that we have been granted a sacred trust: to guide our students, instilling in them the knowledge and wisdom that will empower them to go forward and forge a world that is better. Note that I didn’t say “perfect.” That is not possible. But the impossibility of perfection doesn’t mean the world cannot be better. In fact, it will have to be.

In the past few days, I have been heartened by how we are pulling together. Faculty members who have never taught remotely are pushing through their understandable trepidation, on short notice, to learn how. Faculty members and staff who are already skilled with distance technology are stepping up to assist their colleagues. We are beginning to understand the potential benefits of technology, particularly in times such as these. Yet, perhaps paradoxically, the forced physical separation is making us aware of why it matters that we gather together in person.

Like any institution, each day we face challenges even when we are not in crisis. Those challenges are real. Yet I remain heartened by the excellent work of our faculty, staff and students. We are pulling together and we are demonstrating the power of community. We are in this together, and together we *will* succeed.