

Academic Dispatch

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Fall 2020

I think this is the most important fall of my life as a professor. I first became a faculty member at the University of Virginia in 1989, and from that time to this I have enjoyed and found great reward in the work of a researcher and a teacher. But this fall, despite formidable barriers, I and the rest of the faculty and the staff at the University of New Mexico have the futures of our students in our hands. The learning and intellectual development that we can foster for these young learners will be the foundation not only of their success, but will indeed be the very source of a future society whose form, while only dimly glimpsed through the cloud of pandemic crisis, will be new and different from what has come before.

Each of us has a part of ourselves that gives us, as Richard Brooks describes it, “infinite dignity and value.” Learning and the development of the mind and body – the very core of our work as practitioners of higher education – give this soul the power to effectuate itself in the world, taking that dignity and value from the abstract and spiritual to the reality of human connections and power. To provide the opportunity for learning is to offer power to the learner.

This is our obligation this fall – to help our learners, who often come from backgrounds of struggle, develop their own wellsprings of power and influence. This is always hard work, rewarding, yet hard. But this fall none of us feel that we are at our best. We are challenged by uncertainty and doubt. We are tired and anxious.

We have planned and prepared through an unpredictable summer. Yet we don't know what the fall will bring. Will we fall ill? Will our young colleagues and friends fall ill? How will we navigate this grotesque landscape while still delivering on our duty to shape an equitable future through education? We will not immediately know the outcomes of our work this fall as education is a long-term project for building a better society. We can pursue a strategy founded on our plans and values, letting these shape our choices. And we can flex and bend, navigating the challenges of the semester each according to our own gifts and each responding to the need we encounter.

It still falls to us, faculty and staff at the University of New Mexico, to bring knowledge and wisdom to another generation of learners, and to help them develop power that they might otherwise lack.

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