June 4, 2020

Dear students, faculty, staff and friends in the Department of Health Policy and Management community,

The quarter began with us all adjusting to the new and difficult circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic. It ends with us reeling from the brutal death last week of George Floyd killed by police in Minneapolis. Floyd reflects an ongoing, persistent racism that is central to our country’s history. The killing of Floyd by the police is one of a series of brutal deaths that include Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Philandro Castile, Brendon Glenn, Tamir Rice, Tony McDade, and others too numerous to list, in all parts of the country.

As he died, Floyd cried “I can’t breathe,” as Eric Garner had before him. These deaths, and the reality behind them of ongoing threat to Black Americans and other people of color, underscore that many in our community can’t fully breathe as they go about their lives. Rather, they live with a sense of ongoing fear and dread about what should be normal encounters, shouldering this burden as a regular part of life.

Discrimination and structural racism leaves many of us, our friends, colleagues, neighbors and those in our community at higher risk of physical and mental illness and far from mental and social wellbeing. Our work must be to fix this. We have always believed that Black lives matter. Recent events teach us that to make this belief meaningful, it is time to move from solidarity to action.

In the coming weeks and months, starting over the summer, prodded by our students and spurred by recent events, we will accelerate our review of our curriculum and teaching to assure that racism -- explicit, implicit, historical and circumstantial -- and its consequences are adequately incorporated into our studies, so they can be identified, understood, and addressed. Our faculty will be asked to identify how topics of racism can be systematically and explicitly incorporated across our curriculum in multiple classes. One goal will be to educate our faculty about racism. Our faculty must understand that racism is a abhorrent part of how America has evolved. Incidents of racism are not isolated and they are not only perpetrated by bad actors. Racism is an integral part of how our society understands itself. Only by understanding the deep undercurrents of racism that form US culture, politics, and economics can we begin to understand its effects on health. In order to see racism for what it really is, we must do a better job of centering our attention in the margins of society, focusing on the experiences of those who are most left out. All of our faculty need to think about how to address racism in each of our classes. Our goal must be to create and live in communities where everyone can go about their daily lives and pursue their goals and aspirations free to breathe. All this needs to be part of our curriculum and education.

We will look inward as a department, examining how we can do better in countering explicit and implicit bias and creating opportunities for Black students, faculty and staff, and other marginalized groups. Over the next year, the department will conduct an equity, diversity and inclusion audit, which will include review of student support, retention and recruitment, hiring priorities and hiring strategies, and training and other support for creating a more equitable and equity-promoting environment. Consideration and
action on these issues will be moved forward in both regular meetings of the faculty and program committees and additional dedicated sessions to assure there is adequate time to make and monitor progress. Students will be invited to participate in these meetings. We will begin this over the summer and not wait for the fall.

In the short run, we must successfully navigate the end of the quarter and the start of the summer. We recognize that some of you have been unfairly burdened with the labor of explaining to your classmates and others the nature of race in our society and the circumstances of your lives. Some have made it a priority to stand in solidarity through protest and advocacy, decisions I fully support. Still others have found the events of the past week stressful, unbalancing and distracting from their course work. All of this should be taken into account by the faculty as they make their end-of-quarter assignments and do their end of quarter grading.

For the faculty, if you still have class sessions, I would encourage you to begin with a discussion of the Floyd killing and protests, and your student’s responses to these events.

The UCLA Academic Senate has called for instructors to be understanding and flexible when making decisions about final exams and coursework deadlines and our Dean has endorsed this, as do I. Faculty have the final authority over course content and assignments, but I want to strongly encourage faculty to be flexible and reduce the burden on students with regard to all final exams or assignments that have not yet been submitted. As the Dean noted in his email to the faculty, “students have told us that it is often intimidating to have to approach faculty for this flexibility, so we hope that everyone will grant it to all their students proactively.” I am also making this request. The Senate in an email and the faculty during our faculty meeting provided examples of how this flexibility could be exercised. I’ve included this advice below our signature block. I would also like to remind students that you have until the last day of instruction (Friday, June 5) to drop a course or change the grading basis on an optionally graded course using myUCLA without need for petition and without the usual fees.

The goals of our courses have always been learning, not grading, and our students have worked hard this quarter under extraordinary circumstances. They have pursued their education. We should honor that and approach the assessment process with a deep appreciation of the circumstances under which they are laboring and with the flexibility our students deserve. Faculty should also be mindful of the burden on the TAs as we adjust the structure and timing of grading and assignments and work with them to minimize the demands on them.

I also want to encourage all of you to take care of yourselves, to use the resources available to you to assist in dealing with the academic, emotional and physical toll of the past week and quarter overall. Janae Hubbard, the FSPH Equity Diversity and Inclusion Program Manager has compiled a list of resources for trauma, healing, learning and action that is available here: https://ph.ucla.edu/news/news-item/2020/jun/resources-fsph-community. In addition, the university has compiled a resource page as well: https://equity.ucla.edu/know/resources-for-racial-trauma/. UCLA Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) holds regular office hours for students and offers 24/7 crisis support (https://www.counseling.ucla.edu). Anna Lim, our SAO, is also available to help. Please call on me for anything I might be able to do.

The email from the Academic Senate noted these resources available to faculty: “Instructors seeking resources for healing, learning, and taking action are encouraged to visit the Resources for Racial Trauma from the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Office, particularly the resource “Acknowledging the Current Racial Crisis in the Classroom” (PDF). For resources regarding final examinations and proctoring, please consult Planning for Academic Continuity from the Administrative Vice Chancellor’s Office, the Checklist for Remote Assessment Recommendation from the Center for Education Innovation &
Learning in the Sciences (CEILS), and the Spring 2020 Addendum to Accommodation Instructions for Faculty from the Center for Accessible Education (CAE).”

We have much work to do, in the short term and after. Let’s support one another in the next few weeks and take on with energy, commitment and humility our longer term agenda.

With warm regards,

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Suggestions for exercising flexibility in grading:
The Senate, in an email sent to faculty and students on Wednesday, provided several examples of how flexibility in grading could be exercised. Among them were:

- Offer alternate assessments. This could include take-home (untimed) exams instead of in-person (timed) exams, essays, or other written papers, and recorded presentations instead of live presentations.
- Give students the ability to opt-out of the final and receive the grade that they have earned up to that point.
- Allow students who do complete a final assessment to receive the higher of either the grade that they would have received prior to the final assessment or the grade they would receive after the final assessment. This may be done for students who have already completed their final assessment.
- Extend due dates. Grades may be submitted to the Registrar’s Office until 11:59 p.m. on June 22, 2020.
- Reduce the number of pages required for a final assessment
At the FSPH meeting on Wednesday, faculty shared other things they are doing to respond to this need. Among the additional items not on the Senate list were:

- Administer the final exam, but only count the score of the exam if it will improve the student’s overall grade for the quarter (i.e. “no harm” policy for your upcoming finals).
- Reduce the scope (i.e. number of pages) for the final assessment.
- Inform students that in grading any final assignments you will bring an extra feeling of compassion and understanding to the wide variety of circumstance students are experiencing.