

DEEP SPRINGS
DEEP SPRINGS COLLEGE, CALIFORNIA
Founded 1917

David Neidorf, *President*

April 16, 2020

Friends & Colleagues,

I know you've heard by now about the college's plans for Term 6. But I thought it might be helpful to summarize things here, and to record what our plans are for going forward during the rest of the year.

I want first to note that in my conversations with half of you over the last two days, I've been quite struck by the mature and resigned tenor of the conversations. A month ago many of you were concerned about the injustice of some students being here, and others not, but what I heard this week was an impressively adult adjustment to the real facts of our situation – that we are all of us trapped in a situation we don't like, and that we cannot expect clear guidance about when and how it will end. And people understood, too, that while we are trapped in situations we don't like, at the same time they aren't really all that bad, and there are ways to adjust and make the best of it. The whole experience confirmed for me once again that the students of Deep Springs will rise to challenges by becoming more mature, responsible, and resilient than is generally expected of the age group.

When can students return to the valley? Right now, we cannot invite the students who are away from the college to return for Term 6. For one thing, there would be no teaching staff. The long-term staff, all three of them, are badly in need of time to tend to their workloads and careers in the way they always save up for the end of semesters, and with some exceptions they need to recharge for the future instead of being drained further now. The faculty we hired for Term 6 cannot be asked to travel here while our state government (and theirs on the east coast) is asking people not to travel. Several of them or their family members have pre-existing conditions that preclude travel here anyway. And it's just too early in the country's experience of the pandemic to have any confidence in our own judgment about what literal violations of public health measures are, in our special circumstances, reasonable.

I feel some hope that the picture will clarify during the month of May. For example, one of the criteria we mentioned a month ago for re-opening to the full program was having already established confidence in the local health care system to handle active

cases of COVID-19 from Deep Springs. I think, and a conversation today with a doctor who practices locally confirmed, that this box has been ticked. The local health system is fully able to deal with the caseload they now have. Of course, that's *because* of the protection of remain-in-place practices, and there's always a chance they will be relaxed pre-maturely and things will go south.

Soon we will be sending to the Inyo County Public Health Director a description of a plan to bring students back to Deep Springs in quarantined phases during, if possible, late May and June, and asking for the county's support by providing us, if at all possible, with feedback on our plans and with virus testing. I don't know if testing will be possible; they have more and more of it, but it is still reserved for symptomatic patients. And I don't know if testing is in fact a form of reassurance. Things are still confused; the possibility that a fifth of tests return false negatives, combined with the possibility that vast sections of the population are asymptomatic yet contagious, if confirmed would pretty much render the great hope that testing symptomatic patients to establish safe school or community environments a de facto astrology reading. But all of these possibilities will, I hope, become clearer over the next few weeks. As much as we crave clarity, we have to work with that unfolding process.

I think there is reason to hope that with a good plan to quarantine people as they return, we can aim at getting all of the second years, and ideally all of the current students, back here for some time together at the end of June before graduation. I'm going to work towards that plan. But I can't guarantee it, and I can't even guess about how much time together the second years might have. I think all of us feel that it's pretty important not to let the second-year class just drift off—that folks want very much to reunite in the valley, and to have a proper graduation. I hope we can do that by the end of June, but if we can't, we will keep trying later in the year. There are all kinds of contingency plans that leap to mind; it's just too early to get them out for polishing. In any case, we won't let it drop.

What about academics? We are on track to finish our winter semester with hybrid online classes. But we have enough experience with them now to know that we don't want to continue this indefinitely. We will have only two classes Term 6; a field ecology course here in the valley with Amity, and a purely online course with one of the Term 6 faculty experienced in that format. We will know finalize details to these courses in a week or so.

One of the reasons we called you was to find out what needs for courses and desires for online education the students have. Most of you want, in effect, to make Term 6 your term off. And we agree that's often best. I recommend heavy doses of reading groups. If we are able to get enough folks back here for, say, the whole month of June, we will create some academic programming then.

What about Term 1, and the entering class of DS'20? We are saying to admitted students and their families that we have every hope of starting our year as planned. We might have to alter the initial two weeks for some form of quarantine; if we do, it's not all that complicated, and we'll adjust the program to it. The same goes for current students who planned to study during Term 6 and take Term 1 off; if they decide to be here as students Term 1, we will adjust our courses to accommodate them, and without much fuss.

But of course, we cannot guarantee our usual July start. We are telling incoming students that if we can't do it then, we'll do it August 1, and if not then, September 1. Past that, our year would indeed be severely disrupted. It's pretty clear that taking classes online is not a Deep Springs education, and we don't have the best infrastructure to offer entirely online programs. But I doubt it will come to that, because, while there are many obstacles to entering this valley during a pandemic, once you've been here for two weeks without falling ill, there are just as many reasons to stay. It's a good place to be if the pandemic continues throughout the next academic year.

Please don't hesitate to get in touch with me if you want to discuss your future here, or to discuss your present situation. I'd be very happy to hear from you, and I look forward to talking more.

Meanwhile, thanks for your patience,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'dny', written in dark ink.

David