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## [Oxy-students-announcements-l] End of semester message to faculty

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**Wendy Sternberg** <sternberg@oxy.edu>  
To: oxy-students-announcements-l@oxy.edu

Fri, Apr 24, 2020 at 7:44 PM

Dear Oxy Students:

Yesterday, I learned about the student letter requesting specific end-of-semester accommodations from faculty, and which has been signed by nearly half of the Oxy student body. Many of you have also reached out to your professors directly about this matter.

As the Dean responsible for the academic program I value the frank and forthright statements that you have made in your letter. I appreciate that many of you have faced significant challenges since we moved to remote teaching and learning this spring. I have taken your concerns very seriously, and have brought them to the Academic Deans, the Faculty Council (the faculty governing body), and the Academic Planning Committee (the faculty committee charged with setting academic policies for the academic program) for discussion. I would like to share with you the message (copied below) that I sent to the faculty this evening regarding end-of-semester issues that I wrote in light of those discussions, and in consultation with the Faculty Council.

Please know that I appreciate and understand the motivations that brought forth the student letter and request. This semester has been taxing at the least, and overwhelming for some. I hope and trust that my email to our faculty will affirm for them their right to offer as much flexibility that they can allow, while also maintaining the quality of education that I believe our students deserve and require.

Please know that there are resources available at the College to support you if you are struggling. My office and the Dean of Students office, as always, stand ready to help.

Take good care,  
Wendy

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Dear Colleagues:

With the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel in sight (in this long, dark, and unexpected tunnel of a semester), I am writing on behalf of the academic Deans (and following consultation with Faculty Council and the Academic Planning Committee) to share a few thoughts.

Our first message is one of gratitude. I know that I have said it before, but it cannot be overstated how grateful I am for what you have done to see your students and the College through to the end of the semester. The challenges were manifold--amidst the pressures of a typical spring semester (especially one that began as tragically as this one did, with the loss of two students early this semester), there were complex technological and logistical hurdles to overcome, a short time frame in which to make major readjustments, and all this against the backdrop of a profound crisis that has affected all aspects of our daily lives and has exacted a serious emotional toll on all of us. Your dedication to maintaining the integrity of Oxy's academic program and your commitment to your students' success has been inspiring.

Our second message is a reiteration of prior calls for flexibility, compassion, and understanding for your students as you evaluate their work at semester's end. For example, we ask that you be as flexible as you can regarding deadlines and to consider eliminating grade penalties for late work (provided that a student is able to turn the work in by the scheduled final exam time for your course). We ask that you consider what is essential for the learning goals of your course when evaluating your end of semester assignments. Please also remember that there are options available for students whose personal circumstances preclude them from finishing their work this semester, including taking incompletes (with an appropriate work plan for completion by a selected future date), late drops (a withdrawal from a course), and electing to

convert a grade to CR/NC soon after seeing their final grade. Faculty are also welcome to adjust their grading policies to provide more flexibility without consequence, and the Deans Office and the CTE are resources for you if you have questions or concerns about your grading policy decisions.

You may be aware of [a student advocacy effort](#) that requests that faculty make final exams optional or to revise assessment criteria to not count any graded work since the shift to remote learning began after Spring Break, unless it improves the student's grade. As I conveyed to the students who brought this matter to my attention during yesterday's Board of Trustees meeting, I do not feel that I can support the remedy proposed, because, among other things, it has the potential to devalue the efforts that faculty have put into shifting the academic program to remote instruction, and may devalue the meaning of the credits toward the Occidental College degree that students will have earned this semester.

However, I am sympathetic to the issues that the students raise. Many of them, particularly those who are the most disadvantaged among our student community, are trying to complete their work in extremely difficult circumstances. In normal times, there exist vast inequities among our students' personal circumstances that lie just below the surface. The public health crisis has laid bare these inequities, which is what is driving a large number of our students to request that faculty rethink their grading approach. A recent article in [Inside Higher Education](#) addresses the issue from a faculty perspective. Many of the [policy changes we have already instituted this semester](#) have been adopted with these concerns in mind.

So, although we are not creating an institutional policy on end of semester grading, I want to encourage you to consider the context of Spring 2020 as you calibrate expectations for student achievement this spring and to be as flexible as you can be regarding deadlines and other end of semester expectations. We are stopping short of instituting a College-wide policy that would remove faculty authority over their classroom operations, as we believe that faculty autonomy is a critical component of academic freedom.

Finally, we recommend that you be on the lookout for a message from the Registrar about end-of-semester information, and read it carefully as you prepare for the remainder of the semester.

Take good care,  
Wendy

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**Wendy F. Sternberg, Ph.D.**

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