

November 30, 2020

Dear UTSC affiliated graduate students,

In conversation with Menilek, the GSAS president, it became clear that it might be timely for me to send another missive to the UTSC graduate community, updating you on where things stand, and addressing possible concerns about the upcoming Holiday shutdown and delayed re-start of classes.

First off, let me offer my thanks for your patience with the University's efforts to navigate the global pandemic. I know that some of the decisions have seemed sudden, and perhaps the reasons behind them haven't always been as clearly articulated as one might hope. We are trying our very best to maintain a focus on the academic goals of the university, while foregrounding the health and safety of our community, based on the most recent scientific understanding of COVID-19. I acknowledge that balancing priorities is challenging, and there will always be room for critique. I promise that I will continue to be a strong advocate for graduate student supports.

At UTSC we have generally taken a fairly cautious road, deciding to hold most of our Fall Term courses online, and keeping on campus research activities at a level that could be sustained with social distancing. These decisions have served us well, so that we needed to make relatively few changes with the recent shift back into a higher state of lockdown, with the one key change being a cessation of most in-person, human subjects research. I anticipate that we will continue to follow a cautious path. For Winter term, most courses will continue to be online, with only truly essential elements happening in person. And I don't foresee a significant ramping up with respect to on campus research activities until there is a marked shift in the epidemiological indicators.

With respect to the December shutdown, in some ways it will look much like previous years. The campus will be effectively closed, but there is an understanding that some research operations (e.g., maintenance of animal populations, servicing of equipment) will have to continue. As such, it will be possible to access campus for critical activities. I do want to emphasize, however, that supports that we sometimes take for granted, such as frequent cleaning of bathrooms and removal of garbage, will not be in place. This is always true over the holiday shutdown but may be experienced in a different way in the current context, so I wanted to be sure to highlight this reality for you.

The University has made the decision to push the start of undergraduate courses to January 11th—this start date will also apply to graduate courses in our local UTSC administered graduate programs, and to graduate courses in research-stream programs in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. However, the UTSC campus will re-open on January 4th, and so more research will be possible on campus during that week than during the shutdown. I do want to signal an important consideration, however, which is that staff have been granted three additional personal days, and some will likely take those days in the week of Jan. 4th. My advice is that if you have research activities planned for that week that depend on staff support, it would be prudent to communicate with your PI and encourage them to check in with all the relevant parties about what will and won't be fully operational that week.

Finally, I would like to remind you that SGS has indicated that graduate students should be empowered to make their own decisions about their degree of presence on campus. I am willing to work with you as necessary in navigating these complexities.

I hope that you and yours are staying healthy. And I hope that you can take some time over the holidays to take a break and do whatever supports your mental health.

You are always welcome to reach out to me personally at vdgraduate.utsc@utoronto.ca or to funnel comments or concerns through GSAS.

All Best,



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