

January 26, 2021

Dear faculty

I am writing to you in gratitude, and to express my recognition of how challenging the current circumstances are. In addition to teaching in a remote environment, still relatively new to all of us, many of you have compounding childcare, elder-care and self-care demands, exacerbated by the uncertainty of when schools will re-open and when other restrictions will be lifted.

I will be writing to you about future academic terms in the next week or so, but first I want to focus on the needs of the moment. I have communicated with all of the academic Chairs and Directors signaling my office's desire to support faculty and staff who face acute challenges. Some of you have already signalled that you are facing such a challenge, and a range of remedies tailored to individual circumstances have been implemented. If you are struggling and have not contacted your Chair to have this discussion, I urge you to do so. I do recognize that some of your Chairs are facing similar challenges and I have reached out to them.

I have asked myself the question, how do we get through these challenges? To some degree I think all of us have been just persistently pushing along, barely keeping our heads above the water as the waves crash about us, at moments overwhelming us. For me, in meeting the challenges of these extraordinary circumstances, I have been buoyed by a shared sense of purpose, a valuing of individual contributions within the community, and finally hope.

To illustrate this, I want to share a story from my childhood which, while very different from the current context, was a difficult time for my family.

When I was five, we were transitioning from one home to another. There were delays in moving to the new home. To fill the gap, we were loaned the use of a summer cottage. It did not have indoor plumbing, apart from a hand pump in the kitchen linked to a well. It was not winterized. However, for the summer months, it was fine for a family of five, including three cats and a dog, even though it only had two bedrooms. One of my brothers and I slept in bunk beds located in a porch area. Delays though persisted. September came and since my parents thought the end was in sight, we stayed in the cottage, leaving at 6am each morning as we were delivered to our new schools. The process reversed at the end of the day and 12 hours later we were back at the cottage. September slipped into October. The bunk beds were moved into the living room where the sole source of heating, a space heater, was located. Days were getting shorter, we left in darkness and returned in darkness. My mother spent long hours in the cottage alone with no outside contact, and no telephone. October transitioned to November. More delays. My older brother had the corner bedroom with two exposed walls. A vertical sheet of ice had now formed on the inside wall beside his bed. A few times the water pipe from the well to the kitchen hand pump froze. Finally, in late December, two days before we were to host a large family gathering of aunts, uncles, and cousins, we were able to move into our new home.

This was not a global pandemic, and my family was also fortunate that these housing circumstances were temporary, but in the midst of these difficult months, what enabled my family to persevere? We had a shared mission to survive until the new house was ready. New routines were developed and we each had a distinct and valued role to make the best of our confined circumstances. Finally hope was always present, even if it seemed ephemeral at times.



These are things that I think apply to our current circumstances. It is very clear to me that faculty and staff have rallied to fulfill our academic mission. The goal is very clear, and it is a shared one. While we do hear of student concerns about remote delivery, overwhelmingly the message from students is one of praise for their instructors, who they recognize have performed brilliantly and compassionately as they work to master new pedagogies while at the same time meeting other pressing demands, professionally and personally. Your contribution is deeply valued, by our students, and by me.

Finally, while hope at times has seemed buffeted by the gusting winds of uncertainty, it nonetheless buoys us with the promise of a return to campus. This may be hard to fully perceive during the darkest moments of the second wave. However, the end can be seen in the distant horizon, although we are likely to encounter choppy waters and a few more storms before we get there.

We at UTSC are an academic family. We all have crucial roles to play and given the circumstances and the constraints that this time places upon us, we are all doing our best. I want to reiterate how much your work is deeply valued by students, by your colleagues and the university's administration. And once again, please reach out to us if you need assistance.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'WAG'.

William A. Gough

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