



February 18, 2021

Dear Colleagues,

As if the challenges of the ongoing pandemic weren't enough, an unusually brutal winter (even by Chicago standards) is further testing our resolve. I hope everyone is staying warm amid these frigid temperatures and droves of snow. Special thanks to those who came to campus on Tuesday to clear the snow, teach lab classes and provide support for the Monthly Board of Trustees meeting.

Despite the challenges we have faced this year, there is lots of great work happening around the College.

Here are a few highlights.

Last week, members of our Board of Trustees and I attended the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) Virtual National Legislative Summit. We met individually with members of Congress serving our district to advocate for our students and communities. We discussed topics including expanding Pell eligibility to include short-term certificate programs, creating a path to legal citizenship for DACA students, and developing plans to address student needs like food insecurity and technology gaps. We also advocated for increased support for community colleges in the next federal COVID relief bill. We are fortunate to have federal legislators who recognize the work that we do and the role we play in our community.

This week, faculty, staff and administrators are participating in the annual Achieving the Dream DREAM conference. Given that the conference is virtual, more of us were able to attend this year. At yesterday's plenary session entitled, "Creating Inclusive, Relationship-Rich, Culturally Responsive Learning Experiences for Student Success," Peter Felten highlighted Oakton's Persistence Project work as a best practice and example of how faculty can create a relationship-rich and culturally responsive learning environment.

Also this week, faculty and staff are attending the ILEA Winter Equity Institute hosted by the Partnership for College Completion. This morning, Tania Boisson, our amazing Student Care Coordinator, participated in a

panel entitled "Prioritizing Holistic Care in Student Services," sharing the ways we provide holistic student support at Oakton. Tomorrow, our wonderful student trustee, Karen Suarez, will be part of a "teach-in," joining other ILEA Student Advisory Council Members who will share their perspectives as students.

I am proud that the work we are doing at Oakton is being recognized and shared more broadly at regional and national conferences. Thank you to those representing Oakton, and more importantly, thank you to all of you for engaging in intentional ways to create an equity-focused and student-centered learning environment at Oakton.

Every February, we celebrate Black History Month. Thank you to the Center for Campus Inclusion and Diversity for hosting a number of virtual events throughout the month (details are on the website). I hope that you will attend some of these events and check out the online exhibit in the Koehline Gallery. Given our heightened awareness of the need to become an anti-racist institution, we cannot only celebrate Black history in February. We need to acknowledge, understand and celebrate Black history every month of the year.

Monthly Equity Summits will continue throughout the spring. In January, we [examined our Strategic Enrollment Management \(SEM\) plan](#) through an equity lens.

Our enrollment declines are most significant among Latinx students. We examined the role of student debt and financial holds and the barriers to completion they create, particularly for Students of Color. Black and Latinx students make up only about 24% of our student body, yet they accounted for about 42% of the financial holds during the previous academic year.

As part of our commitment to equity, the College will pilot a debt relief program that will include completion, persistence and reclamation grants. Through this and other strategies, we will support our overall enrollment goals and reduce the predictability of student outcomes based on race/ethnicity.

I invite you to participate in the next Equity Summit, scheduled for Thursday, Feb. 25, at 2:30 p.m. We will examine another one of our ILEA Equity Plan strategies — the ANDALE program — which is designed to support the needs of our Latinx students. Check Oakton Matters for the link to join.

At the start of the spring semester, we also completed updates to procedures for reporting discrimination based on race, color or national origin for both students and employees. These updated procedures, outlined by federal Title VI guidelines, support the institutional racial justice commitments I introduced at the start of the fall semester and are one mechanism to hold members of our community accountable to our values.

Discrimination of any kind has no place at Oakton and any student or employee who experiences discrimination will be heard and supported. Please visit the [Equity Matters](#) channel of the myOakton employee portal for more information on Title VI reporting procedures.

It is also important to recognize and denounce the recent increase in hate crimes against elders in the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) community. Hate crimes and bias against the AAPI community have increased during the coronavirus pandemic. Be mindful of how these incidents impact members of our own AAPI community and what you can do in your role to create a safe and welcoming community for everyone.

This month I have an exceptionally long list of Lifesavers. There are so many members of the College community who are making an extra effort to support students and their colleagues.

Amie Adams  
May Alimboyoguen  
Danielle Aquiline  
Jason Arndt  
Arti Ayachit  
Rebel Barber  
Svetlana Bayer  
Tania Boisson  
Linnea Boyev  
Enrollment Center Team  
Chell Coonen  
Jennifer Crowley  
Eva De La Riva  
Vanessa DeJesus  
Chris Dentamaro  
Craig Friedman  
Marcela Gallegos  
Margaret Gas  
Victoria Giambrone  
Nizar Handzic  
Stephanie Herrera

Alyssa Humbles  
Mary Kakenmaster  
Rich Koerner  
Karin Kushino  
Andrea Lehmacher and College Relations Team  
Ellen Lieberman  
Jeff Manson  
Rory Martin  
Mike McNett  
Caitlin Melzer  
Ozzie Mendez  
Nadine Mitchell-Poyser  
Michelle Naffziger-Hirsch  
Cindy Nijmeh  
Cari Paterno  
Chris Petray  
Sam Pudi  
Beatriz Sparks  
Kari Susens  
Cheryl Thayer  
Jonathan Turnbull  
Alexandra Ware  
Val Westphal  
Brad Young

Congratulations are also in order for the faculty members who will be granted tenure at the completion of the spring semester, as approved by our Board of Trustees this month. They include:

Ahyoung Kim, Assistant Professor of Mathematics  
Dezrine Dunn, Assistant Professor of Nursing  
Kayla Mitchell, Assistant Professor of Economics

I'll close this Leadership Update by turning your attention to some activities slated to take place in the warmer months ahead (yes, spring will come... eventually!).

Our Virtual Commencement is set for Monday, May 17. Join us for a live pre-show at 6 p.m. and an interactive watch party at 6:30. More details to come! Although the pandemic will prevent us from gathering in a traditional way, it's important to mark this important milestone for our students and celebrate their success. Please remind students that the graduation petition deadline is tomorrow, Feb. 19.

Lastly, our Return to Campus Task Force continues to meet, formulating instructional plans for the fall semester (determining the percentage of face-to-face vs. remote classes), and creating a strategy to allow employees to return to campus safely. There will be more to share in the coming weeks and months regarding these plans, but please know that our campus community's health and safety will guide all decisions, and plans will remain flexible as COVID conditions evolve.

Thank you all once again for all you've done — and continue to do — during these incredibly challenging times. We will get through this together — stronger — and continue to live out our mission of empowering and transforming our students.

All for One,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jri". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small dot above the "i".