From: Office of the Provost
To: Active Lawrence and Edwards Students @ KU; KU Lawrence All Staff, Faculty and Affiliates
Subject: Provost’s Message: The Need for Certainty and the Need for Understanding
Date: Monday, August 31, 2020 11:24:36 AM
Attachments: image011.png
image012.png

The Need for Certainty and the Need for Understanding

Dear Students, Staff and Faculty,

We've been through a lot over the past six months and, no doubt, there will still be challenges ahead. The pandemic has increased anxiety in almost every corner of our community. In times of such high anxiety, it is human nature to crave certainty for the sense of safety it provides.

The problem with craving certainty is that it is a false hope; it is a craving that can never fully be met. As Astronomer Carl Sagan once noted, while humans may crave certainty, “the history of science … teaches that the most we can hope for is successive improvement in our understanding, learning from our mistakes, an asymptotic approach to the Universe, but with the proviso that absolute certainty will always elude us.”

I was struck this past week by the irony that the craving for certainty led many to plea for KU to close campus and deliver classes fully online, while a craving for understanding lead many others to plea for our campuses to open.

Though the craving for certainty is futile, the craving for understanding is our greatest hope to overcome the very things that produce the anxieties we so desperately want to address. We have said repeatedly over the past several months that we would open our campuses because we believe what we do is essential. It is essential because, as Physicist and Chemist Marie Curie said, “Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less.”

If there were ever a time in our lives that we need to fear less and understand more, that time is most certainly now. The re-opening of KU is, for me, a clear sign of hope and renewal. For many in our community, repopulating the Lawrence and Edwards campuses has been restorative.

On Thursday, the Chancellor and I received an email from a senior faculty
member who wanted us to know about his first-week experience this fall. He wrote:

I'm sitting in my office after my second live lecture of the semester. My feet hurt, my back is sore, and I am hoarse. I am also happier than I have been since sometime before spring break last year. The time between last spring’s shutdown and today is the longest period I have been away from a classroom in 54 years. Teaching and learning define what I am and not having interaction with students for so long was painful. I'm writing simply to thank you for all of your efforts to get me back where I am supposed to be. It feels amazing to be in front of a classroom again. I could not be more thankful.

This first week of fall semester filled me with gratitude, as well. While I've had the privilege of being on campus for some time, I was finally joined by others, and their presence allowed me to experience it all with fresh appreciation. What might have been commonplace activities this past spring are extraordinary gifts this fall:

- The Big Tooter steam whistle signaling the end of a class session.
- Students talking about big ideas in the library.
- A group holding class outside of Marvin Hall.
- Students studying in tents.
- Offices with doors open and staff so happy to answer questions.
- The traffic information booth attendants sharing the latest news of campus.
- Students marching along Jayhawk Boulevard in peaceful protest of racial injustice.

Things are coming alive again at KU.

Thank you for having the courage to face uncertainty. Thank you for your willingness to change and to do things differently. Thank you for recognizing your responsibility to wear a mask and to physically distance, so we can be together. Thank you for your commitment and dedication to learning and understanding.

Courage, responsibility, and willingness to change are characteristics that are the foundations of one of the most necessary and noble of human virtues – resilience. Last week, resilience was on abundant display at KU, and it was truly breathtaking. What I saw at KU this past week was Jayhawks living up to our highest aspirations. We were, and are, an exceptional learning community that lifts each other and advances society. I saw Jayhawks Rising.

Rock Chalk!

Barbara Bichelmeyer

Barbara A. Bichelmeyer, Ph.D.
Provost & Executive Vice Chancellor
Follow Provost Bichelmeyer on Twitter at @KUBichelmeyer.

Follow the office at @KUProvost.

Join the office on Facebook at /KUprovostoffice/.

Join the office on Instagram at /KUprovost/.

The University of Kansas prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, ethnicity, religion, sex, national origin, age, ancestry, disability, status as a veteran, sexual orientation, marital status, parental status, gender identity, gender expression, and genetic information in the university’s programs and activities. The following person has been designated to handle inquiries regarding the non-discrimination policies: Director of the Office of Institutional Opportunity and Access, ioa@ku.edu, 1082 Dole Human Development Center, 1000 Sunnyside Ave., Lawrence, KS 66045, 785-864-6414, TTY 711.