



The Days Ahead: Uncertainty and Confidence

1 message

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Tue, Apr 14, 2020 at 10:56 AM

Dear Wake Forest community,

I am writing to you today to share my thoughts on the days ahead. I want to be realistic about the pain and uncertainty that all of us feel. I want to share my profound appreciation for all that is being done in the face of daunting challenges. And I want to express my unwavering confidence in our future.

A month ago, when we were still working in Reynolda Hall – with social distancing – I encountered a colleague in the hall and blurted out, “Welcome to a new year.” We had entered, it seemed, a whole new dimension of time.

That shock has only continued. I don’t underestimate for a moment what each of you and your families are going through. The stress, the disappointment, the uncertainty almost take our breath away. There are good reasons why we feel so deeply.

Some in our community have actually contracted COVID-19 – with its pain, its very real threat and its forced isolation. Many have watched loved ones and friends endure this trauma. And still others have had to be isolated and quarantined because of potential exposure. All of us fret about any unexpected contact.

Like so many around the globe who are selflessly dedicated to those they serve, our doctors, nurses and staff at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center are working under acute stress. Their lives disrupted and their days precarious, they are the true heroes of the moment.

This pandemic struck at an unparalleled pace – like a bolt out of the blue. On the Friday that spring break began, I remember a budget meeting when everything seemed normal. By Monday, three days later, we were in full crisis mode, with meeting upon meeting. Another 48 hours and we had come to the difficult decision of asking students to stay home and faculty to teach remotely. With little time, and no real applicable experiences, we moved forward in lock-step with our public health advisors.

We are also exiled in our own homes. Unlike crises of the past – World War II, the 9/11 attacks or the financial meltdown of 2008-09 – we cannot physically come together to face the crisis and build solidarity. Zoom and WebEx do provide amazing platforms for communication. But even at their best, they do not allow the deep satisfaction of being together – rigorous back-and-forth in the classroom, banter in the hallway, engagement with dozens of friends and colleagues each day, taking note of a colleague who is downcast, celebrating a birthday. I miss terribly a regular Saturday morning basketball game where the quality of teasing and “trash talk” – out of friendship – far exceeds the quality of play. We miss all the occasions of connection that provide meaning, purpose and joy to our lives.

Our professional lives have been radically reordered. Many research labs remain dark, art studios empty, internships postponed and practice fields vacant. Faculty have worked with enormous energy and creativity to teach courses remotely, and students have embraced this new medium with grit and goodwill. All of that determination, on both parts, doesn't alter the deep sense of loss of the kind of interpersonal exchange in classrooms and faculty offices that is a hallmark of Wake Forest.

Families also face new levels of stress. For some, that involves the challenges of unexpected home schooling of younger children. For other households, it means finding appropriate privacy – and bandwidth – for your own work and that of high school or college students.

And I feel keenly the disappointment of graduating seniors. They left for spring break without knowing that, as a class, they would not be coming back together again before graduation. They watched their last semester of college cruelly ripped from them. They will miss all the reminiscing and celebrating college life together, the last visits with valued faculty and staff, mentors and coaches. As the curtain was set to open for their final act, suddenly the lights went out.

But today, I am still hopeful and confident despite the uncertainty of the moment, the pain of loss and the disappointment of dreams deferred. We have just celebrated the seasons of Easter and Passover. Both are profound stories of tragic events, gloom, suffering and death. But they are also stories of life overcoming death, of deliverance from oppression, of sorrow turning to joy. These were holidays born in extreme conditions, when hope sprung from despair.

In recent weeks, the Wake Forest family has shown an unprecedented outpouring of goodwill and hard work, of cooperation and patience, of innovation and adaptability. I have seen faculty go the second mile to serve our students and staff reach out in countless ways to help students, particularly those who are most vulnerable. I am deeply grateful to so many staff who have kept our campus functioning and safe for the roughly 350 students not able to go home.

I have seen leaders at Wake Forest come together in powerful ways – working day and night – to craft solutions to our most vexing problems, challenges never before imagined, much less experienced. I have never before witnessed such creativity and resolve.

I am also grateful for the leadership and oversight of our Board of Trustees. Led by Gerald Roach, our Trustees have been great thought partners and supporters in the University's efforts to fulfill our mission in these times. As we build a vision for how and when we will return to normal life at Wake Forest, I look forward to engaging the talents of each of you – our faculty, staff and students.

Goodwill, resolve, love and dedication – these are the bedrocks upon which I have confidence for the future. We will weather this storm. Let me encourage each of you to take heart, to focus on making the most of this new reality and to continue to be creative in assisting those in need. Thank you for all you will do in the days ahead for each other and our community.

Sincerely,

Nathan O. Hatch

President