

Dear Senate colleagues and guests,

I would like to begin my remarks today with expression of my deepest gratitude for the efforts each of you have put forward in helping the University transition to remote, online learning. I know this was not how most of us envisioned our spring break. I had hopes of immersing myself in data analysis for my latest research project, and also planned to spend two days in a writing retreat with my colleague working on our book manuscript. I imagine many of you were also planning to use the time to catch up on writing and research, or perhaps taking family vacations; and some may have simply wished to use the break to rest, relax, and recharge. Certainly, none of us expected to have the spring break we did. And as a colleague said to me the other day, complaining about COVID-19 is like complaining about the weather, we are all affected by it.

Hopefully you had a chance to read my letter to the faculty from March 13. In that letter, I shared what the Senate has been doing in the transition. Moreover, while many of you were working overtime during your spring break to convert your spring semester to online learning, the Senate leadership was working over the spring break to convert our Senate meeting to a virtual one. As time went on it became increasingly obvious that a full virtual meeting was our only safe option. Thank you everyone for being here today and for some of you, your willingness to learn a new technology.

To state what is now an overused, yet apt phrase, these are unprecedented times. COVID-19 presents an ever-evolving, fluid crisis. As such, we, faculty, staff, students and administrators, are being called upon to adapt to this ever-changing landscape. Historically, such calls are accompanied by appeals for perseverance, grit, and resilience. These calls for strength and determination, and persistence in the face of adversity are intended to be empowering and inspirational. This discursive context often enables and supports behaviors and perspectives that lead one to disconnect or disassociate from the experiential dimensions of the reality of the moment. I must admit I found myself captivated by such a mode of being as a doctoral student when I was diagnosed with advanced stage cancer. I had taken in the cultural messaging: Vulnerability was weakness, emotion was a liability. Determination and perseverance, a ‘never give up’ and a “LiveStrong”-attitude were what made me feel like I had a sense of control or agency over something of which I did not. Other than selecting the best medical care I could access, there was little I could do to control the outcome. Yet, reflecting back on my experiences, I now realize how this approach closed me off to fully sharing my experience with my family and friends, and especially my fears. Now I have come to appreciate vulnerability as a strength, emotions as an asset that makes us human and is what connects us to others and binds us together.

Vice Provost Dooley’s letter today (March 23) echoes much of what I wished to communicate with you today. I encourage you to read it, if you have not done so. Today, I wish to acknowledge and give voice to the ways in which faculty, staff, students, and administration, are all experiencing not simply the logistical challenges of transitioning our courses online, but also the emotional and mental dimensions of a profound change in the very foundations of how

we live, work, and move through the world. The human element of the moment cannot be understated. While experts agree, social distancing is necessary to save lives; humans are social beings and along with the physical separation comes for many, disconnection, anxiety, isolation, and despair.

I am reminded of a lesson I learned while seeking therapy during my cancer diagnosis. In one session, the therapist was communicating the importance of self-care. She asked if I had ever flown on an airplane. She reminded me of how the safety information card notes that in the event of a change in cabin pressure, passengers are instructed to put on their oxygen mask first and then help those around them. I replied, "Yeah, that never made sense to me. Why wouldn't you help the small child sitting next to you first? They might pass out and die!" To which she explained that we cannot help others if we do not help ourselves. It was as if she was speaking to me in a foreign language.

Now that I am older and have a bit more life experience under my belt, I realize the importance of that advice. The 'push through it' mentality while seemingly empowering in the moment, may very well lead to burnout down the road. As Vice Provost Dooley addressed, self-care is important for faculty, students, staff and administrators. We must put on our proverbial oxygen masks first before we can take care of others. I encourage you all to read NASA astronaut Captain Scott Kelly's article in the *New York Times*<sup>1</sup>. Captain Kelly offers readers salient advice from his experiences on the International Space Station on how to cope with the isolation we are all experiencing as we work from home and socially distance.

As I told my students last week, you did not register for an online course, and I certainly did not sign up to teach one! We are all learning this together. There will be challenges for all of us as we move through the semester, some anticipated and others not. We need to be gentle with ourselves, and with each other, in setting expectations and recalibrating goals. We especially need to be understanding of our graduate and undergraduate students in terms of the myriad personal challenges they are facing- remember, for many, they spent last week moving out of their dorms or apartments and back home to their families For those who stayed, they too are transitioning to a semester where many of the events and activities they prepared for and looked forward to are now cancelled. Friends have left, and they are social distancing. To expect that we will be able to provide an equivalent learning experience online, or to expect students will be able to provide an equivalent level of learning and engagement is unrealistic given the current moment. We must recognize this reality: that whatever we can do, and whatever our students can do, will be the best we can do.

We are all in this together, and together we will get through it.

Thank you again for all you do for Purdue.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/21/opinion/scott-kelly-coronavirus-isolation.html>