Dear Marshall Family,

As we virtually welcome our students back after spring break, I wanted to take the chance to give all of you an update on some of the developments here at Marshall over the last week. I don’t know about all of you, but I feel that somehow spring break didn’t seem as relaxing as usual. In my house, most days consisted of four of us online either teaching classes, taking classes, administering exams or running meetings. While growing up in New Zealand my impression of a Southern California spring break definitely involved more sun and sand and less Zoom! Still the human spirit seems undaunted by adversity. By Friday my two boys had launched a seven-person multi-player game of Diplomacy including coding up the board with moves remotely conveyed through Dropbox and breakout rooms on Zoom to discuss strategy. I’m sure you and your families have all been adapting in similar ways.

While I know all of you have been scrambling to adjust to working from home and teaching classes online, the dean’s office and department chairs have also been working hard to plan for the future. Our top priorities are clearly ensuring the health and safety of our students and employees, while providing the best possible education and research environments. But in order to realize these objectives it is essential that we continue to maintain the strong financial position of our school. Naturally, this is more challenging than any of us might have guessed even a few weeks ago. Nevertheless, I am confident that we can weather the storm in reasonable fashion provided that we are able to attract a strong group of students for the 2020-21 academic year. Many of our actions over the last couple of weeks have been geared towards ensuring this goal is achieved.

1) Among our undergraduate population, there is obviously more uncertainty about yields than in past years. However, USC still has an impressive pool of highly qualified applicants, so I am confident that we will be able to reach, if not exceed, our targeted population size.

2) There is more uncertainty in the graduate population. Several of our programs involve a large number of international students and we have made a few changes to mitigate this concern.
   a. All of our programs with summer start dates have been moved to begin during the fall semester. This will present numerous significant scheduling issues, and I apologize for the inconvenience and extra work that this change will mean for some of you. However, a fall start provides up to three months extra time for life to return to normal and our international students to line up visas to get into the country.
   b. We will also provide a temporary streaming option for any students who are delayed in arriving at the start of the fall semester, so that they can join our classes in person once they make it to campus.
   c. Finally, for any programs that have a particularly large number of high-quality applicants, such as our MS in Business Analytics and MS in Finance, we are increasing the number of admitted students to help balance out possible losses in other programs.

I believe these actions should significantly mitigate any decrease in student numbers as a result of the COVID-19 shutdowns. However, we will continue to monitor the situation very carefully and will make further adjustments if necessary to provide for a strong 2020-21 graduate class.
Of course we are not solely focused on the next academic year. The online learning team will be holding weekly open forums for faculty on Fridays for the rest of the semester to discuss issues, tips, and best practices from your online teaching experience. The open forums will be hosted by some of our faculty online-teaching ambassadors, as well as instructional designers from our online learning team. Details will be posted on the Teaching and Working in an Emergency site.

I am also cognizant of our duty to serve the community outside USC. We have had dozens of faculty reach out to offer their expertise on issues related to crises (both health- and finance-related) and we are currently in the process of putting together a series of “fireside chat” videos to share with the wider public. If you would like to be involved in this project please contact our Vice Dean for Online Programs, Patti Mills.

No doubt there will be more changes coming in the weeks and months ahead, and I will try to provide regular updates. While for many of us the recent events have shaken our feelings of invincibility, at the same time they have restored much of my faith in our ability to come together to do great things. On that note I will leave you with one of my favorite recent clips.

We will survive

Best,

Gareth

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