



Dear Colleagues,

Happy New Year! I hope you all had opportunities to rest and recharge over Winter Break and spend meaningful time with loved ones as you celebrated the holidays.

While 2022 is less than a month old, it has already presented numerous challenges. This week we kicked off the spring semester, and up until just a few days ago, I fully expected to restore in-person classes to pre-pandemic levels and welcome students and faculty back to our campuses. But as you know, rising COVID-19 cases increased the level of concern for many of our colleagues and students, and we quickly transitioned many courses online for the first two weeks of the semester.

To say we implemented this temporary transition on short notice would be an understatement. Faculty quickly modified their curriculum, and staff and administrators in Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, College Relations and IT sprung into action once again to work through the many adjustments needed to communicate with students and faculty to support the transition to remote teaching and learning. I know it wasn't easy, but you did it – and I thank you.

In fact, nothing during this pandemic has been easy. And I know not everyone agrees with this course of action. Still, we worked together and we'll move forward, supporting students and one another.

While we will continue to be responsive to pandemic-related changes, I fully expect courses will revert to their originally scheduled format starting Jan. 31. Students who registered for in-person learning did so because it is the learning modality that best suits their needs. For many students, the in-person connection they find in our classrooms — both with their peers and faculty — is a central component of their Oakton Experience and a catalyst for allowing them to reach their Big Goals.

We are absolutely committed to creating a safe environment for all, but ultimately, we must learn to live and work alongside COVID. We will continue to utilize mitigation strategies recommended by health officials, including masking, testing and increasing vaccination rates. I encourage you to take advantage of expanded COVID-19 testing hours on both campuses and on-campus vaccination clinics scheduled throughout the semester, which offer Pfizer and Johnson & Johnson boosters for those eligible. See our website for details.

Even as we continue to navigate these seemingly never-ending challenges, I'm proud of all the great work taking place at the college, by individuals and as a collective. We're able to accomplish much of this work partly because of the grace and flexibility we continue to afford one another and our students. I know this mantra of "grace and flexibility" has been repeated so often (especially by me) that we risk losing sight of

what it really means. I make it a point to continually remind myself of its true meaning. I recently came across articles (which I've shared with some of you already) in the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#) and [Korn Ferry](#) (a management consulting firm) that provide helpful reminders of the importance of leading with grace — demonstrating empathy, courage, and genuine human connection with our colleagues and our students.

Thanks to everyone who attended the virtual Spring Kickoff presentation earlier this month. We heard powerful personal accounts from colleagues about their equity work — and its impact on our students. I hope that by hearing about these initiatives — including iANDALE!, COMPASS, The B.L.A.C.K. Student Success Program, Elevating Indigenous Voices at Oakton (EIVO) and the forthcoming Oakton Academy for Black Men — you were inspired about opportunities for collaboration that will allow us to support students even further.

New at this year's Opening Day address, we recognized colleagues who've earned professional certifications and academic degrees within the past year. Congratulations to you all and thank you for your commitment to lifelong learning.

I would like to acknowledge once again those who earned their doctoral degree within the past year:

- Dr. Rick Daniels, Director of Student Life and Campus Inclusion
- Dr. Toni Maglione-Solans, Professor of Nursing
- Dr. Leslie Van Wolvelaar, Co-Chair and Distinguished Professor of Accounting
- Dr. Ruth Williams, Assistant Vice President of Academic Affairs and Dean of Curriculum and Instruction
- Dr. Ribhi Salhi, Adjunct Faculty in the Division of Liberal Arts

Congratulations to all, and apologies to Dr. Salhi for neglecting to recognize his accomplishment during the Opening Day address. As you encounter these colleagues, please do offer your congratulations on reaching this milestone.

Our opening day presenters, doctoral recipients, and everyone who helped make our transition to temporary remote learning possible are just a few of the people who make Oakton such a special place. The following individuals — this month's lifesavers — also played an essential role in helping us continue to live out our mission of empowering and transforming students' lives.

May Alimboyoguen  
Reza Amirisefat  
Dear Aunaetitrakul  
Marc Battista  
Kelly Becker  
Nahraen Benjamin  
Jayne Blacker  
Stephanie Blumer  
Mario Borha

Donovan Braud  
Karl Brooks  
Michele Brown  
Steve Butera  
J Byrd  
Mary Christiansen  
Eva de la Riva Lopez  
Vanessa DeJesus  
Mindy Finnigan  
Tracy Fulce  
Cecilia Gomez  
Julia Gray  
Mary Hope Griffin  
October Gunawan  
Martinique Hallerduff  
Tom Hicks  
Matt Huber  
Alyssa Humbles  
Jake Jeremiah  
Cheryl Joseph  
Kelsey Kapolnek  
Angela Koenigs  
Linda Korbelt  
Karin Kushino  
Andrea Lehmacher  
Gloria Liu  
Daryl Long  
Ileo Lott  
Mike Loveday  
Toni Maglione  
Nadine Mitchell-Poyser  
Felix Ortiz  
Sandra Payan Cataño  
Arbella Pera  
Sam Pudi  
Kathy Roberson  
Ribhi Salhi  
Katherine Sawyer  
Samantha Schenk  
Dean Schulz  
Zaya Shamoon  
Shannon Sloan-Spice  
June Sproat  
Bob Sompolski  
Julie Sumner-Garibaldi  
Aneta Tamraz

Danielle Terry  
Aleda Thompson  
Leslie Van Wolvlear  
John Wade  
Cheryl Warmann  
David Williams  
Larry Williams  
Ruth Williams

As I wrap up this month's leadership update, I'd like to give a shout-out to our women's basketball team, which is off to an incredible start this season. Go Owls! You can catch the men's and women's basketball teams in action tonight (Jan. 20) at the Des Plaines campus, starting with the women's team at 5:15 p.m. At halftime of the women's game, former Owls Coach Rich Bolinder and former student-athlete Agata Wojciechowska will be recognized for their induction into the Illinois Skyway Collegiate Conference Hall of Fame.

Finally, as a reminder, I encourage you to join The Atlantic staff writer and New York Times Bestselling author Clint Smith who will serve as our virtual Martin Luther King Jr. keynote speaker next Wednesday, Jan. 26, at noon. See our website for details.

Martin Luther King Jr. Day always offers a time to reflect on how we can personally help create a more just society and improve equity for all — especially our students.

As I reflect on Dr. King's contributions, I'm reminded of some of his most powerful words:

"The time is always right to do the right thing. If I cannot do great things, I can do small things in a great way. Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability but comes through continuous struggle."

In this moment, rife with struggle, these words are particularly poignant. As we navigate the challenges of the pandemic and the continued fight for racial equity, I take comfort knowing that collectively, we will continue to do the right thing.

In Community,

