

A Message from Dr. Nancy Brickhouse, Provost

Dear Colleagues,

Thank You for a Successful Semester

As we conclude the fall semester and prepare [to honor our December 2020 graduates this Saturday](#), I want to reiterate to each of you my gratitude for your commitment to our students and for the creative ways you have continued serving the mission of Baylor University. Despite the many challenges of a pandemic, we have ensured the continuity of our teaching and research endeavors as we make significant progress on the implementation of *Illuminate*.

During a period of extreme uncertainty and volatility across higher education, we have succeeded in maintaining a stable on-campus undergraduate enrollment while preserving in-person instruction with innovative measures and stringent COVID-19 protocols. Our first-year retention rate was remarkably strong this fall, and it currently appears that our four-year graduation rate for May 2021 will be better than previous years.

Other achievements worthy of celebration include increases in sponsored research expenditures, the number of research dollars awarded, and the number of Carnegie-recognized doctorates. In addition, fundraising efforts to endow new chairs as part of the [Baylor Academic Challenge](#) program have continued to find a warm reception among Baylor alumni and friends, with three new chairs recently announced.

Faculty Evaluations

A topic of considerable discussion in recent weeks has been the process of conducting annual evaluations for faculty. I appreciate the concerns of those who question the fairness of evaluating faculty performance in a manner similar to previous years, given the particularly challenging conditions in which we find ourselves working. Please allow me to share some context and perspective on this subject.

Faculty evaluations are important, even during a pandemic. In the same way that we want students to make academic progress, we want our faculty members to continue growing as teachers and scholars. Faculty evaluations provide an opportunity for our department chairs to learn more about their respective faculty members — their scholarship, their classroom experiences, what they have learned during the past year, and what frustrates them. Faculty evaluations thus have both a formative and a summative purpose. To provide greater context I suggest that faculty consider submitting a brief narrative of their teaching activities over the past year that provides chairs with information such as new instructional approaches, new materials created, or changes in student outcomes that are noteworthy. Faculty may also address in this narrative their research endeavors and service as well as provide a statement that informs the evaluator about special challenges you faced as a result of the pandemic.

When department chairs perform evaluations this year under the guidance of our deans, we are asking that they keep the following considerations in mind:

- Evaluations should be, above all, an opportunity to engage in thoughtful conversation with faculty members at a time when such dialogue may be particularly valuable.
- The Planning Document should continue to be used as the springboard for this conversation.
- Chairs should make sure to celebrate accomplishments, commend COVID-related work that has gone beyond the call of duty, and address any challenges that have surfaced.
- Ratings should continue to be assigned, not only because they relate to the possibility of merit pay, but also for other reasons, such as overall institutional data for this year.

- Chairs should take each faculty member's COVID situation into account during the course of conducting the evaluation.
- Deans should ask chairs what they have taken into account and discussed with their faculty members regarding teaching, beyond matters strictly relating to course evaluations.

In addition to making these recommendations to enhance our evaluation process, I will be seeking additional input during the Academic Leadership Seminar, to be held in mid-January, on how to most fairly address faculty evaluation challenges this year. The seminar will be an opportunity for sharing ideas regarding how we can approach evaluations differently — in ways that are valuable to faculty and that help to build a culture of continuous improvement. Please know that I remain deeply committed to working with Baylor's faculty to develop an enriched set of guidelines for faculty evaluations — particularly as they relate to the evaluation of teaching. I consider the measures we are implementing this year to be the beginning of a longer term effort to improve faculty evaluations.

Self-Care

This semester's challenges have been many, and they have at times seemed unending. Baylor's Christian mission calls for us to be a community of compassion, and it is important that we lift up one another in love and prayer. I would like to remind you that among the resources available to each of us is the Baylor [Employee Assistance Program](#), which offers free and confidential resources, assessments, counseling, referrals, and follow-up services to employees to support their personal and professional life.

Thank you, again, for your service to Baylor University and our remarkable students. I wish you a happy and healthy Christmas season and look forward to the beginning of another successful semester at Baylor in January 2021.

Sincerely,

Nancy Brickhouse, Ph.D.

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