

Spring 2020 Semester Closing Note to My Students

By Don Sutherland

At the end of each semester, I provide my students with a closing note about the course. That note seeks to place the course, its content, and its requirements into a larger context. I do so, because I believe it is helpful for students to have one last opportunity to understand why they took the course and perhaps better identify what they might have gained from the course. Such understanding can perhaps reinforce learning for the long-term.

Below is the note to my spring 2020 students:

Dear Student,

No Lehman College class has ever faced the kind of struggle, much less pain and grief, that has confronted you. No past class has faced anything close to what you lived and experienced and fought through.

The virus that had seemed so distant back when the semester began, silently slipped into the New York City area shortly thereafter according to the latest epidemiological research. Once there, it circulated at an accelerating rate, all out of the notice of public health officials who were blinded by a lack of testing capacity combined with rigid testing criteria.

On March 1, New York City recorded its first confirmed case of the novel coronavirus. In days, a coronavirus “hot spot” erupted in nearby New Rochelle. Then, in mid-March, the gathering viral storm hit the entire area with full fury, overturning the regular academic order of the semester, pushing classes into cyberspace, disrupting lives and livelihoods, and taking away friends and loved ones all too soon.

But this terrible virus did not defeat you. You persisted. You pushed ahead. You are now poised to complete your journey beyond this class. If ever there were to be a monument erected to the feats of Lehman’s students, this COVID-19-swept class would merit such tribute. You have demonstrated heroic spirit. This, without any doubt, is Lehman’s finest class.

Looking ahead, this pandemic will end. The timing of that moment is uncertain. What is certain is that you will all play a role in building the post-pandemic world in its aftermath.

The challenges that will confront companies and their managers—you—will be enormous. The path ahead will entail real constraints on capacity in many businesses, a structural decrease in demand for some industries, and the need to devise new ways of conducting business for many others.

The course concepts and research experience, if leveraged effectively, will provide you with a framework for organizing such an effort. The willingness to rely on science, evidence, and truth with discipline and intellectual integrity will provide understanding of the situation. The ability to communicate clearly and with empathy will make it possible to translate

ideas into outcomes. The humility and recognition that great ideas can come from all over the world, even the most unlikely places, will put one in a far stronger position to address the requirements of building a viable and prosperous post-pandemic world.

There is one other intangible ingredient that may matter as much as anything: faith in a better future. When one truly believes the future will be better, one is proactive in bringing about that better future. The real magic exists when large numbers of people possess that faith. The cumulative efforts of large numbers of people—whole communities—in pursuit of that better future is what transforms the world.

In his February 2019 letter to Berkshire Hathaway's shareholders, Warren Buffett provided just such an anecdote. He wrote:

In that spring of 1942... The U.S. and its allies were suffering heavy losses in a war that we had entered only three months earlier. Bad news arrived daily.

Despite the alarming headlines, almost all Americans believed on that March 11th that the war would be won. Nor was their optimism limited to that victory. Leaving aside congenital pessimists, Americans believed that their children and generations beyond would live far better lives than they themselves had led.

The nation's citizens understood, of course, that the road ahead would not be a smooth ride. It never had been.

Think about the extraordinary changes that took place since then. Think about the great things that were accomplished. Think about the new things that were invented, much of which we use regularly in our own lives. Think about the great companies and industries that were born afterward.

“Spring of 1942” is where we find ourselves today. A war, not against people, but against a deadly pathogen rages in much of the world. Thanks to the wonders of the Internet, bad news now arrives not just daily, but at all times during the day. But things will get better.

Embrace the spirit of a better future. Draw upon what you have already achieved in passing through this hurricane of coronavirus. What you accomplished in this period of extraordinary adversity demonstrates unequivocally that you are capable of far greater things than you might ever have imagined. You are truly ready to begin the rest of your life's journey.

I wish all of you much success in your professional and personal lives.