

August 25, 2020

## Regarding In-Person Classes During the 2020A Semester

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the students, faculty, and staff of the College of Arts and Sciences and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences for your great cooperation in our response to the novel coronavirus pandemic. We can all be particularly proud that there have been no reports of large-scale cheating during the regular exams in the S Semester.

I would now like to explain to you the current status of our efforts to hold in-person classes during the upcoming A Semester and to ask for your further cooperation. I apologize for having to ask for your help once again as well for the unavoidable length of this message.

As you know, both the College and Graduate School had to hold all of our classes online during the 2020 S Semester. The government had announced a state of emergency, and we had no other choice if we were to avoid the worst-case scenario of not teaching classes at all. During the spring, we did not yet have enough information about COVID-19 infections. If I may borrow terminology from the economist Frank H. Knight, we were facing a state of *uncertainty*, which is difficult to manage as future outcomes cannot be predicted, rather than one of *risk*, in which the probabilities of those outcomes can be quantified.

At a university like ours, it is easy for large clusters of infections to form. We have many young students who live active lives and are therefore likely to spread infections. Our students come from many different locations and, during normal times, gather in large numbers in lecture halls while also moving from classroom to classroom frequently. When we were in that state of uncertainty and still knew little about COVID-19, the only response available to us was to move all of our classes online.

We had little time to prepare for online teaching this year, but we somehow managed to get through it thanks to the cooperation of students, faculty, and staff. During that process, we discovered both good and bad aspects of online classes. The good points included the fact that students and teachers do not need to commute to campus and that ideas can be exchanged conveniently through online text chat. On the other hand, many students have expressed their unhappiness with lack of opportunities for real, face-to-face

communication, especially first-year students who have had no in-person classes on campus yet and do not feel that they have really enrolled in the university.

The results of the recent university-wide student questionnaire show that many students, especially first-year undergraduates, would really like to start in-person classes as soon as possible, while some students are worried about infections and want to continue to have the opportunity to study online. Looking beyond the university, more and more people are wondering why only university students are stuck studying at home by themselves while elementary, junior high, and high schools have resumed in-person classes. The Ministry of Education has asked universities to offer both online and in-person classes starting this autumn. The president and other top administrators of the University of Tokyo are also asking that there be more opportunities for in-person classes throughout the university and that students be allowed to take part in activities on campus.

At a meeting of the Japanese Association for Infectious Diseases a few days ago, it was reported that medical experts now believe that, at least during the current wave of infections, the worst-case scenario—in which tens of thousands of people die in the major urban areas and the medical system is overwhelmed—has become less likely. It has also become clearer what types of people are most susceptible to serious complications, and clinical treatments are being developed for seriously ill patients. Even when infections continue to spread, we have learned that the rate of increase can be held down through restrictions on some activities, such as the late-night operation of bars and restaurants that serve alcohol. In other words, COVID-19 is no longer a problem of unmanageable *uncertainty* but rather one of manageable *risk*.

Based on our analysis of the overall situation, the Dean's Office has decided that we no longer need, due to a fear of uncertainty, to hold all of our classes online. While large lecture classes will continue to meet online, we have begun preparations so that courses for which face-to-face contact are particularly important, including laboratory classes, practicums, and small seminars, can be held in person again whenever possible. We have also asked the foreign language departments to prepare for in-person classes in foreign languages other than English, as those classes play a particularly important role in enabling interactions among Junior Division students. Of course, we are also preparing online programs for students who do not wish to attend classes in-person yet.

One important issue has emerged, however. Many faculty members who teach subjects that are scheduled to be taught in person have expressed concern about the risk of infection. Many faculty (including me) and their family members are in high-risk groups

for COVID-19 infection. Those teachers are very worried about whether they would be able to teach students in person while protecting themselves from infection. Teachers of in-person classes would also have the additional burden of preparing online classes for students who request them.

The College and Graduate School are doing everything we can to deal with these issues. Working together with the central university administration, we are now devoting huge efforts and large amounts of money to prepare for the start of in-person classes in the autumn. The measures now being planned include: reducing the number of students on campus by limiting the subjects taught in person and by having students attend during alternate weeks; modifying classroom seating (such as by arranging seats in checkerboard patterns); enhancing the WiFi network and electrical supply and providing computer charging stations so that students can take online classes while on campus; installing plastic barriers, disinfectant, trash cans, etc. at appropriate locations; setting up an online system for monitoring campus entry and health; having the Health Center conduct risk assessment and supervision of locations where practicums are conducted; installing window screens and ventilators to improve air circulation; requiring that all visitors to campus use the COCOA contact-confirming app; installing a system developed by UTokyo faculty to monitor congestion on campus using the COCOA signals; and expanding TA and other class support measures.

While implementing these measures, the Dean's Office will stay in close contact with concerned faculty to explain the situation, work out new arrangements, and try to find mutually agreeable solutions. To be honest, however, we do not yet know whether enough faculty members will be willing to teach in person, so we might not be able to offer enough in-person classes for all students who want them.

I would therefore like to ask all students who are able to take in-person classes to understand the position of their teachers and to make the very best of this special opportunity. I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to the teachers of those in-person classes for understanding the strong desire of students for in-person classes and for cooperating as best they can.

A university is more than just a place to do research or to transmit knowledge to students. It is also a place where conversations among students and between students and faculty create an enjoyable, interactive environment that inspires further scholarship and leads to the growth of human potential. That environment is the true soul of a university, especially one that emphasizes the liberal arts as we do at Komaba.

Because our new first-year students have not yet had a chance to have real-life personal interactions on campus, a wider gap than we had imagined has formed between their experiences and those of our second- and later-year students, who had already formed networks of friends through in-person interactions. That is why I hope that first-year students especially will be able to gather on campus soon and, while still being careful about infections, enjoy the university experience in its truest sense.

Let me conclude by asking all students, faculty, and staff to work as a team to confront the current crisis, overcome the many challenges, and strive to restore our university life to its original form as best we can. I sincerely hope that through this experience, which will be remembered for many years to come, we will be able to share the world of hope and promise that, I believe, lies ahead of us.

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