

2020-10-07

Dear First Years.

I'm writing to respond with as much detail as I can to respond to the letter received by Reps on 9/25.

Best Regards,  
Hilary Brougher

## **I. The decision to hold Fall B remotely. When and Why?**

**When:** Please know the timing of the announcement had to do with the timing of our faculty meetings and not at all with tuition deadlines. Faculty wanted to answer queries from students as soon as we could. We had our first MFA faculty meeting late in the day on a Friday 9/11, then after the vote, the decision was confirmed with SOA admin over the course of the following week. Most faculty votes will be confirmed more quickly than this, but please keep in mind Faculty, Staff and Admin are carrying a lot of extra operational tasks in response to programmatic change caused by COVID, and that week was an intense week as classes began.

**Why:** This decision to continue Fall Classes that start Fall A and continue into Fall B, as well as those starting Fall B (including Dir. Actors and Directing 1) was:

- 1) Framed by continuing concerns about health and safety.
- 2) Based on our experience so far in the virtual classrooms, both teaching remotely and hybrid modes.

## **II. The letter on June 1 as it relates to our planning for Fall B.**

The screenshot indeed describes what we anticipated and hoped for in June. *"We anticipate that being able to return to campus in small groups (number to be determined) sometime in the Fall."* The June 1 letter then speaks to *"most instruction continuing online"* (which is indeed how it has played out) and then specifies:

*"while casting, rehearsals, office hours and, and perhaps some instruction" happening on campus." We are still working to see how much - if any - supporting work is feasible and can happen by end of Fall B.*

We are being transparent about where we are now in terms of classes.

Please keep in mind the June 1 letter also notes: *“(9) It is likely that many of your classes will continue as "online only" rather than hybrid or small group classes throughout the Fall.”*

In terms of **additional hybrid or “support activity”** we mentioned in the June 1 letter, Faculty and Staff are still exploring these possibilities. As always health and safety is the main concern that frames this thinking, followed by pedagogical design. Please keep in mind, the year is young and we are designing in response to our experience teaching this Fall (as well as safety). **We will let you know as we know more, and by start of FALL B.**

**III. RECORDING.** The language indeed indicates *"select classes will be recorded"* and we believe (and hope) that this is already happening. We're continuing to discuss this as Faculty, and I know many who have not recorded classes in the past are now doing so. Please do reach out to your instructor in advance to discuss if this option is important to your individual learning. A few classes will be recorded by default, but in most cases you will need to talk to the instructor in advance, so please do start there, or if you need to you can reach out to the supervisor of that concentration.

The June 1 letter also noted: *(8) Some of our classes can also be accessed asynchronously. However, students should be aware that there are some workshops that just do not work asynchronously.*

#### **IV. REQUEST FOR A MEETING, AND MORE COMMUNICATION**

We have added a meeting this Friday.

It's not a long one, but hopefully a productive start. Please know it's truly challenging scheduling our FT Faculty due to their Teaching, Service, Office hours and our filmmaking practice which is at the core of being Professors of Professional Practice.

There is another community meeting/town hall in November, which is traditionally what we do.

The Faculty Steering Committee will also be in touch with your reps going forward, and I will keep the Updates coming.

If you have a curricular question, please do reach out to your head of concentration:

Directing: Ramin Bahrani <rb148@columbia.edu>

Creative Producing <mar111@columbia.edu>

Screenwriting: Jamal Joseph <jj260@columbia.edu>

Film and Media Studies: "Robert J. King" <rk2704@columbia.edu>

If you have an admin question, please reach out to the DODGE OFFICE STAFF.

If you have a question about production/RISC policy that you can't find an answer to on the production hub, or if you want some clarification on something, Jenny and Ann are a wonderful resource.

### **Some of the specific questions and concerns in your letter:**

**Question: "Will we still be able to complete the 3-5 and 8-12?"**

**"In June, when we were making our decision to commit to the program, we were promised that we would get to complete these projects.**

**"Will we be able to shoot our 3-5s and 8-12s at a later date, when production guidelines are more feasible?"**

*ANSWER: Our shoot window for the 3-5 is **February 15 through March 30**. As of now, students will be expected to make their 3-5 under whatever the current parameters are. Please refer to Ann Czar's email of 9/29 which has a lot of useful links.*

*We are planning for the 8-12 to proceed as planned in Summer B. Our current shoot window is now: **May 3 through August 13**.*

*As mentioned we are currently transitioning to Phase 2!*

*We hope (and currently it looks good) that the Production Center will open Fall B (OCT 26).*

*We will make sure students can complete project work. Last Spring, as COVID hit us mid-stride, we allowed a few students to "opt out" of directing the 8-12 and D-4 to stay on track with graduation goals. Going forward we will both continue to require and support these projects.*

**Question: “How will Summer 2021 look re: 8-12s and summer internships?”**

**Answer:** See earlier info re: 8-12’s.

*(From Alece): For **summer internships**, I am already working with major studios and companies that offer internship programs like **Academy Gold** in LA and **Warner Media** in NYC, and production/distribution companies such as **The Population** and **Kino Lorber**. There is a high probability that many of the summer 2021 internships will be remote. Also, please know that summer internships are very popular for students across the country, so look for her weekly newsletters in early Spring semester to apply as early as possible to be considered.*

**Question: “We would like to clarify and revisit guidelines for shooting internationally.”**

*Answer (From Jenny T): Please see the [Parameters](#) for the guidance on international projects. All Columbia films are subject to the same rules by project type. Currently, per University rules, no University work can include travel. This goes for faculty, PhD students, everyone. For our films, that means that you cannot travel for the purposes of making a film.*

*You can, however, always make films where you are currently located!*

**Phase 2** will also apply to all productions, including international productions, and will make filming in your location (including international location, if that’s where you are located) more flexible. Travel restrictions will still be in place, however, and won’t change until the University opens travel to the entire community.

**Question: “How will Summer 2021 look re: 8-12s and summer internships?”**

**Answer:** See above re: 8-12’s. *From Alece: For summer internships, I am already working with major studios and companies that offer internship programs like **Academy Gold** in LA and **Warner Media** in NYC, and production/distribution companies such as **The Population** and **Kino Lorber**. There is a high probability that many of the summer 2021 internships will be remote. Also, please know that summer internships are very popular for students across the country, so look for her weekly newsletters in early Spring semester to apply as early as possible to be considered.*

**Question: “How were the [Phase 1] guidelines arrived at and what is the process for them changing in the future? What are the *specific benchmarks* that have to be reached before students can access university equipment and generally move to later phase shooting restrictions?”**

**Answer (from Jenny): *Developing Phase 1 Guidelines:*** Phase 1 Production was under discussion from March-July 2020, and approved in early August 2020. [From April through July, we paid close attention to industry developments](#) including the white papers that the industry developed for the earliest opening of production. We also coordinated with the University, which has its own separate guidelines that were constantly in progress (and continue to be updated as the health crisis, US government response, and science unfolds).

***Developing Phase 2:*** As with the rest of the film industry, it is difficult to point to one or two benchmarks that are the tipping points. Rather, the response has unfolded in small steps, with everyone paying close attention to first movers. We are now moving forward with Phase 2 given that the industry has adopted [The Safe Way Forward](#) as best practices, and some production has been able to successfully proceed without creating super-spreading events. Testing is a big challenge for not just us, but for the whole industry, and we continue to pay extra attention to developments in methods, CDC guidance, and related issues.

**Question: “Why is outdoor filming not included in the Phase 1 guidelines? Shooting outdoors would seem to be the safest place for a film crew to operate.”**

**ANSWER (FROM JENNY & MAUREEN):** **Phase 1** only included locations that students were able to guarantee complete control of all exposures. Outdoor locations were allowed, but only in private locations that followed the protocols.

As we shared on September 29, we have submitted the **Phase 2** Proposal Production Guidelines for approval and have eliminated this restriction. As with the Phase 1 Production Protocol approval process, these will also go to University Risk Management and our outside Insurance broker for approvals before we can announce them.

**Question: “We were told in June that the program would be a good place to learn about how the industry would adjust to the pandemic and its aftermath. Why isn’t our program encouraging us to follow and be in-tune with the industry standard?”**

*ANSWER (FROM JENNY & MAUREEN): Since the start of the pandemic, we have kept [careful track of all industry developments](#). We also have sought input from alums, faculty, and other members of our network who have actually planned and/or completed production since March. Moreover, we initiated and run an ongoing Peer School Production Working Group to share best practices and learn from our peer schools. Together, these efforts have been very helpful for operations challenges like testing especially. We also have been using [The Safe Way Forward](#) to develop our protocols and parameters, which has become an industry standard/baseline.*

*In addition to the industry, we are also part of the University community, and so must follow University guidance and get University approval for any production plans. In addition, all MFA programs have a different relationship with the insurance industry than the expensive but more flexible insurance coverage options that large commercial productions have. We are often subject to requirements that do not align perfectly with a large commercial production, but please know that we work very hard to give our filmmakers as much room as possible to complete their projects given the industry, the University, and our external partners. We are very successful working with these partners, and within these parameters, and our student productions are the very best in the industry, not just among other student productions but all short films.*

*The Phase 2 Production Protocols Guidelines are in line with the industry standards, especially The Safe Way Forward Document which was posted on the Hub in June 2020.*

**Question: “Is there a possibility for an equipment share with other universities, or other ways to ensure that students staying at home can have access to similar equipment in their specific or neighboring cities?”**

*ANSWER: We’re planning on disinfecting all our equipment between check outs, and we discourage sharing as a safety measure. An outside equipment share program would raise safety and liability concerns.*

*We expect that D1 exercises will be shot simply. “Simple is good” has long been a pedagogical mainstay in terms of D1.*

*We will be holding **mini seminars** at the start of Fall B to support shooting exercises under the production parameters that are current at that point.*

*We understand your concern with regard to the production of the 3-5 if you don't own equipment and are not in NYC, and will continue to consider how to address the concern at the heart of this question.*

**Question: “What are the benchmarks for when classes will be allowed to take place in person?”**

*Answer: For a return to fully “in person” — meaning no low density measures, no masks, etc — we'd need to meet benchmarks at the University level and on a governance level (state, national, local).*

*It's hard for us to answer this looking to the Spring.*

*“Hybrid” has different benchmarks. As mentioned — our decision not to run all classes hybrid is framed first in thinking on safety, but is also essentially **about the effectiveness of this modality of teaching.***

**Question: “How does the program plan to equip us with the skills we would normally receive during non-COVID times?”**

*Answer: There's no short answer to this. There's multiple answers that are evolving every day. It's a good question for our discussion this Friday.*

*Film Faculty continue to work to restructure the program so our students get the experience they need — albeit perhaps in a different chronology and proportions than in years gone by.*

*We also want to add that though we wish we were not facing all these challenges — we hope there will be some learning distinct to COVID era study that will serve you well. The world we return to post-COVID won't be the same. Our graduating filmmakers have always been notably “adaptable.” As a Faculty of working*

*filmmakers — we believe in finding new opportunities for growth wherever safely possible within a challenging situation (in this case the conditions the pandemic has imposed on teaching and production).*

*We find ourselves growing as instructors and filmmakers in spite of all the difficulties and stress of this time, and see our students work growing, and that is worth acknowledging.*

**QUESTION: “Can all lectures be recorded moving forward?”**

*Answer: In terms of “lecture classes” (Fundamentals, Elements ETC, as opposed to the lecture component of workshops). I don’t have a commitment to this from all MFA Faculty at this point. But my understanding is that most lecture classes are now being recorded (by request). I will continue to follow up on this with Faculty and report more in the next update. Please see earlier answer re: “RECORDING.”*

**Question: “We are missing out on casual run-ins and hang outs since we’re not all on campus. One of our classmates had a great idea to have a permanent Zoom session open that could act as a “coffee room,” where people can go in & out and mimic “bumping into” each other virtually. Can we organize this?”**

*Answer: We’re looking into this and will follow up in my next update.*

**Question: “Zoom classes limit casual conversations after with professors. Many of our classes have TAs as “in-betweens” but direct contact seems limited. Is there a way to have smaller office hours even for a short amount of time with professors and smaller amounts of students?”**

*Answer: We’ve found students less likely to reach out to set zoom office hours than when we are in person... please do reach out for office hours to discuss your work.*

*I know a few instructors are now keeping rooms open “after classes” so students can continue conversations.*

**Question: “Is a hybrid option for Directing I/Directing Actors possible?”**

*Answer: For the Fall B portion of these classes, we will be remote. We hope to let you know about Spring A by the start of December.*

*As mentioned we will let you know if we are able to offer any additional support activities FALLB, by start of Fall B.*

**Question: “E.g., if this decision was made because the faculty wish to teach remotely, could the students still meet together in person?”**

*If students are meeting in person to attend a class, it becomes by definition “hybrid” and needs to be supervised, so unfortunately no.*

**Question: “Is there *any* chance we will return to in-person classes sometime during Fall B? Has there been any discussion about delaying classes that would be better suited for in-person instruction, and bringing up classes that would be more easily translated to virtual instruction (e.g., film theory), as was done for Fall A?”**

*Answer: Fall B will be remote. (See earlier answers). Faculty feels it is important that Directing 1 and Directing Actors 1 connect with the other 1st year coursework you’re taking, and we feel that we can deliver this learning effectively.*

**Question: “Can class sizes reflect what they would be if taught in person? E.g., Tech Arts [Post] has been noticeably difficult as a large group, especially on Zoom.”**

*Answer: I think the only class this concern applies to is “Tech Arts Post.” Michael has been in dialogue with Reps on this one. Please follow up with him if you need to.*

**Question: “How does grading work with classes split over two semesters?**

**What classes, if any, will be accessible asynchronously?”**

*Answer: I'm working on answers to these two questions for our next Update.*

**Question: “How will we be updated throughout the decision process for Spring A? Will the department communicate with us the plans, including contingency plans, going forward?”**

*Answer: We hope to have answers regarding Spring A by the start of December. We will communicate as we can any contingency plans that are viable.*

**Question: “What we’re paying for. How will this change affect tuition/fees, and what is planned to make up for what we are undoubtedly missing out on compared to what we were told to expect when we made our decision to commit to the program?”**

*Answer: Tuition is set at the University level, so it is not within our purview as Faculty. We do feel we are delivering the program as we’ve described given the shifting parameters of the pandemic and what we learn every day. As a Faculty we’re going to simply keep adjusting the program to be the best it can be.*