

A&S Explorer

April 2020

Letter from the Dean

Dear A&S community,

I hope that this note finds you well and safe. Needless to say, we all face new challenges in an environment that seems increasingly defined by uncertainty. But even though we are facing tough times, I know we will get through it.

Every day more and more Americans understand the scope of the COVID-19 pandemic and are following appropriate precautions to ensure their health and that of others. Here at Vanderbilt, Interim Chancellor Susan Wentz and her leadership team took early and swift action to ensure the safety of our entire community. Nashville Mayor John Cooper followed suit, acting quickly and wisely to declare a “safer at home” policy. State-by-state, policymakers are making smarter and smarter decisions to protect people and “flatten the curve” to save lives.

In this extraordinary and difficult situation, it would have been very easy for our community to look inward and retreat. However, I'm proud to report that the exact opposite has happened. The Vanderbilt community—faculty, students, staff, and alumni—are stepping up to support one another. This is the Vanderbilt way.

Below are a few of the many examples of our community *stepping up*:

- Our Chemistry Department had, by chance, just received a shipment of 200,000 latex surgical gloves for research use and immediately donated them to the Vanderbilt University Medical Center to help them with patient care.
- Kentucky Governor and A&S alumnus Andy Beshear (BA'00) has been a true leader in addressing the pandemic, serving as an important role model for other public officials around the country.
- The A&S faculty and staff transitioned over 600 courses to a distance learning format in the span of four days. Let me say that again: we transitioned 600 courses from in-person to online in a handful of days.
- A group of nine dedicated A&S graduate students came together at a moment's notice to provide nearly 150 hours of technological support over three weeks to help our faculty move their courses online.
- Roughly 4,000 A&S students moved out of their dorms on very short notice, said goodbye to their friends, and returned home, while adjusting to the new demands of distance learning.
- A&S staff have been working tirelessly in the background to help shut down research labs in record time and handle countless student questions, all while making sure that our key processes continue (including pay and health benefits).
- Some of our A&S faculty shifted their research to offer new insights into COVID-19. Chemist Lars Plate's lab is working on new drugs to stop the virus; biological physicist John Wikswo and team are working to develop quicker ways to get vaccines to the market place; A&S Research Dean David Wright and colleagues are studying those individuals who have recovered from COVID-19 as a way to develop new and quicker tests for the virus; and mathematician Glenn Webb is building models to predict the size of the COVID-19 outbreak and studying the effect of intervention measures such as social distancing.
- Vanderbilt staff members Andrea Bordeau and Sabrina Kronk worked miracles to help two A&S students studying abroad in Morocco return home safely and quickly.
- The English Department's Beth Bachman expressed her sentiments through the poem “Mask,” which was [published in *The New Yorker*](#).
- Chemistry's John McLean swiftly converted his lab, securing FDA approval, to produce much-needed hand sanitizer that will protect Vanderbilt employees, including our first responders.
- Associate Provost Dawn Turton has been working tirelessly on behalf of A&S students, ensuring, among many other things, that we provided housing to students who did not have access to housing following the closing of the residential halls.
- And, last but not least, staff across the University, including those in housing, dining, and student health, continue to care for the A&S students who remain on campus.

There are countless stories beyond these. If you know of more instances of people stepping up to make a difference, please share them with me. These examples give us faith that we will—together—navigate these uncharted waters.

Without question, our society is facing challenges and questions that we haven't faced in generations, or possibly ever. However, I believe our community is ready and able to tackle these challenges. How do we stem the spread of highly communicable viruses, and develop new vaccines? How do we change social behavior that will ensure our safety? How can literature and the arts help us to interpret and better understand these unusual times? These are the kinds of questions that our community is prepared to answer. Within A&S, we have scientists, social scientists, humanists, and artists working on these and other questions as we seek to turn the tide against this deadly virus.

We do not know the path ahead. Much is unclear—about the economy, public health, social interactions, higher education, and the world generally. But I am confident knowing that the dedicated, creative, and intelligent people that make up the Vanderbilt community will meet this crisis and be ready to restart our lives, our communities, and our economy.

My sincerest thanks to all who have provided essential support over the past month, including those of you who have given to the new [Student Hardship Fund](#) designed to help our students most in need. I hope that you are staying safe, healthy, and connected to others during this trying time.

Take good care,



John G. Geer
Ginny and Conner Searcy Dean, College of Arts and Science
Professor of Political Science