President Randhawa, Provost Carbajal, and the WWU ICS via Melynda Huskey,

As our institution and communities have been wrought with affliction, disruption, and uncertainty in the COVID-19 pandemic, we recognize that you have been tasked with an unprecedented leadership challenge. We, the undersigned, acknowledge and appreciate this challenge and your work in addressing it. Thank you. We support you and are with you in pursuing our shared values and goals for Western Washington University.

We are writing as practitioners of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion on this campus to collaboratively bring focus in your leadership to the points outlined below. As members of and servants to the marginalized and underrepresented communities on this campus, we seek to address the structures of inequity in service to institutional transformation towards a more equitable university.

Since the last weeks of winter quarter, you have led a large, complex university through a difficult transition to remote learning in little time. Again, thank you. Now that we are partially across the gap to a return to in person teaching, the opportunity to evolve our collaboration in service to equity and inclusion is significant. Everyone in the Western community has been impacted by the pandemic. Resources from the university are distributed more evenly while the impacts from the pandemic are distributed unevenly. The shocks created by the pandemic are creating an amplification of those inequities in the measures crafted in response to this crisis. As the university moves to the next stage, we need to ensure support for members of the Western community who have been disproportionately impacted.

As this university is without an assigned power center or executive administrative leadership position that is wholly resourced and responsible for diversity, equity, and inclusion on this campus, we are uniting our voices to draw your attention to the following, and we offer our support and service in addressing these points:

EID Perspectives in the allocation of funding from the CARES Act— We have welcomed the marginalized, now is the time to care for and protect them. The $11.6 million in CARES Act funds distributed to WWU present a unique opportunity to support our students in greatest need. We need complete transparency on the decision-making process for allocating those resources, as well as EID leaders and representatives from the campus communities experiencing the most impacts centered in the design and implementation of the funding allocations. Western has an opportunity to equitably distribute these funds beyond the minimums outlined in the CARES Act and per DOE policy. We advocate for providing the maximum level of student support. Additionally, the DOE guidelines come with discriminatory restrictions excluding the support of our undocumented students. Therefore, Western must conceive a mechanism of equal support for our undocumented students who are excluded from the CARES funding.

Our colleagues throughout the university are doing a great deal to support our students. For example, the Students in Need working group has secured a few options for students experiencing food insecurity and housing challenges. They are supplying gift cards to various grocery stores, dining hall swipe access, and take-home meal kits. We want to acknowledge all that is being done, but emphasize that there is still so much more that the institution needs to do to support our students as this is a challenging time.

We are especially concerned for our students who do not reside in Whatcom County. Many of our students have retreated from Bellingham back to their home communities. This puts the burden for their support on their families and local organizations. Additionally, these local organizations are overtaxed in supporting local non-students. It is untoward to ask them to add to their burden with care for our students. This CARES funding is an opportunity for our institution to increase remote support for those students whom we have promised it to in our drive to diversify this campus.

Institutional transparency and inclusion in the next phase of Covid response--We simply cannot defer to the same organizational structures that have sustained inequity and lack of diversity in our policy making in the past. We need inclusive structures of shared governance with new and diverse voices now more than ever. Our strategic plan mandates diversity and inclusion. Faculty, classified staff, student, and inclusive identity representation are needed as contributors to senior leadership structure and at least two EID focused positions should be present on the senior leadership team. The ICS structure, membership and organizational chart should be published and known to the university community.

To date during this pandemic those traditionally underrepresented on our campus have experienced greater marginalization and a lack of relief in the institutional response to the shocks we all are experiencing. Although many of our colleagues throughout the university in academic and student affairs are working to provide resources and support for our university community, we are still too frequently left with inadequate support, opaque process of access to resources and further alienation and marginalization in the virtual version of university life. As our current values state, Western is committed to “equity and justice, and respect for the rights and dignity of others,” as well as “pursuit of excellence, in an environment characterized by principles of shared governance.” Thus, transparency and inclusive structures of shared governance with new and diverse voices are necessary now more than ever and are well supported by Western’s strategic goals, mission, and values.

Proactive Support of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) - Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are increasingly experiencing racial hatred. Concerted efforts should be made to support students, staff, and faculty of AAPI ancestry against targeted hatred and acts of aggression, and mechanisms should be put in place to address this issue. We need to be proactive on this issue, as we anticipate a surge in misplaced anger and racially motivated hatred towards our Asian, Pacific Islander and Asian American colleagues, students and community members.

Fall Quarter – Thank you for the recent update regarding fall planning, this is a critical student retention issue and your communication was greatly appreciated. We should all at least be aware of the process by which the decisions will be made. This is a critical student retention issue and we need to heed the retention and completion impacts on students in the delay of this announcement.

The short-term retention of our most vulnerable students is inexorably tied to the long-term viability of our university. For students who do not come back in the fall, the likelihood of completion drops dramatically. For them, the lifetime promise of the value of their education and the earned degree is lost. For Western, we lose their presence and contributions as individuals and as human beings. That matters in our culture, communities and classrooms. We all know the university is a culture and an ecosystem. We need to move forward with a clear sense of togetherness. The university needs to send a message to students and the greater campus community about how they will be welcomed and cared for in Fall quarter. How will we solve or at least attempt to solve the equity issues that Spring Quarter has exposed, and the quality of instruction issues that are present in our current rapid migration to remote teaching? Maximizing our immediate investment in students makes sense for our students and makes sense for the university. Radical transparency with a singular focus on student outcomes is our only path forward.

End the delay of NTT contracts until July--This practice leaves NTTs in a position of untenable uncertainty and compounds the already precarious position of contingent labor. Delaying the issuing of contracts asks an unfair commitment of NTTs to the institution that may not be met with due employment. Although allowed by the CBA, this delay and any resulting elimination of appointments potentially effects reasonable assurance of employment, which in turn could jeopardize the opportunity to seek unemployment benefits for any faculty who have classes and contracts not issued. Clarity on this issue is needed as many of these impacts and outcomes are made uncertain by the delay.

Discretionary funds and student support--Craft a mechanism that will allow for utilizing discretionary funds for student support. Many campus units, departments and faculty have proposed directing the use of discretionary funds and unconsumed remaining budgets toward student support during the pandemic. There is a general culture of prohibition around utilizing these funds for student support but no evidence of a collaborative and innovative exploration of what can be done. An earnest policy review must be undertaken to truly understand what is and is not possible. It is not at all clear that this has been done. If it has, the results must be composed and shared, making policy clear, as the simple and frequent “no” answer only contributes to sentiments of alienation and oppression.

As previously stated, we appreciate your leadership through this challenging time. However, we the undersigned ask that you consider the above points and request that all further COVID-19 related initiatives, processes, and policy decisions include representation and counsel from SJEC and other EID leaders to ensure equity and inclusion perspectives are present. We request that a more diverse representation of the campus community be integrated into response teams, including representatives from identity groups most impacted, each of our campus labor classes, and diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioners.

Respectfully,

Lucas Senger, Instructor, MBA Program and Arts Enterprise & Cultural Innovation, SJEC Co-Chair

Shevell Thibou, Interim Director of Teaching & Learning, Western Libraries, SJEC Co-Chair

Yesugen Battsengel, AS VP for Diversity, SJEC member

Monique Kerman, Associate Professor of Art History, SJEC member

Robin Kodner, Associate Professor of Biology, SJEC member

John Korsmo, Chair Health and Community Studies Dept, Professor of Human Services

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April McMurry, Center for Community Learning Program Coordinator, SJEC member

John McLaughlin, Associate Professor of Environmental Sciences, SJEC member

Benny Musonda, Custodial Supervisor, SJEC member

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Shalini Singh, Diversity Recruiter & Retention Specialist, Huxley College, SJEC member

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Nabil Kamel, Associate Professor, Environmental Studies, Huxley College of the Environment, SJEC member

Nick Stanger, Associate Professor, Environmental Studies, Huxley College of the Environment

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Jason Kanov, Professor of Management, Chair of CBE EID Task Force

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