

ADAM HOWELL: Welcome. Thank you, everybody, for joining us. My name is Adam Howell. I'm the chair of the Employee Assembly for this year. I'd like to welcome you all to our second topical forum, this one on returning to campus. We're so happy that the Employee Assembly is able to have these opportunities to connect all of you out in the staff community with our leaders and, hopefully, good information, and we're really happy that you're joining us today.

A quick note-- we have the schedule for the rest of our topical forums set, although please understand that there could always be changes as things are fluid right now. But we'll be putting a link to that schedule in the chat pod, and we hope you join us for four more of these.

Today, as you know or may not know, these are 30-minute topical forums. We had a lot of interest as returning to campus is a very important topic that we all understand you have a lot of interest in. We received multiple, several dozen, pre-submitted questions, and as we only had 30 minutes today, we may not be able to get to some of the live questions. We know you all have a lot of interest, but we hope, regardless, we're able to get you a lot of good information.

So with that-- I'm not going to take up too much time speaking-- I'd like to introduce and welcome Vice President and Chief Human Resources Officer Mary Opperman, who's joining us today. Mary, thank you. And I'll let you and the panelists introduce themselves, and we'll get going.

MARY OPPERMAN: Great, thank you, and I'm not going to take much time either because we have lots of questions. I want to be sure that we get to them. I will say as just a quick preface that returning to campus is something that I think many of us are both excited about and nervous about. From the standpoint of being excited, I think most of us realize that it is an essential element of who we are as a university to have our students back in some form and for us to be able to engage in a meaningful way on a campus.

But in the concerning part, we are still in a pandemic. The virus is still out there, and so a lot of time has been taken by quite a number of academics, and researchers, and staff to really try to figure out a return-to-campus strategy that balances those two. So I'm going to ask Dr. Clark and Dr. Koretsky to introduce themselves and maybe say just a couple words, and we'll turn right to questions. Dr. Clark?

JOHN CLARK: Yes, I'm Dr. John Clark. I'm the director of occupational medicine here for now, and I've been here about three years at Cornell. And one thing I would say is that there's two ways to look at coronavirus. One is that you focus on how you can prevent other people from exposing you if they're spreading it, but the other way is how can you protect yourself if you come in contact with it.

And we have very little control over controlling other people's behavior, so what I would suggest is everybody focus on what you can do personally to protect yourself. And we could talk a bit more about that later, but I'll pass it on to Gary to introduce himself.

GARY KORETSKY: Thanks, John and Mary, and also thanks, all of you. I think these forums are so important. This is a complicated time and getting as much information out as possible is critical. So I'm really pleased to join you today.

I'll just give you a tiny bit of background about myself. I'm actually primarily appointed at the medical college. I'm a physician and an immunologist, but I've been in Ithaca now for two years with a role in the provost office of trying to build programs between the campuses.

But over the last few weeks, now, to months, I've really devoted almost all of my attention to helping think through what we can do as an institution, as Mary said, to meet our missions to be able to have our students have the best experience possible, but to also do that in the way that we believe is the safest, not only for the Cornell community, but our surrounding community. So we've been working on that. I've been participating in the activation reports that have now been made public, and I'm happy to answer whatever questions I can. So once again, thank you very much.

ADAM HOWELL: And thank you to all of you, our panelists, for joining us today. We really appreciate your time. With that, I would like to introduce the Executive Vice Chair of the Employee Assembly, Hei Hei Depew, who's going to be asking our questions and orchestrating things for us here, so Hei Hei, I'll turn it over to you.

HEI HEI DEPEW: Hello, everyone. So the format of this forum is going to be a little different. I'm going to introduce individuals who have submitted questions and comments through the Qualtrics link that everybody received when they were notified of this staff forum. We asked two questions, what are you most concerned about as New York state reopens and the university begins to reactivate on-campus operations? And then what is working while that should be continued?

So we selected five individuals who have submitted commentary questions that reflected cumulatively what we've seen when we've looked at the feedback, so I want to introduce Ellen Miller, who has passed several questions through the Qualtrics that reflect a lot of what we've seen through the feedback that we've received. So Ellen Miller, I will turn this over to you.

ELLEN MILLER: Hello. I want to thank everyone for being here, Mary, Gary, and John, for taking our questions today. I work as an administrator in the Research Division, and I'm also a member of the Employee Assembly. And a few questions that I had-- I have three separate questions I'll be asking today.

The first, Dr. Clark, you touched on a little bit already, but once people start returning from out of the region, out of the state, and out of the country, I feel more concerned about the spread and less confident about my personal safety. How can we be sure that others in the community are taking the necessary precautions and have remained safe throughout this period? And what type of enforcement of the rules will be in place? And how do we deal with anyone that we see that is maybe not compliant with those rules?

GARY KORETSKY: Sure, maybe I can start and then turn it over to John. The concern that you got is one that we all have. So the we're very fortunate in Ithaca right now, and that is that the prevalence of the virus is low. We have escaped some of the most significant challenges that colleagues have faced in different parts of the Northeast and Northwest, initially, and are now facing in other parts of the country.

And we recognize absolutely that the virus doesn't know that you're moving to Ithaca and stays in Houston. The virus is part of your environment, and as we bring people back to Ithaca, this is foremost in our mind and how we can continue to protect the community. I will say at the outset that there will be more infections in Tompkins County and at Cornell. We will not be able to keep those to be zero.

People will move between Ithaca and other places. People will be visiting, and this is something that we won't be able to prevent. So even if Cornell was not here, there would be additional viral infections in the region.

And I think it's really important to note that as we thought about our process and what would be possible in reopening the campus, we actually considered two very different scenarios. One would be that we would bring back students and mount a very vigorous testing program that I'll just mention briefly in a moment and also put into place advice and constraints on behaviors that we felt that if the campus was open we'd be able to monitor quite closely.

The other alternative we considered was, what if the campus stayed online, so all of the education was like it was in April, and that was all digital and that the campus was effectively closed? And we recognized pretty quickly that even if we did that, there'd be a lot of people that would will come back to Ithaca. They've got leases. They like it here.

One of the nice things about it is it's a nice place, so students would come back. That's where their friends are, and we were really worried that we would lose our ability to mandate some of the things that we're going to put in place, like frequent testing, asking everybody to do a daily self-check to make sure that they're not symptomatic, to have a mask policy that we will really monitor. And not having those constraints in place, actually, according to all of the modeling we did, made it more risky for the public safety.

So we enter our entering into this with our eyes wide open, recognizing that individuals may well or will certainly come to campus. We'd like to get them tested before they come, and if they're positive, politely ask them to wait until they've convalesced. We'd like to test them as soon as they come and then continue to test individuals over time.

Testing is a way to identify people that are infected, and as John said and I'm sure he'll say a little bit more about in a moment, one of the most important strategies is to keep people from transmitting the virus to each other. And that will be with the recommendations that we make, and we hope that people will really take those to heart. John, do you want to say more about that?

JOHN CLARK: Yes, and what I would say is the first measure for everyone to recognize is that we all have our own responsibilities, social responsibility, professional responsibility, to each other that if we are sick, if we have symptoms, if we've been around someone, if we've traveled to an area with a high prevalence rate, then we should comply with those recommendations to stay quarantined. Go get tested. Make sure that you're not someone who is actually bringing coronavirus into the workspace or into Ithaca, so that's one element.

I was having a conversation with some folks today about vacation, so I was planning a trip to go to Florida. We were going to go, and notice I said we were going to go because we planned it before the numbers in Florida increased. So I've decided to not go because I don't want to go into a high-prevalence area and potentially get coronavirus or spread it to others, so one of the elements is our own personal responsibility.

The other is just recognizing that, yes, this is a very contagious virus, and they estimate maybe 50% to 70% of the population is going to get it over time. So with that in mind, understand that, OK, you want

to be prepared, that if you actually do come in contact with the virus, that your immune system is as healthy as possible and that you take measures, handwashing, and stay physically distant.

As far as enforcing what other folks do, I'm not sure if the university is going to have a policy that's very strict about that, but what we can do is, as in the [INAUDIBLE], you see something, say something. If you see someone who's not wearing a mask or not compliant, say something to them, and say, look, you may be spreading coronavirus if you have it. Would you please wear a mask or leave the area? So those are just some of the thoughts, but truthfully, because it spreads asymptotically, it's a complicated situation where many folks don't even know they're spreading it. And that's what I think is leading to such wide spread.

MARY OPPERMAN: So let me just add one thing. We do have in our workplace guidelines a very clear expectation that you will follow all of the guidance from the university, and from the state, and from the CDC and that if you don't, that we reserve the right to take action because what we're finding--

I get a lot of these when they see people on campus without masks, and sometimes it's fine. The person actually was complying. They were alone. They were outside. It was OK. But the person that reported it couldn't see their mask, and so one of the things that we're going to ask people do is just keep your mask where people can see them, even if it's OK based on our guidelines that you don't have an right away.

But the only-- we have an obligation as employees to follow the guidance that has been carefully developed for the university by our health professionals, and as it relates to students, they're talking about that right now. What is the right way to work with students and make sure that they know the expectations? So Ellen, I just want you to know we know that, that you have these rules, but you have to have a way to enforce them.

ELLEN MILLER: Thank you so much. Another question that I wanted to address-- the university stance all along has been, for staff that have the ability to work remotely, that they should continue to do so. How can staff who maybe have a supervisor or a director or whose unit really wants them to return to campus as soon as possible? How can staff deal with that if the guidance from the university is really to continue working remotely?

MARY OPPERMAN: Yeah, so thank you. I'm going to take that first. So that guidance remains. When we talk about physical distancing, part of physical distancing is densification. If we pack back in, even if the space that you're in in the building can accommodate it, if we pack back in, that creates more issues around eating spaces and common spaces. So we continue to want people who can do their job effectively and fully from home to be able to do that as long as possible.

If you have a supervisor that is pressuring you to come back, we need to know about that, and understand it, and be able to react to it. So you have to tell-- if your supervisors is concerned, tell their supervisor. Tell the HR person so we can manage it.

I do want to stop right here and say one other thing, which is that we do have some number of staff who need to be able to come back because they don't have internet, and we need them to do their work. But the only way that they can do it is on the campus, which just adds to the pressure to allow those individuals to be able to fully function.

The rest of us have to be very respectful of the fact that if work can be done effectively from home, that allows us to be able to create safe and physically distant spaces for those who have no other choice. So this does require us to have a sort of community approach to our safety and our health, but Gary or John?

GARY KORETSKY: I'll just double down on that. I think that is so important, Mary, and that message is so important to everybody that's listening. And that is that if you can work remotely, work remotely. If there are things that you've got to do at work, then match them. Work out with your colleagues so that if they are working remotely but have to come in for something, they come in at a different time than you. It does require quite a bit of coordination.

But it's not just in your office. You share restrooms. You share space, and this is a real serious thing. And there are things that we know mitigate spread. Masks mitigate spread. Being physically distant mitigate spread. Not sharing the space mitigates spread, and it's all about that.

I think it's just exactly what John said, and that is your responsibility to your community. So it might be more fun to work at work. I prefer to work in my office. I've been there once in the last four months, and I think this is something we just have to be able to live with through the course of this pandemic.

JOHN CLARK: And I would just add to think about, if you do come to work, continuing the remote practices. What I mean by that is if you're going to have a meeting, you can still be remote. Go on Zoom even though you might be in the same building. So the real principle behind it is to not go around other people.

I know it may be difficult where a lot of us as social, but the problem is, with corona, it spreads very easily. And many folks are asymptomatic, so continue to principles of remote work. Personally, when I've come in-- because I've had to come a couple of times-- I just come in, do what I need to do, and then leave. Like I don't stick around for the whole day. So I recommend considering that, as well, that if you must come in, come in, do what you need to do, and then leave as soon as you can.

MARY OPPERMAN: And so one last thing, and then I'll let you ask your other question, Ellen. The other thing I would say is we have a lot of people whose jobs really do require them to be here. That's the way they do their work. So as supervisors and staff are thinking about this, keep in mind that we have the opportunity to help keep them safer as well because they've got no other choice. They have to be on campus. And so for those of us who can do our work in more flexible ways, it's not just for ourselves, but it's for our colleagues, as well.

ELLEN MILLER: Thank you. My last question is in regards to the COVID hours that are being allowed for some employees. Once some work on campus starts to reactivate, will COVID hours be scaled back and eventually eliminated for those employees?

MARY OPPERMAN: Yep, so let me just say, this is what that is, so that you know. The COVID hours opportunity, which we'll also be giving eventually to exempts, is an opportunity for the university to get tax credit. That's why we're asking that it be-- if you monitor the hours that people are not fully active but you kept them on payroll, one of the things that we-- we haven't been able to participate in a lot of the federal programs, but that is one we can participate in.

So to the extent that people continue to have hours that they aren't fully productive, yes, we will continue those until the program that the federal government is offering runs out. And then we'll drop it because that's why we put it in in the first place.

HEI HEI DEPEW: Thank you. Moving on to Elizabeth Demmings, I just want to indicate, if there have been any questions that have already been answered for this process, Elizabeth, feel free to move on and ask a different question. So I'm going to send it over to Elizabeth Demmings, who wants to address some of the concerns that she has in regards to reopening.

ELIZABETH DEMMINGS: Yeah, so Ellen did ask some of my questions about what efforts are going to be taking place and for social distancing, but then on top of that-- and the proper use of face coverings or face masks-- so I just wanted to ask-- and maybe this is more towards Mary. Kind of a follow-up questions to that is, what sort of things is the university or campus community going to do to try and enforce this sort of a policy when employees, when staff, when students and others are off campus? Is there anything that Cornell can do or is going to do in order to try and enforce that behavior?

MARY OPPERMAN: It's such a great question because what it really does is point out the fact that we are interdependent no matter where we are. So the university is working really hard to create expectations and monitor them on the campus, but to your point, Elizabeth, we don't-- I love Cornell, but I don't like to be there all the time. We are all part of the broader community, and so what are we doing there?

And let me tell you what I would say. We all have individual social responsibilities to one another, so I think one of the things that Cornell is doing and can continue to do is educate, educate people about why physical distancing, and the use of face coverings, washing our hands and sanitizing them when we can't wash them, keeping our hands away from our face, why those things are always a good idea.

And so one of the things-- I'm going to turn it over to Gary-- that we plan to do is do some broad-scale public education and public awareness because that needs-- we need to be sure that our employees and our students understand the why behind this and not view it as simply something they have to do when they're up on the campus for a little while. So Gary, did you want to talk more about this?

GARY KORETSKY: Yeah, so I think it's a great question, and it is very much like Mary said in that it is personal responsibility. We feel that it's our obligation to provide education and to provide the evidence behind it, and a lot of the recommendations that have come from the reactivation committees came only after literature searches, talking with colleagues, really trying to understand how this virus works. And so the advice that's given isn't frivolous, but it's actually advice that could matter.

And we do hope, we think, that there is a communitarian spirit amongst our faculty, our staff, and our students and they realize that what they do does impact others. When it comes to specific things that we can do-- I saw a few questions in the chat. I'll just say a little bit more about viral testing.

We are going to test all of our students, and our faculty, and staff. We're going to test them on a schedule. We haven't figured out exactly that schedule, but that includes off-campus students. They will be expected to participate in this, and there will be recourses if they don't. We're still, again, working out exactly what that is, but we're really serious about this because we feel that it's our collective responsibility to do it whatever we can to negate the spread.

And this is something that we're particularly concerned about for individuals who might be more vulnerable to make sure that people who might weather the infection better recognize that it's not just them, but it's to whom they might transmit the virus. So a lot of this is going to be education. We can't be so intrusive and paternalistic that nobody is going to go into college town and say, put on your mask, but people are going to be aware of what the expectations are.

ELIZABETH DEMMINGS: Thank you. I think the efforts of time I'll move on to my second question, and that-- and my final question-- is, how will the university respond if there is an outbreak in the campus community, so more like a hotspot situation where you have multiple individuals who are infected within the university?

GARY KORETSKY: Maybe I'll just try to answer that briefly, and that is that we do have a data-gathering dashboard that we are putting together. So we're going to be monitoring what's happening, and we want to respond early rather than late. And we do have these measures. We have testing, and we can accelerate the frequency of testing.

We do have the measures that we've been talking about, and if we discover that there's a region on campus where there seem to be a collection of cases, that will make us pay attention to that region. What did we do right, and what did we miss on? And so we want to be looking at this in real time throughout the semester to make sure if there are ways that we can pivot and change what we do, to everybody's advantage we do that quickly.

JOHN CLARK: Yeah, and what I would add is Cornell is not alone. So the Tompkins County Department of Health is going to be engaged, that if there is a case, they're going to contact tracing. And they'll be able to identify where these hotspots are, hopefully at a very early stage. So it's not just an effort by Cornell. It's an effort by Tompkins County, as well, because, yes, it's in an interest of public safety of all of us, not just at Cornell, but in the wider community in Ithaca and Tompkins County.

MARY OPPERMAN: I know we need to move on, but I just want to say one more thing, Hei Hei, which is one of the things that we could take for granted if we didn't stop to think about it is the state's aggressive stance on testing availability. So we have had, really, an incredible testing capability already in our community, and Cornell's plan to create regularized testing will help in that way.

And we have great partnerships between the community members, and businesses, and organizations, with the Tompkins County Health Department and with Cayuga Medical Center. So this is a time where I think what we'd all like is a perfect assurance, but in the absence of being able to have a perfect assurance, what I can say is we have a lot of factors that go into creating a plan that we feel like we can manage. So we have a lot of really good partners in this area, including the state and New York.

HEI HEI DEPEW: Thank you. Moving on to the next person asking, what are you most concerned about as New York state reopens, I'm going to turn it over to Amy Beckhorn.

AMY BECKHORN: Thank you. So my question or statement was really, our support structure for our lives has been completely upended. I'm one of the many that has a young child or just children at home that cannot physically go back into the office until they have daycare, which is incredibly hard to find now, not to mention the many challenges of working at home with no childcare.

I'm concerned about how the K12 schools are going to adapt in the 2020-2021 school year. There's been ideas thrown out of shortened school days or even alternating days that the children go in. This really leaves us in a bind, and I'm just unsure how it'll work. It's hard to plan our logistics when there are so many unknowns, and given that with any new outbreak or wave, we need to be able to remain flexible enough to handle any changes. And I'd be curious your thoughts on that.

MARY OPPERMAN: Yeah, Amy, I think you've-- thank you, first of all, for giving voice to something that we know is a big issue for a lot of our employees. I wish I had a perfect answer to this, but I don't. What I think-- the best thing I think I can say is that the situation for employees since we went home has been a blending of stresses, trying to keep going with work, trying to deal with students, yeah, your children who are students, your children who are in daycare.

We also have people who have health conditions. Some of our people who have health conditions haven't been able to get treatments. We also have people who are caring for elderly people who they can't see because of lockdowns. There's been a lot of stresses and strains, and here's my walk away.

We, as a community, can do this as long as we recognize that people have whole lives. Sometimes when everything you do is in an office space, you almost forget that there is a whole rest of a person, and so I think the last few months-- and honestly, it's part of why I love seeing people in their home spaces-- well, I don't have a choice. My home space a big fat mess-- because it reminds us that that's OK.

And I guess, Amy, what I would say is we're going to have to be flexible. We're going to have to work on issues that come up. We're going to have to recognize that we may have to do some pivoting and changing in order to be able to make it through, and I think we can do it. I think that's what the last few months has proven to us, but it but it does require a community approach and a belief in one another that we will get through this incredible time, but maybe not in ways that we used to do things.

ADAM HOWELL: So as is the limitations that we have with these topical forums being 30 minutes, we're going to, unfortunately, have to cut it off there. I apologize to everybody who didn't get a chance to ask the question, but I want to remind everybody that next week is our next open forum, July 9, for an entire hour. So there will be more opportunities for more great information.

I want to thank all of our panelists so much for your time, thank the Office of the Assemblies for, as always, doing great work setting these up. And Mary, if you have any final thoughts or last words, I'd be happy to turn it over to you.

MARY OPPERMAN: Well, I didn't say this before, but a big thank you to the Employee Assembly. This has been a very difficult time, and our challenges are not over. That's part of what we learned today, that the university still faces financial challenges that we have got to address. Part of how we're addressing those is with a careful, thoughtful, science-driven way to bring our students back and bring us back in the safest manner possible.

But I know that these are difficult times, and I know that not everything we're doing feels perfect or makes everybody happy. But we are really going to get through this. We are. We are so fortunate to have the academics, and the scientists, and the staff that we have who have worked tirelessly to try to bring us to a space where we will rebound as quickly as possible and where our future is bright. So to all of you, thank you for what you're doing. We just appreciate that so much, and we'll see you soon.



ADAM HOWELL: Thank you all so much. Thank you for everybody who joined us today, and I hope you have a great weekend and a lovely rest of your day. Take care.