



The University Assembly

Memorandum

To: President Martha Pollack and Provost Michael Kotlikoff

From: Bob Howarth, Chair, the University Assembly

Date: August 7, 2020

I write on behalf of the University Assembly, with input to this memorandum from the entire Assembly, to express concerns over plans to reopen the Cornell campus for this fall semester. This memorandum reflects a special meeting of the Assembly held two days ago on August 5 and follow-up joint editing of this document. We recognize the incredible hard work and dedication that you and many others are putting into developing and implementing these plans. We understand the unprecedented situation and challenges posed by COVID-19. Further, we appreciate your commitment to doing what you feel is best for the University. However, we do have many concerns we would like to discuss further with you, and some suggestions we ask you to consider.

As you know, we represent all of the constituencies of the campus: undergraduate students, graduate & professional students, faculty, and non-faculty employees. All of these constituencies are feeling an extreme level of stress. We feel it is critical that the University further explore options that can reduce this level of stress. Our concerns fall into these categories:

1. Equity: we understand the need to pull back on the earlier commitment to financially and physically support quarantines for those students who require it, based on the explosion of COVID-19 in so many states. However, the new path seems inequitable to students with limited financial means. They are basically being encouraged to stay at home, while others with more means can quarantine and attend Cornell in person this fall.
2. Mental health: we all recognize that many undergraduates have felt a high level of anxiety at Cornell for years. We appreciate that you and the University have taken steps over the past several years to provide better and more immediate counseling for those in need, yet we also recognize that these steps have barely been adequate. Now, students will experience stress at a level never before seen, from the social isolation of quarantining and from the extra anxiety we have already seen that students feel when taking classes virtually. In addition, the pandemic carries additional emotional and mental burden on faculty and graduate student instructors as they navigate their responsibilities in the academic semester. Can we as a University and as a community actually support the mental health needs that the students will undoubtedly have? Can we also support community members who may experience pandemic-related bereavement?

3. Physical health: we understand the conclusions from the Frazier model, but many at Cornell continue to point out the reliance of the model on assumptions that may not accurately reflect the behavior of individuals on our campus and community. Many feel the risk to students, employees, faculty, and others in the Finger Lakes area are greater than acknowledged. In addition, the recent announcement to pull back on supporting quarantines for required students means that many students will feel more compelled to not follow public health guidelines, thus reducing the anticipated compliance desired in the model for safe campus reopening.

4. Transparency and engagement: we realize you are trying to engage various aspects of the campus through a set of reopening committees. However, we feel this has not been adequate for the larger community to feel engaged, or to understand your decisions. Many of us are finding out about important new decisions and changes in previous decisions for the first time through social media, or from anxious messages from parents.

All of these concerns are highlighted in the recent announcement that rolls back the provided support for students who need to quarantine after travel from high-risk states as determined by New York State. We feel it would have been best to convey this issue far earlier to the community than was done, at least to the University Assembly and other parts of shared governance, but perhaps more broadly yet. Ithaca College has chosen a different route in the face of this changing environment and decided that no students from states with high-infection rates be allowed in Ithaca this fall. What if you had asked the Cornell community this question, say 6 weeks ago: since we find ourselves unable to meet the original pledge in the face of changing conditions, is it better to allow no students from high-infection-rate states this fall, or should we allow those who are able on their own to quarantine without University assistance? Perhaps we could have accommodated students on financial aid from high-risk states or set up a system in which students applied for consideration for quarantining since there is limited space. We, as a university, should do all that we can to protect students from staying in potentially unsafe or academically insufficient environments. The decision in the end would still be yours to make, and you may well have made the same decision. But by engaging the broader community, we all feel more involved and respected, and we would be less surprised, stunned, and reactive.

We want to reiterate that we understand your situation. We want to be supportive. We strongly feel you deserve a great deal of slack for whatever decisions you have made, given the ongoing situation. So these points are meant as constructive criticism, a normal part of functioning in an academic institution. We are more interested in helping you think through how to move forward. We are hearing a variety of suggestions from our constituencies, and we ask that you consider some of these and discuss your reasoning further with us.

Foremost among these is that Cornell consider a change in current plans and not reopen the campus this Fall. Many of us feel there is simply too little time to do this well, and doing it poorly could be damaging both to the University and the broader community. Instead, what if we as a community put effort this fall into developing the most creative, positive on-campus experience we can collectively imagine for the spring 2021 semester? Reasons to consider this:

- Compared to peer-institutions, our current plan seems far more ambitious and far less protective of community public health;
- A large number of courses for the fall will be only delivered remotely in any case, making the need for students to be on campus small;

- The social isolation of students is very problematic to moral and mental health; many may have no classes in person;
- Many students may have almost no social engagement, if they follow NY State regulations and guidelines;
- This is likely to cause widespread disregard for these guidelines, posing a physical health problem;
- Students who struggle with the decision as to whether or not to follow the guidelines or instead follow their need for social activity will face incredible emotional stress;
- Many faculty are choosing to teach remotely, given how they perceive their risk. We believe this could change if they were better engaged in understanding the details of their teaching situation, including which room they would be using and how that room would be set up;
- If more faculty could be convinced to teach in person, this would be far better for students, but this will take time and far more interaction than has occurred so far.

We are deeply concerned that Cornell students returning to Ithaca from high-infection states under the current plan will be unable, even if they are highly motivated, to follow the necessary quarantine instructions from the State. We note these instructions are contradictory in places, and not easy to follow given the reality of the housing situation faced by most students. The Frazier model has not adequately addressed this concern.

We also suggest that Cornell spend some time to closely analyze the decisions made by our peer institutions, many of which have gone to an all-remote mode this fall. What can we learn from these plans? You undoubtedly are doing this to some extent, but has it been done in a formal manner, to actually extract better policies we might follow? If so, that has not been communicated to us. Additionally, some institutions have adopted a staggering model where students arrive at different times, sometimes multiple weeks or months apart. Is this something the administration has or would consider?

Finally, we note although we have heard from many of our constituents about their concerns over salary and retirement cuts for employees and faculty, this is not the major issue we are hearing. We do believe this could have been better thought out, and more transparently communicated to the affected staff and faculty far earlier. We also feel there is some inequity between how this is handled in the endowed and statutory colleges. Nonetheless, the staff and faculty are committed to trying to help in these very trying times, and the University Assembly would prefer to focus on the broader issues raised above. There is one financial issue though that deserves further discussion: does it really make sense for Cornell to proceed with an increase in tuition at this time? We suggest perhaps not.