

Statement on Reopening Ohio University during Uncontrolled COVID-19 Pandemic
July 23, 2020

Athens now leads the state of Ohio as a hotspot for Covid infection ([Athens County Ranked as No 1 Coronavirus Hot Spot in Ohio](#)). We know that the virus is highly contagious, and that it can be spread by asymptomatic carriers. Most scientists now agree that it is airborne, thus calling into question the utility of the six-foot social distancing guideline as an effective tool. We also know that Covid cases increase exponentially given a high concentration of carriers. Although masking and social distancing can greatly reduce the risk of spreading, widespread compliance with these public health guidelines is highly unlikely. To the contrary, many of our students will, in all probability, prioritize their normal socializing activities off campus over any public health measures we would require of them when on campus. This has already proven to be the case in the numerous parties that occurred in Athens, Ohio during the months of June and July. We have no reason to believe that this behavior will change significantly. In fact, it is likely that the dangers will increase by virtue of the sheer number of potential spreaders when combined with non-compliance.

Local hospitals are underprepared to handle a high volume of Covid patients. The highly vulnerable region of Appalachia in which Ohio University and its regional campuses are located will likely face high degrees of contagion, illness, and death due to the failure of OU to adjust its plans in response to our evolving knowledge about the virus. Current planning flies in the face of the facts we now know, and its success depends on [a kind of magical thinking](#) about the nature of the virus and the possibilities of containing it with a fall opening of the university. Therefore, it is our conclusion that bringing some 14,000 students back to campus for fall term is likely to result in a superspreader event of potentially disastrous proportions. If the goal is for all of us to survive and to save the future of Ohio University, this is not the proper path forward. This may be our last opportunity to make the right choice.

We understand that it is the view of the university's leadership that our fiscal health depends upon students returning to campus. However, we agree with the AAUP's national policy statement on financial crisis that, "many current 'crises' represent shifts in priorities rather than crises of funding," and this is not a plausible account "from a campus that has shifted resources from its primary missions of teaching and research toward employing increasing numbers of administrators or toward unnecessary capital expenditures," ([AAUP 2015, 294](#)). The actions of Ohio University's executive team reflects a failure to mount a creative, powerful and heroic response to this crisis. The executive team is responding with a series of disorganized panic cuts rather than a creative, sustainable long-term plan to adapt to our changed and dire circumstances and come out of this whole. Far from rising to the occasion with vision and leadership, the university's executive team and the Board of Trustees are following the same well-worn path that led us to the fiscal crisis in which we found ourselves even before the onset of the pandemic. In short, the university continues to meet financial crises with austerity plans, frivolous and profligate spending on luxury items such as high executive salaries, an indulgent attitude towards athletic spending, and overuse of expensive corporate consultants. The decision makers continue to rely on a wing and prayer that we can be rescued by the same tired enrollment strategies of the past by cutting jobs, salaries, and benefits and by raising workloads. All of this while stubbornly refusing to examine the actions and commitments that led us into our precarious situation even before the pandemic, and that now place us on the very precipice of permanent disaster. They have threatened our livelihood. Now they are threatening our lives.

This is an opportunity for the university to boldly reimagine itself; to resist and repel defeat with a forthright and determined refusal in a true partnership with faculty. Faculty will not let this university die on the sword of a failed business model. We demand the university redirect its efforts by partnering with us in a robust shared vision to meet this crisis and to bring us into the future. While we respect our faculty colleagues who have been working so very hard on plans to reopen, we must reject the view that shared governance is achieved by executives directing the faculty senate to find ways to implement already decided upon

strategies. Rather, “The faculty has **primary responsibility** for such fundamental areas as curriculum, subject matter and methods of instruction, research, faculty status, and those aspects of student life which relate to the educational process” ([AAUP 1990 \[1966\], 120](#)). Shared governance demands that faculty be given a meaningful role in leading the creation of the vision. To our peril, we as faculty have allowed the principles of shared governance to be eroded. It is important to remember that in financial and other crises, shared governance becomes more important not less.

We Demand Immediate Measures to Protect Public Health:

- Though in person teaching is far superior in every way, we must insist that for indisputable reasons of public health--Covid infections are spiking in Ohio and nationally; they are by no means controlled--that the default teaching mode be online instruction at least through this current academic year
- That faculty, graduate, and staff instructors be able to choose their modes of delivery regardless of rank or group, without reprisals, as consistent with the mandates of academic freedom and the need to protect public health
- That the university make the decision to go online immediately in order to allow the remainder of the summer to be used by faculty to lead the creation of quality online teaching as they see fit
- That those who require physical space to pursue their teaching, research, and creative work (such as studio, dance, and theater artists, or laboratory scientists) be allowed to return to campus should they so choose
- That for the safety of those who have to be on campus, including non-academic workers, the university should go beyond CDC requirements to provide large scale and ongoing COVID testing and timely contact tracing
 - For example, “surveillance testing” can be accomplished through pooled testing, for instance of students in dorms, which would be followed by individual testing if the combined test sample is positive.
 - Also, students and faculty and non-academic staff should present a recent negative Covid test result before arriving on campus.

- For all people required to be on campus, that the university mandate, not recommend, the wearing of masks at all times and explain clearly how this mandate will be enforced
- That this policy--the default online decision, full faculty control over how they will teach, and the testing and masking measures we specify above--apply to faculty, graduate, and staff instructors on the main and all regional campuses
- That students who do return to campus be allowed in dorms only in single rooms
- That OU's extensive body of experts in public health and medicine be charged with developing a concrete plan for the management of possible outbreaks during the 2020-2021 academic year
- That reduced on-campus student presence be reassessed as the pandemic evolves

We Demand That We Return to Real Shared Governance

- That the president and trustees go to the state and federal governments to demand increased funding and a bailout similar to the ones provided to private corporations
- That there be no more furloughs or faculty layoffs
- That current furloughs end at end of this academic year
- That the university financially support the library as integral to the academic mission
- That the university pause all athletics for this academic year (which in itself will likely save some \$26 million)
- That we continue to fund athletic scholarships as they are non-cash subsidies
- That we initiate an immediate faculty-led assessment of and possible pause to any and all non-academic programs that deplete resources using the guiding principle that priority be given to the teaching of classes, the health of faculty and students, the welfare of the community of Athens. Consistent

with principles of shared governance, these faculty ought not to be *appointed* by the executive team, but *chosen directly* by faculty

- That because the faculty themselves constitute a large body of experts, immediately halt the use of all outside consultants
- That we immediately halt finance driven programs that inhibit faculty teaching and research such as contracts with printing companies, travel partners, and so on, until such time as it can be determined *by faculty* whether these actually save money
- That control of curriculum be returned to the faculty
- That there be a faculty-led audit of all executive positions entailing an assessment of whether the position is necessary, and whether the salary can be cut, and that this audit become the basis for “right-sizing” the administration
- That anyone making over \$150,000 take a significant salary cut
- That there be a faculty-led assessment of costs, the origins of pre and post-pandemic debt, and endowment management