

NEIU UPI

Newsletter / Special Update

May 2020

Discussions on Return to Campus... UPI Local, IFT HECC, NEIU UPI Members

Summary as of May 15, 2020 – Nancy A. Matthews, Chapter President, NEIU UPI

In order to go back to campus, our institutions have to figure out how to protect students, employees, their families and communities.

The UPI Local Executive Board has been focusing on “the conditions that are necessary before a university resumes face-to-face instruction and the return of workers. The goal is to agree to a set of demands/conditions that must be met. We will also then discuss the strategy to engage our members around these conditions.”

Questions that have been discussed:

- What conditions do we need to be able to return to work on campus?
- What kinds of training do members need to continue to work remotely?
- What compensation is needed for members to retool for better quality remote/ online instruction?
- What compensation is needed for the costs people are incurring from working from home (e.g., equipment purchases, increasing internet service, supplies, etc.)?
- How can we deal with members' health problems from the strain of constant computer work when they are not set up for it? -- eye strain, hearing, musculo-skeletal injuries from not having ergonomic workspaces.

Cleaning and Sanitizing

There must be specific and transparent plans and procedures for cleaning and sanitizing, not just once, but in an ongoing way before people can safely be on campus regularly.

Concerns about the normal cleaning capacity at our institutions – it was already severely curtailed since the Rauner budget crisis and has never recovered.

What are the effects of the cleaning chemicals on people with respiratory problems or other compromised health conditions?

The cost of external contractors doing the deep cleaning and sanitizing that the university is promising is high; what is the university's capacity for maintaining this if the campus re-opens while the pandemic is still not under control?

Testing, Tracing, Masks, Social Distancing

The epidemiological experts seem to agree that until there is widely available, dependable and regular testing for COVID-19, AND the capacity to do contact tracing of individuals who test positive, the risks are very high for engaging in regular social contact.

Masks and Social Distancing – wearing masks and staying at least 6 feet apart from people we interact with are currently the best practice for reducing the risk of infection. When employees return to campus, will the university require masks and provide them to students and/or staff who show up without them?

The still-evolving UPI Local position is that

1. Until there is much more robust testing and contact tracing, we

should not return to general face-to-face instruction.

2. There might be exceptions for selected courses that really can't be offered effectively online/remotely – advanced science labs, performance classes, arts that require specialized equipment, etc., but the default approach should be remote/ online.

Different Levels of Risk

Anyone can get COVID-19, but not everyone is at the same risk for becoming seriously ill. People who are older (55, 60, 70 are some of the age cut-offs cited in various sources) are at higher risk.

People with pre-existing health problems (asthma, diabetes, lung or kidney disease, etc.) are at higher risk.

People who have been marginalized by our health care systems, which includes many of our students and their families, are at higher risk.

People at higher risk need to be protected and not be called back to campus prematurely as part of a general return to campus move.

Librarians

Libraries are essential resources for universities, but libraries are high-risk environments. Normally many people, including members of the public, pass through library spaces and use and touch many varied surfaces, from computer terminals, to books, to study carrels, in addition to all the other usual surfaces—door handles, elevator buttons. When Library staff assist people, they typically engage in close contact, for example, demonstrating how to search for resources on a computer. To re-open libraries, we would need to have safety practices in place that address the complexity of the library.

Advising

Advisors have unique risks in face-to-face interactions with students. The relationship-building with students that makes for good advising typically involves close face-to-face interaction. Their workspaces – cubicles or small offices – often do not allow for social

distancing. Students often show up sick in normal times exposing ASPs to illness; the additional risk of students, ASPs, or other staff being asymptomatic COVID-19 carriers and interacting is a huge concern.

Transparency

We need transparency about how the CARES Act money is being used. We know that there was some struggle over how to distribute the half of the money that the law required go directly to students.

What decisions are being made about the other half? The provost has indicated that it is being used to fund development of faculty, improve technology, and address losses incurred due to the pandemic. (Fall Planning Committee, 5-15-20).

Additional Concerns / Threats

There are some indications that some forces are using this crisis to make moves toward drastic changes without going through normal processes of shared governance. NEIU BOT members have recently suggested delaying granting tenure (that didn't work) and reorganizing academic programs based on which ones are performing well or not. To deal with the ongoing enrollment crisis, Academic Affairs has adopted a model for canceling classes that raise concerns. While saving money, this model could seriously damage academic programs' ability to deliver, thus creating the conditions for not performing well. There were indications that high-cost tenured faculty were targeted differently for course cancellation during summer as a cost-saving measure, again possibly damaging program delivery.

Fall Planning Committee

Provost Dennis Rome has initiated a committee to discuss plans for Fall 2020. Unlike the Covid-19 Taskforce, this committee includes representatives from shared governance bodies (Faculty Senate, Fac Ac, University Advisory Council) and UPI. It also includes all of the deans and the associate provosts, Dan Weber (the registrar), Blase Masini (Institutional

Research) and Liz Rodriguez (CTL). The first meeting was Friday, May 15, 2020, and I was encouraged by the general direction that the conversation was taking. The general tenor was in line with the concerns UPI has been discussing, i.e., not rushing into face-to-face instruction until public health conditions are in place. The provost explicitly referenced the demographics of our students among the reasons that NEIU's phased plan must be carefully thought out.

No specifics were discussed, but the provost did mention compensation for faculty for the professional development work to move toward better online/ remote instruction. Academic Affairs is moving to contract with Quality Matters to provide some of the faculty development this summer. If you are among the 70 people who signed up for that, you will be getting more information about modifications to the plans.

There was discussion about differentiating classes that may need to be at least in part face-to-face (e.g., some science labs, some performing arts). Part of the role of this committee is to explore what that would look like, if most instruction is online or remote, but some is face-to-face.

Broader Issues that Require Political Organizing

Many of the issues we are facing cannot be addressed by individual institutions.

- Testing and tracing are not things we can demand our universities perform; they are reliant on a robust public health system in the state, which is reliant on broader forces, as we have all been hearing.
- Similarly, the challenges of technology access for our students needs to be addressed politically. The E-Rate charge that we all pay as fees on our phone service is used to fund technology for K12 schools; UPI will be working to have that

extended to higher education, to fund better internet/ wifi services.

- We know NEIU (and other institutions) are going to have even more serious enrollment challenges than we were already experiencing before the pandemic. To protect the institutions of higher education through this disaster, we need emergency financial support, not cuts.
- It is likely that some of our contingent faculty (instructors) may lose courses to the point of essentially being laid off. We need the rules for unemployment insurance to be revised and/or the Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES) to be directed to approve instructors for unemployment benefits.
- We need immediate federal relief packages to provide direct federal aid to higher education and a Paycheck Protection Program for universities like NEIU (among other things). We need expanded student financial aid to enable more students to attend college during this time. Historically, times of high unemployment have led to surges in college attendance, but without more adequate financial aid, that may not happen in this disaster.

Discussions of these issues will continue in the coming weeks. If you have concerns, please speak up! If you receive a survey, please respond promptly!

Legislative Committee Work

Several UPI members have been asked to serve on the Legislative Committee, chaired by Nik Hoel. We will be getting training on talking to our Illinois representatives to communicate what higher education and NEIU need in the relief packages and other policies to come! If you want to participate,

speak up! We will need more people working on these issues, both immediately, and in the coming months on the Fair Tax.

The FAIR TAX proposal that will be on the November ballot in Illinois is still needs to be a priority this year, so watch for calls to be involved in supporting this big change in Illinois. It will require a constitutional amendment, but labor and social justice groups all believe it is necessary to be able to adequately fund all of the public goods that we need in this state, including higher education!

A Few Informative Articles to Consider

<https://www.erinbromage.com/post/the-risks-know-them-avoid-them>

<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/05/11/students-should-not-return-campuses-fall-regardless-financial-implications-opinion>

Bargaining for the Common Good:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1dVZEbiLl6nZkW4qmOZkERwamC7TpKuiVeqWFxFyS8hs/edit?usp=sharing>

SOLIDARITY!