

August 21, 2020

Dear Chancellor Gaber,

It is with increasing concern that we, as UNC Charlotte Public Health Sciences faculty, write to you regarding the continued decision to hold hybrid in-person activities this fall during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our commitment to the field of public health, including a priority on community health, motivates us to offer our perspective and expertise during an evolving situation. As professionals who are training our students and conducting research in the values and principles of community health, the reluctance of the UNC System Board of Governors to shift to virtual-only activities this fall is a clear contradiction of our work.

We acknowledge that these decisions are not easy. However, the recent outbreak of cases at multiple universities (1) can provide evidence for the epidemiological arguments against returning to any face-to-face instruction. As such, we focus our attention on the community's health. It is our shared belief that reopening campus will result in avoidable illness to our campus and surrounding community.

Our University has an opportunity to be a public health role model for the Charlotte region and our state. At this point in time, the Mecklenburg community is seeing a decline in their percent positive cases, daily case counts, and hospitalizations. Our department has worked to develop relationships with local healthcare entities, which are strained as they vocalize concern over our institution's contribution to potential COVID-19 proliferation. Mecklenburg County Health Department Director, Gibbie Harris, stated that despite our sound plans, she is expecting a rise in COVID-19 cases due to universities reopening (2). While UNC Charlotte is a resourced community, our surrounding areas are not as equipped to handle the effects of the inevitable surge of infections if students are invited back to campus. Furthermore, if we follow other university trends and subsequently move to online instruction after beginning face-to-face, we risk dispersing the virus back into other communities. For these reasons, we believe the best course of action would be to start the semester with virtual-only instruction.

Compared with most of the other large institutions in the state system, UNC Charlotte's student population is disproportionately composed of members of vulnerable communities — the very same communities that have already experienced the most severe impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, we have a larger proportion of commuter (non-resident) students who move frequently between our campus community, jobs as essential workers, and the vulnerable communities in which they reside. Decisions about campus reopening will have far-reaching ripple effects in vulnerable communities throughout our region.

We rely on scientific evidence to inform our community-based public health efforts. While we acknowledge preventative measures are in place to mitigate risk, we know that the greatest variable is human behavior and that the virus is airborne. We saw the tremendous response and effects of community health in March as we distanced ourselves and adapted to the call for action. Unfortunately, as evidenced by other university openings, our prevention plans will only succeed if our community can adopt and perform these behaviors without flaws. We have concerns about the unpredictability of students' and others' behavior both on and off campus property, given the science (3). Our students are increasingly concerned as well; they are requesting online accommodations at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

The decision to reopen conveys a message that the members of our community are expendable. We ask you to consider, what are our community members worth in terms of revenue? We urge you to advocate with the UNC System Board of Governors to move to virtual-only instruction ahead of bringing students back to campus. This course of action will demonstrate the University's commitment to the health and well-being of our campus community but also our larger metropolitan area, and indeed our state. The next two weeks present an opportunity for exceptional leadership and we hope that you will rise to the occasion to keep all of Niner Nation in good health. We stand ready to support you with the science, expertise, and perspectives needed for informed decision-making.

Sincerely,

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Sources:

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