Principles for a Responsible Fall Semester

A Joint Statement from Graduate Assistants United and the SIUC Faculty Association

June 29, 2020

SIUC appears committed to reopening the campus to all students who want to return. We have serious concerns about this approach. As this document is being drafted, Illinois is faring relatively well regarding COVID-19; but cases have recently started to increase within Illinois and are now rising at an alarming rate nationally. It has also become clear that we will lack the ability to test all students and staff for COVID-19, raising the risk that will begin the semester with many unrecognized cases of the virus in the campus community. We thus believe that SIU should be prepared to reconsider the plan to reopen for widespread face-to-face instruction.

The proposal below, however, assumes that conditions will allow SIU to invite students back to campus. It aims to provide a set of recommendations which would help us to reopen campus in a way that promotes our academic mission and limits risk to the health and safety of students, staff, and the Carbondale community.

I. Principles and priorities

1. Our highest priority must be health and safety of students, staff, and the community.

2. Our second priority is continuing and preserving the quality our teaching, research, and service missions.

3. Our third priority is the long-term financial health of the institution. This priority comes third because the best way to secure long-term financial health is to meet the other two priorities, and decisions made solely out of short-term financial concerns can threaten the first two priorities.

4. Our planning should be timely, inclusive, transparent, and honest. We should not promise students things we cannot deliver. We must make decisions promptly enough to allow adequate time to implement them without chaos.

5. We do need to take student preferences into account. But we must follow our own considered judgment about the best way to educate students safely under the challenging conditions of COVID-19. If the first two principles above come into conflict with student preferences, the proper response is to educate students (and parents) about our plans to educate students safely.

II. Analysis

Anything that can be taught online will have to be taught online to some degree.

- Most classes will need to be made available online to students who choose not to return to campus or face to face instruction out of health concerns.
- The last week of the semester and exam week will likely be online.
- International students may be quarantined, arrive late, or have to complete the entire semester at a distance. Students from regions in the US suffering major outbreaks of COVID-19 may also need to be quarantined.
- Many students and instructors will enter quarantine at some point during the semester as they test positive for COVID-19 or are exposed to those who test positive.
- Even if classes are small enough to meet entirely in person on a regular schedule, instructors or students in such classes may want to or need to work online.
- It is entirely possible that we will need to shut down all or most face-to-face instruction if COVID cases increase markedly in Illinois or in Jackson County.

Face to face (F2F) instruction will be complicated and compromised.

- Breaking classes into small groups that meet separately will fragment instruction and complicate course planning.
- Mask usage and social distancing requirements will make group work and other sorts of interaction within the classroom more difficult.
- Lack of an adequate supply of large, smart classrooms will pose immense scheduling problems.
- If students or instructors are required or pressured to attend F2F, the psychological strain that results will undermine teaching and learning.

Efforts to combine F2F and online teaching will often produce poor learning outcomes.

- Few of our classrooms can record not only what happens at the lectern but what student do throughout the room; few have reliable projection devices to allow online students to interact with students in the classroom. Thus, if only a subset of students can meet F2F at any given time, other students will not have access to the same classroom experience, unless instructors limit themselves to lecturing. We should not adopt a learning plan that restricts instructors to this mode of instruction.
- Instructors cannot be expected to teach high-quality courses in two new modalities at once, F2F with social distancing and online. There will simply not be enough hours in the week for an instructor to provide quality classes in both modes.
- If F2F instruction remains the default, students who choose to remain online or who are required to shift to online (by health conditions or quarantine) will get a second-rate experience, delivered by overworked instructors who have been required to prioritize the F2F experience.
- There are recognized models to offer classes in flexible modes (F2F, online, synchronous and asynchronous) to meet student preferences and needs, including the HyFlex model (https://edtechbooks.org/hyflex). But such models require a substantial investment by

instructors in class preparation and substantial institutional support. Neither will be possible at scale before the fall semester.

III. Conclusions

If a class can be taught online, the default mode of instruction must be online instruction; F2F instruction for such courses should only be offered on a voluntary "opt-in" basis.

- No instructor, including graduate assistants working under the supervision of faculty, should be required, asked, or pressured to teach F2F if they determine that their teaching work can be done effectively online.
- All students should be given the option to do their classwork online in any area that can be taught online.
- While online instruction must be the default, instructors may be allowed to opt in to F2F instruction if they believe they can safely provide a higher quality educational experience by doing so.
- This opt-in policy would reduce ableism; prevent instructors from being pressured into behavior they regard as unsafe; avoid arbitrary decisions determining who qualifies as being at higher risk; and ensure students that their instructors want to be in the classroom.
- If we focus on online instruction, we can offer it at high quality, rather than making it an afterthought.
- Resources that would have been spent on widespread F2F instruction (PPE, cleaning, scheduling, smart classrooms) can instead be directed to areas where F2F is the only practicable approach, or the preferred approach of a given instructor.
- Resources that would have been spent trying to teach in two modes at once can be used to help address the digital divide.

Instructors of classes that cannot be practicably taught online must be protected and supported in F2F instruction.

- Some courses can only be taught F2F, and we should aim to do so provided an instructor capable of teaching the course has opted in to teach F2F and F2F teaching is allowed by health guidelines.
- Instructors who volunteer to teach such classes are essential workers and should be prioritized for support by the university.
- No instructor at higher risk for COVID-19 or uncomfortable with teaching F2F should be required to teach F2F; if all of their assigned courses are F2F, they should be reassigned to other duties.
- Even in courses that must be taught F2F, F2F interactions should be minimized to the extent possible, with all possible aspects of such classes offered online, unless the instructor chooses otherwise and can do so safely.

- Instructors in such classes must be fairly compensated for the extra work required to meet new safety requirements and provide supplementary online instruction.
- All possible safety precautions must be taken to protect students and instructors including: university supply of PPE; regular cleaning of shared equipment and surfaces; relocation to larger classrooms or outdoor settings; and scheduling students in cohorts to reduce the number of students who are exposed to one another.
- Instructors teaching such courses must get priority access to smart classrooms if this is practicable given their other needs.
- Instructors and students in such courses must all be regularly tested for COVID-19.

Instructors who opt to teach F2F because they believe they can safely offer a better educational experience in a F2F mode must be supported in doing so.

- If the administration wishes to encourage optional F2F instruction, it must fairly compensate instructors who provide this instruction, given that they will also have to provide some level of online instruction for the same class.
- Instructors volunteering to teach F2F should receive priority access to smart classrooms, PPE, cleaning staff and supplies, etc. after the needs of faculty teaching courses that can only be taught F2F are met.
- Instructors and students in such courses should all be regularly tested for COVID-19.