



Student Government

University of Iowa
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Dear President Bruce Harreld and Interim Executive Vice President and Provost Kevin Kregel,

Throughout the summer, we have kept our fingers crossed in hopes that we could safely return to in-person learning this month. We have engaged with campus leadership in the “return to campus” planning process to share the student perspective and advocate for student needs. We were excited to return to normalcy—academically and socially. However, the persistent increase in COVID-19 cases in Iowa, and specifically Johnson County, has become troubling, especially as most students are scheduled to move back to Iowa City in the coming weeks. While we deeply miss our traditional learning environments and collegiate social experiences, the rising cases and risks associated with COVID-19 make returning to campus an alarming prospect.

We cannot, in good conscience, support in-person classroom learning and full opening¹ of residence halls in the Fall 2020 semester amid our current environment. A return to in-person learning, as planned, even using a blended learning strategy, acts as an invasive choice constraint given that three out of every four UI students are concerned about contracting COVID-19 on campus this semester.²

We ask that the University of Iowa move all non-essential in-person learning, activities, and events to a virtual format. No student should be on campus unless absolutely necessary,³ especially when virtual learning options are accessible and efficient.⁴ Simply put, virtual learning should be the rule and not the exception until COVID-19 can be controlled effectively and continuously. Furthermore, we urge the University to significantly reduce density in campus residence halls by only allowing access to students in urgent need of housing and dining.

Decisions that impact tens of thousands of students, staff, faculty, and community members must be made on the basis of the latest available data, including:

¹ With the exception of emergency housing and dining for residents and resident assistants.

² *University of Iowa COVID Student Survey*, U. of Iowa 2 (July 27, 2020), <https://coronavirus.uiowa.edu/sites/coronavirus.uiowa.edu/files/2020-07/University-of-Iowa-COVID19-Student-Survey.pdf> (indicating 75% of survey respondents are either very or somewhat concerned they might become infected with COVID-19 if attending the University of Iowa on campus this fall).

³ We acknowledge that there are certain programs that require specific experiential learning environments, including but not limited to, healthcare student clinics, research activities, and fine and performance arts, that require necessary in-person interactions. These programs should continue in person so long as the university can provide and maintain steadfast public health policies and procedures, including the use of PPE, social distancing, regular hand washing, sanitization, etc.

⁴ See Wayne Jacobsen & Matt Anson, *Pandemic Response Survey: Virtual Instruction*, U. of Iowa Office of the Provost 1–2 (June 17, 2020), <https://assessment.uiowa.edu/sites/assessment.uiowa.edu/files/2020-06/PRS-Virtual-Instruction.pdf>.

- In every 50-person classroom in Johnson County, there is a 61% risk level that *at least* one COVID-19 positive individual will be present.⁵ In every 25-person classroom in Johnson County, there is a 37% risk level that *at least* one COVID-19 positive individual will be present.⁶ Even in a 10 person classroom in Johnson County, there is a 17% risk level that *at least* one COVID-19 positive individual will be present.⁷
- 46,021 individuals in Iowa have tested positive for COVID-19. 64% of those who tested positive were symptomatic; 48% of those who tested positive were between the ages of 18 and 40.⁸
- 886 individuals in Iowa have died from COVID-19. 2% of those deaths were individuals between the ages of 18 and 40.⁹
- Daily, there are still extremely high numbers of new positive cases of COVID-19 in Iowa; on July 29, 2020, there were 585 new positive cases.¹⁰
- The University of Iowa currently leads the Big Ten Conference in confirmed COVID-19 cases within the Athletic Department.¹¹
- As of August 3, 2020, the University of Iowa Athletics Department reported 33 positive cases of the 603 COVID-19 tests conducted since the end of May (a 5% positive test rate).¹²
- In a study of patients who recovered from COVID-19, 82% had persistent symptoms after an average of 60.3 days from the onset of initial symptoms.¹³ Other studies have reported that, “Ongoing problems include fatigue, a racing heartbeat, shortness of breath, achy joints, foggy thinking, a persistent loss of sense of smell, and damage to the heart, lungs, kidneys, and brain.”¹⁴

These facts are startling, but they likely misportray the disproportionate adverse effects COVID-19 continues to have on racial and ethnic minority groups throughout the U.S.¹⁵ **We would be remiss to not highlight this important intersection given the immense progress the**

⁵ Aroon T. Chande et al., *COVID-19 Event Risk Assessment Planning Tool*, Ga. Inst. of Tech. (accessed July 30, 2020), <https://covid19risk.biosci.gatech.edu> (noting that estimates may be affected by under testing and under reporting of COVID-19 incidence).

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Additionally, only one in six individuals in Iowa has been tested. State of Iowa Gov't, *Positive Case Analysis*, COVID-19 in Iowa (accessed Aug. 4, 2020), <https://coronavirus.iowa.gov/pages/case-counts>.

⁹ State of Iowa Gov't, *Outcome Analysis – Deaths*, COVID-19 in Iowa (accessed Aug. 4, 2020), <https://coronavirus.iowa.gov/pages/outcome-analysis-deaths>.

¹⁰ State of Iowa Gov't, *supra* note 8.

¹¹ Weiyi Cai et al., *More Than 6,600 Coronavirus Cases Have Been Linked to U.S. Colleges*, N.Y. Times (July 29, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/28/us/covid-19-colleges-universities.html>.

¹² KCRG News Staff, *Five more in University of Iowa Athletics Test Positive for COVID-19*, KCRG (Aug. 3, 2020), <https://www.kcrg.com/2020/08/03/five-more-in-university-of-iowa-athletics-test-positive-for-covid-19>. See also, Mark Emmert, *Iowa Men's Basketball Team Stops Workouts After Two Players Test Positive for COVID-19*, Des Moines Register (July 28, 2020), <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/sports/college/iowa/basketball-men/2020/07/28/iowa-basketball-two-hawkeyes-test-positive-covid-19-forcing-two-week-stop-workouts/5527720002>.

¹³ Angelo Carfi et al., *Persistent Symptoms in Patients After Acute COVID-19*, JAMA (July 9, 2020), <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2768351>

¹⁴ Jennifer Couzin-Frankel, *From 'brain fog' to heart damage, COVID-19's lingering problems alarm scientists*, Science (July 31, 2020), <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/07/brain-fog-heart-damage-covid-19-s-lingering-problems-alarm-scientists>

¹⁵ The Atlantic, *The COVID Racial Data Tracker*, COVID Tracking Project (accessed July 30, 2020), <https://covidtracking.com/race> (“We’ve lost at least 30,648 Black lives to COVID-19 to date. Black people account for 23% of COVID-19 deaths where race is known.”).

University of Iowa needs to make toward diversity, equity, and inclusion—a need amplified by the Black Lives Matter movement and activism by university students, staff, and faculty. Acknowledging these disparities, virtual learning and virtual engagement could mitigate the continuation of this inordinate impact on the lives of students who identify as Black, indigenous, and/or persons of color.

We recognize the challenge this unprecedented situation presents to the entire University of Iowa community and respect the hard work that went into the development of the current return to campus plans. Based on case analysis by The New York Times, “What is clear is that despite months of planning for a safe return to class, and despite drastic changes to campus life, the virus is already spreading widely at universities.”¹⁶ Even the best possible return to campus plans at the University of Iowa do not negate the fact that statistically speaking, students will become infected with COVID-19, some are likely to die, and others will suffer additional adverse physical and mental health effects in an in-person learning environment. We believe that it is not a matter of *if* our community sees a COVID-19 outbreak this fall—it is a matter of *when*.

Thus, the choice is between providing students and families stability through virtual learning *before* an anticipated outbreak or turmoil due to uncertainty in learning and unplanned reversions *after* an outbreak. We implore the University of Iowa to choose the former, and we hope the institution stands as a leader in higher education to make the difficult, but responsible, decision to value our community’s health above all else by using the safest option: virtual learning and engagement.¹⁷

Respectfully,

University of Iowa Student Government
Undergraduate Student Government
Graduate and Professional Student Government

¹⁶ Cai et al., *supra* note 11.

¹⁷ The University would not be alone in moving the start of the semester virtual. See Chris Quintana, ‘The Virus Beat Us’: Colleges are Increasingly Going Online for Fall 2020 Semester as COVID-19 Cases Rise, USA Today (July 29, 2020), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2020/07/29/covid-college-fall-semester-2020-reopening-online/5530096002> (“After planning ways to reopen campuses this fall, colleges are increasingly changing their minds, dramatically increasing online offerings or canceling in-person classes outright.”).