

SUNY union unveils steps for safely reopening campuses

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ALBANY, N.Y. —The union representing faculty and staff at the State University of New York has submitted a series of steps it believes the system needs to take to ensure the safety of its members and surrounding communities before campuses are allowed to reopen.

The union has sent SUNY administrators a [six-page list detailing its requirements](#).

“I do believe that a safe reopening can be achieved,” Fred Kowal, president of United University Professions, said in a May 29 letter to SUNY Chancellor Kristina Johnson and Board of Trustees Chair Merryl Tisch. “However, it will be the greatest challenge the SUNY community has ever faced.”

The UUP's steps include closing common areas and other congregate spaces to the extent possible to encourage social distancing; extending a telecommuting agreement that expires July 18 through the end of the year; restricting access to residence halls; isolating on-campus students who test positive for coronavirus and making diagnostic tests and personal protective equipment readily available.

SUNY and other college leaders agree that many of these requests are necessary and are formulating plans to implement them.

Schools are hopeful they will get the go-ahead to [reopen campuses for the fall semester](#), although what the capacity might be remains uncertain and is likely to vary by region and each college's situation.

The costs to individual schools could be substantial, and comes at a sensitive time for many schools that have seen their revenue streams upended amid the pandemic. But unnerving professors and other employees by shortchanging safety policies and procedures also poses grave risks to colleges at such a precarious moment.

Kowal urged SUNY officials to integrate union leaders into the development process, adding that UUP has been largely left on the sidelines thus far.

“The concerns and perspectives of UUP are relevant and must be a part of conversations so as to provide the safest, most productive setting for our students,” he wrote. “Not to include us in these discussions will inevitably lead to problems and errors which may well endanger the lives of our members and our students.”

One challenge is that colleges, SUNY included, are trying to develop these blueprints while awaiting further instruction from Gov. Andrew Cuomo's administration, which has consolidated decision-making authority about nearly every facet of economic life during the pandemic after securing emergency authority from the Legislature earlier this year. But the governor's office has its hands full juggling countless competing interests all begging to move forward.

“We are working in close coordination with the State and campus presidents regarding potential scenarios for the fall semester,” SUNY spokesperson Holly Liapis said in a statement. “Our collective, primary concern will always be to ensure students have a safe and healthy environment for learning.”

Schools are hoping to receive further instruction from the state early this month in order to finalize their fall plans sometime in July.