



UNITED UNIVERSITY PROFESSIONS
Testimony on How COVID-19 Has
Impacted Higher Education

Presented To:

Senator Toby Ann Stavisky, Chair
Senate Standing Committee on Higher Education
and
Assembly Member Deborah J. Glick, Chair
Assembly Standing Committee on Higher Education

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Chairperson Stavisky, Chairperson Glick, distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly Committees on Higher Education, thank you for providing the opportunity for United University Professions (UUP) to testify at a crucial and monumental time in our state.

My name is Dr. Frederick E. Kowal, and I am the president of UUP. I have the honor of representing more than 37,000 academic and professional faculty and staff—of which more than 13,000 work in our academic medical centers. Our members, especially those designated essential workers at SUNY's hospitals, and I are keenly aware of the sacrifices made and the dangers presented by this global pandemic.

UUP has been very vocal in its opposition to continued cuts to SUNY and the need to fund the University, an important economic engine for the state.

A sustained lack of funding has laid bare the tenuous financial situation of our state-operated campuses. It has peeled back the truth: SUNY is over reliant on tuition and fees. With a possible drop in enrollment, we face draconian measures without federal aid. This is an issue I am confident we will work together on in the coming months.

At this moment, the health and safety of our students, our members and our communities is paramount. The coronavirus pandemic has made the way we operate literally an issue of life and death for too many in our society.

Over the last few weeks, SUNY's campuses have individually released their reopening plans. UUP does not oppose reopening our campuses. On the contrary, UUP published a set of reopening principles June 2, with the hopes that common sense recommendations would be included in SUNY's plans. See

<https://uupinfo.org/resources/covid19/pdf/UUPReopeningPrinciples.pdf>

Our members have been working constructively at their individual campuses and collectively through our statewide efforts to welcome back students safely and responsibly in just a few weeks.

Unfortunately, SUNY's plans do not go far enough to promote safety on campus. They have abandoned the consistent messaging of Gov. Cuomo and Dr. Zucker that we have heard for five months. To safely reopen campuses, to spur the economy and return to our way of life, we need four basic systems in place: baseline and surveillance testing, contact tracing, mask-wearing and social distancing, and telecommuting.

Testing and tracing

New York has done a better job of testing than any state in the country, testing tens of thousands of people each day. That needs to extend to our public university system.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 40% of individuals with COVID-19 infections are asymptomatic and they are 75% more infectious than symptomatic individuals. The CDC also estimates that 50% of COVID-19 transmission by symptomatic individuals occurs prior to the onset of symptoms. See <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/planning-scenarios.html#table-1>. A recent Yale study found that more than 50% of COVID-19 transmission occurs due to contact with asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic individuals. See <https://www.pnas.org/content/early/2020/07/02/2008373117>.

The Harvard Global Health Institute has concluded that “mitigation level” testing (i.e. testing of symptomatic individuals and contacts) is insufficient to stop COVID 19 outbreaks. “Suppression level” testing is necessary. “This requires large, proactive testing — ***including regular testing of asymptomatic people in high-risk environments such as nursing homes, colleges, and parts of the service industry*** — paired with rapid contact tracing and supported isolation (TTSI), as well as other measures.” See <https://globalhealth.harvard.edu/new-testing-targets-as-covid-19-outbreaks-grow-more-severe-most-u-s-states-still-fall-far-short-on-testing/> (emphasis added).

The return of students to college campuses will be the largest migration of people in New York since the beginning of the pandemic.

Parents, students, faculty and staff will travel from downstate to upstate and vice-versa, from outside New York and outside of the country. Baseline and surveillance testing must be mandated to ensure that campuses are a safe environment for students and staff and the virus is not present when classes begin.

Many of New York's private colleges have recognized the crucial need to provide for baseline and surveillance testing. They have found, or are developing, ways to address the hurdles of testing and have not resorted to excuses about testing being unnecessary, impossible or too expensive. As a result, their campuses and surrounding communities will be better able to identify and address outbreaks that will almost certainly occur among college students living on or near campuses before they spread out of control. Parents and students must be assured that roommates, classmates and teammates are clear of the virus when they meet on Day 1.

Comparing the announced testing plans of private campuses with those of SUNY's state-operated campuses is a jarring experience, one that paints a picture of a "Tale of Two Cities." The students and the academic and professional staff at our campuses should not be compelled to play roulette with possible exposure to asymptomatic spread on campus while private colleges recognize and proactively attempt to protect against the possibility.

To remedy this, baseline and surveillance testing must be required at all of SUNY's state-operated campuses. While the details of how this is done at each campus may vary, pooled saliva testing (currently being developed at Upstate) shows promise as a cost-effective way to accomplish this.

Mask-wearing, physical distancing and telecommuting

Gov. Cuomo and state officials have impressed upon New Yorkers that wearing a face mask is an essential tool to stop the spread of coronavirus and keep each other safe. We agree without equivocation. UUP asks the governor to mandate that masks be worn at all times in the classroom and common areas at our colleges and universities—not just when students may come within six feet of other individuals. Increasing international evidence that COVID-19 may be contracted

via aerosolized spread over distances greater than six feet in indoor settings compels this.

If the governor does not do this, UUP asks the Senate and Assembly to consider legislative action to mandate masks across SUNY. It is negligent and dangerous to not include this in reopening guidance. The wearing of face masks at all times in indoor areas on campus must be mandated to prevent outbreaks and campus closures.

Physical and social distancing is the most effective way to suppress COVID-19 and stop the spread of the virus. That SUNY campuses have been likened to cruise ships on land presents significant challenges and reinforces the need to baseline test those returning. Because physical distancing can be difficult, any method to reduce density on campus should be implemented. This includes closing campus libraries to the public and instituting a remote system of access for those that are repositories.

Additionally, UUP and the state entered an historic agreement this spring that allows UUP-represented employees to telecommute on a full-time or part-time basis. That agreement expressly recognizes that telecommuting is an important component of a multilayered strategy to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The agreement provides that where operationally feasible, telecommuting requests shall be assigned or approved to the greatest extent possible.

Since that time, UUP has continued to advocate for extensions of the Telecommuting Agreement, as it remains the best tool available to reduce density (particularly in professional staff work areas) and maintain social distancing on campus. To date, the state has agreed to extend the Telecommuting Agreement through close of business Oct. 2. We are continuing to advocate that the Telecommuting Agreement should be extended at least through Dec. 31, 2020.

Unfortunately, UUP is increasingly receiving reports of campuses that are failing to honor the full scope and goal of the Telecommuting Agreement. A glaring example is SUNY Fredonia, which has directed all professional staff to report back to work on campus (the sole exceptions being medically documented high-risk individuals and those with short-term childcare issues). Other requests to

telecommute by staff who successfully telecommuted this spring, and whose presence on campus is not necessary to complete their duties, are being routinely denied.

SUNY Fredonia, while the most egregious, is not the only example. Increasingly, we are receiving reports from multiple campuses across the state suggesting that telecommuting requests will be denied this fall unless medically necessary or required to address childcare issues. These are obviously circumstances where the ability to telecommute, if possible, will be necessary. However, they should not, and must not, be the only circumstances.

Telecommuting requests, where operationally feasible, must continue to be approved if requested. This is necessary to best assure that our members, our families and our students are protected to the greatest extent possible. UUP seeks your assistance in assuring that campuses are required to make this so.

Conclusion

Neither the challenges we face nor the solutions we seek are out of reach. We can—and we must—rise to this occasion and do what is necessary to keep each other safe. If SUNY does not reopen with safety at the forefront, there is every possibility that the state could be forced to close campuses and send students home, as it did in March and April to stem the spread of coronavirus. No one wants this to happen. By doing this the right way, we can ensure that our students, our faculty and staff and our communities are properly protected and that our campuses can again become world-class places of learning.

On behalf of the entire UUP membership, I'd like to thank you for this opportunity to address you today. Chair Stavisky and Chair Glick, for so many years, you have shown to be the strongest advocates for our SUNY system, our students and our patients. In this historic time, your leadership is more consequential than any time in memory.

Thank you