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Statement on the Reopening of Campuses Fall Semester 2020

Decisions by Kansas universities to close campuses in the spring greatly limited infections and saved lives. We owe them our thanks. Now, they are planning to bring students back to campus and teach them in person in the fall semester, albeit with somewhat modified courses. This approach will result in danger to students, faculty, staff, and surrounding communities, and may thereby exacerbate the pandemic.

Deteriorating Situation, Increasing Concerns

Barring a miracle, if students return to campus in August, some, perhaps many, will bring the virus with them. Undeniably, Kansas universities face budget problems, and tuition, room and board are important sources of revenue. And it is likely that a majority of undergraduates would prefer to be on campus. However, we believe it is time to re-evaluate plans to bring them back and continue to adapt the plans as situations change. When initial decisions were made, there was reason to hope that infection rates would decline dramatically by the start of Fall Semester. The world looks very different now. The number of people in the U.S. who have died of COVID-19 this year already exceeds the number of American soldiers killed in World War I. Since the relaxation of restrictions, rates of infection and deaths have accelerated alarmingly – faster than when campuses shut down in the spring. Opening them now would make outbreaks inevitable.

Individuals of all ages can become very ill and die from COVID-19. SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, is insidious and deadly. Although the likelihood of death increases sharply with age and with certain underlying conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure, younger people also die, or they have agonizing symptoms and chronic after-effects. Indeed, it is now known that the virus can infect many types of cells in the body. Even if one survives, there can be long-term negative effects on several organ systems, including the brain and nervous system, the heart and circulatory system, the pancreas, and the renal system.

Ease of Transmission

SARS-CoV-2 is *highly* contagious. Infected individuals can infect others before they show symptoms (if they ever have any). It is true that, where a limited number of careful and knowledgeable individuals interact, it is possible to minimize the risk of spreading COVID-19. For example, the recent reopening of research labs at Kansas institutions has apparently been safe. However, safely bringing tens of thousands of students back to campus is another matter.

University of Kansas students interviewed recently by the *Lawrence Journal-World* said they believed if there were an outbreak on campus, the infection would spread rapidly in the residence halls. All available evidence indicates that they are correct. Dr. Lawrence Steinberg, a professor at Temple University who studies adolescent psychology, recently authored an op-ed for the *New York Times*, “Expecting Students to Play It Safe If Colleges Reopen Is a Fantasy.” He points out that people in their late teens and early 20s are extremely prone to risky behavior. Add to that their strong desire for social interaction, along with the fact that most of them probably would have relatively mild symptoms, and it seems certain that they will engage in behaviors that will spread the virus rapidly, both on and off campus. Even if students act 100% responsibly, significant transmission will result. Putting thousands of students together in fraternities, sororities, and residence halls; having them share meals and attend classes together; and requiring they interact with instructors and staff in offices, common areas, library spaces, and research labs virtually guarantee that infection rates will soar.

We all know by now that the virus is carried in fluid droplets that are expelled by sneezing, coughing or simply breathing – hence the “six-foot rule.” However, smaller particles remain in the air longer and often travel farther before settling. A recent article in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* concludes that airborne spread is very significant and notes that the only policy that reduces infection rates is the use of face masks – provided they are worn properly at all times. So, while the virus is unlikely to spread among individuals spaced six feet or more apart at all times and sitting quietly in classrooms, or to faculty teaching them from behind plexiglass shields (assuming appropriate air circulation and filtration), when students crowd together in halls, libraries, labs, elevators, stairwells, bathrooms and other common areas, the danger of transmission increases exponentially. Surfaces will be contaminated repeatedly, and it will be difficult to disinfect them often enough to limit viral spread.

Given the numbers of faculty and staff that work, have offices, or conduct research in buildings that are also used by students, it seems inevitable that the virus will infect many in these groups. Many faculty and staff are older and more vulnerable to COVID-19, and many have family members in high risk groups. Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) are particularly vulnerable because they must interact closely with many students (for example in lab courses). Students will not, of course, be confined to campus, and they likely will spread the virus to off-campus businesses and the surrounding community.

Finally, we are concerned that the level of testing will be insufficient to control an outbreak and that those who test positive will spend a lot of their semester quarantined. Athletes are tested frequently, and many already have tested positive. They are then quarantined and retested until they are free of the virus. The athletic departments at Kansas universities have rightly decided that this degree of effort is required to eliminate the spread of COVID-19 among student athletes. Similar efforts would be required among the rest of the student body, as well.

Urgent Recommendations

If students are to be brought back to campus, in order to minimize risk to all involved, the Kansas Conference of the American Association of University Professors makes the following recommendations.

1. Faculty and staff should be given the choice of course delivery. For the safety of all, predominantly online is the preferred method of delivery to limit face-to-face interactions and crowded common areas.
2. No faculty, staff, or GTA should be required to teach a course in person.
3. If there are to be in-person classes, administrations should develop and publicize, well in advance of the first day of class, scientifically valid criteria for reopening campus to students and employees. They should include the infection rates they consider acceptable for reopening. If these thresholds are exceeded during the semester, in-person teaching should stop, and students and employees, sent home.
4. Universities should make available free of charge, effective masks to all faculty, staff and students and provide instruction in their use. They should require that effective masks be worn on campus at all times, except when individuals are alone in their offices or rooms in residence halls.
5. An adequate testing, monitoring and tracing plan should be in effect before students are brought back to campus with clear reporting methods to keep faculty, staff, and students informed.
6. Individuals who test positive should quarantine until they are no longer infectious. Quarantined students should be allowed to stay in residence halls until they no longer test positive.
7. Plans should be developed in advance with local hospitals to handle any major outbreak.
8. Food service should be altered to minimize spreading the virus.

We urge universities to adopt these measures. Furthermore, we call upon the State of Kansas to value the education of its citizens and support its universities in these uniquely challenging times.