

Penn State Joint Graduate & Professional Student Joint Open Letter Regarding the Return to Campus Plan

Dear President Barron, Provost Jones, Vice President Sims, and Dean Vasilatos-Younken,

We write this letter to you in light of the recently released plan to resume on-campus work and learning for the Fall 2020 semester. As the global COVID-19 pandemic continues to pose serious hardships for the Penn State community and the world at large, many in the Penn State community have voiced concerns with the University's "Back to State" plan. Notably, over 1000 faculty have signed on to [this letter](#), which clearly itemizes these concerns and which many of the authors of this letter are in strong agreement with. We feel it is vital that we present our additional concerns as graduate and professional students. We serve multiple roles at this university: we are students, instructors, teaching assistants, and researchers, often at the same time. Because of our unique combination of roles, we will be among those most relied on for the return to in-person instruction while also being most affected by whatever guidelines, policies, and procedures are put in place.

Despite the critical part we will play in the University's reopening we feel that our voices were not provided an adequate space in the drafting of reopening guidelines. The following list outlines some of the issues of importance to us:

1. Graduate and professional students, like faculty, are still waiting on details regarding the procedures Penn State will put in place to ensure that those of us who cannot or are uncomfortable with teaching or learning in-person are not forced to do so. The imbalance between faculty and graduate teaching assistants when it comes to decisions about teaching in-person makes it difficult for graduate and professional students to prioritize their well being. Graduate and professional students should be guaranteed that no retaliation by their departments or the university will occur if they choose to opt-out of in-person teaching, if their physical or mental health interfere with their ability to teach, or if they have family members who are at risk. This policy must be widely communicated. Graduate and professional students should not be forced to disclose personal/medical information in this process. Requirements for all teaching responsibilities, including time spent, must be within the bounds of teaching assistant contracts.
2. Penn State should commit financial resources ensuring the funding for assistantships for the 2020-2021 academic year will be kept at least at the same level as 2019-2020 to ensure that graduate and professional students, who already often face precarious financial situations, are not forced into additional financial hardship.
3. Penn State should establish the expectation that departments should, where possible, commit financial resources toward providing all current doctoral students an extra year of funding, if needed, to accommodate for the pandemic's disruption to meeting academic benchmarks required for graduation. For example, this could be accomplished by accepting fewer students in the next admission cycles, as this would demonstrate availability of funds and existing students must be prioritized.
4. Current policies regarding the allowance of online dissertation defenses, comprehensive exams, and committee or other meetings that normally would take place in person should be extended to at least the end of the 2020-2021 academic year.
5. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that CAPS is able to work effectively remotely. Given the significant amount of additional mental health stress that the COVID-19 pandemic will add this fall, Penn State should increase funding and other resources to

CAPS so that they will be able to provide adequate mental health resources and staff to graduate and professional students and continue to cover virtual appointments through health insurance.

6. In line with the open letter recently published and signed by over 1000 faculty members, we are concerned about Penn State's COVID-19 testing plan. While the administration has said it will exceed Pennsylvania's guidelines, those guidelines currently only call for testing symptomatic cases. Graduate and professional students need for Penn State to demonstrate clearly that it will commit to at least an availability of 750-1000 tests per day on average. That testing must be fair, free, fast, widespread, and widely promoted among the Penn State community. If these testing goals are not or cannot be met, Penn State should commit to a transition to remote learning as soon as possible.
7. Penn State should ensure that the library system provides improved access to online reading materials as well as the ability to return and check out physical library materials through online reservations and curb-side pick up until the library opens fully. This is essential for completing coursework, comprehensive exams, and dissertation research.
8. Penn State needs clearer and more readily available plans for conducting in-person and online research. While there are general guidelines on working with faculty and advisors online, language is missing as to how to set up research sites, maintain social distancing protocols, get administrative approval, funding sources, consent for data collection and what research should be conducted in-person or online. More details around in-person research and data collection need to be outlined for graduate and professional students. Requirements for all research responsibilities, including time spent, must be within the bounds of research assistant contracts.
9. Incoming Penn State international students are reporting that departments have stated that they will not be paid their Penn State stipend until they arrive in the United States. If the university is unable to support the students while they are abroad, Penn State should allow both domestic and international admitted graduate and professional students to defer their offers of admission for at least one year to allow for students to adjust their plans to the COVID pandemic while retaining their funding offers.
10. When the return to campus surveys were originally sent out, they were split between faculty/staff and students. Graduate and professional students were not asked about their concerns as instructors, and many of the questions on the student survey seemed geared towards undergraduates. We face greater difficulties than undergraduates when it comes to decisions about returning to campus because the nature of our teaching, coursework, and research obligations means that we have little or no choice but to continue without the possibility of leaves of absence. Graduate and professional students should be given a separate survey to address their unique concerns regarding reopening.

While we understand the difficult choices that Penn State must make for the upcoming academic semester, we urge you to consider the unique position graduate and professional students find themselves in when confronted with the reopening of the university. We hope that providing solutions to these concerns, while potentially difficult in the short term, will ultimately ensure the long-term health and well-being of not just graduate and professional students, but of the Penn State community at large.

On behalf of the graduate and professional student body, we respectfully request an itemized response within one week (by July 6th). Thank you for your time and we look forward to working with you through these challenging times.

Sincerely,