Resolution #70-05
The Graduate and Professional Student Association (GPSA)
The Pennsylvania State University

of the 70th Assembly
September 2nd 2020

Be it decided by the Assembly of Elected Delegates,

Statement of Support for the Coalition of Graduate Employees at Penn State
COVID-19 Justice
(Decided: [ Y / N / A ])

Nature of the Situation:

On June 14th 2020, Penn State announced its “Back to State” plans\(^1\) after a reported “three-month comprehensive planning process”. During this process, Penn State officials, including 250 faculty, staff and administrators, were charged with “developing [an] evidence-based decision-making processes aligned with public health and science”. The plan centered around the safe return of faculty and staff to research and administrative activities with a focus for the return of students to Penn State campuses.\(^1\)

We, GPSA, fully believe the task force and research conducted by the administration are not enough to ensure student safety and disease prevention, and do not represent the overwhelming safety concerns of students, faculty, staff and the Penn State community at large. On August 28, 2020 Centre County reported 27 new cases of COVID-19, all among University Park students, the largest reported increase in a single day for the county since the onset of the pandemic\(^2\). This trend is alarming and reaffirms that the administration has not taken student safety as seriously as it should. Furthermore, the increase occurred after Penn State performed extensive, but not comprehensive, pre-arrival testing among students. Penn State’s decision to conduct daily surveillance testing with only one percent of the university community -- compared to 100% of on-campus students being tested bi-weekly at the University of Illinois- Urbana-Champaign, and
100% of the campus community tested weekly at Boston University-- makes it highly likely that cases are being undercounted and underrepresented on our campuses³.

The administration’s actions demonstrate that they are not confident in their abilities to foster a safe and healthy community. In troubling contradiction to the confident language in the “Back to State” plan, the administration attempted to force students to sign a compact⁴ assuming full responsibility in case of COVID-19 related illness, and/or death: “I acknowledge that the Centers for Disease Control, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and the Pennsylvania State University have issued rules and precautions that may, or may not, be effective in mitigating the spread of COVID-19" and " I assume any and all risk of exposure to COVID-19 that may result from attending Penn State, or participating in Penn State activities, and I acknowledge that exposure or infection may result in personal injury, illness, permanent disability, or death". While the latter statement has since been amended, the language demonstrates that the university views community illness and death as foreseeable and acceptable risks.

The Back to State plan is flawed and will lead to unnecessary COVID-19 cases which may result in permanent negative health consequences and/or death. President Barron has asked students “Do you want to be the person responsible for sending everyone home?” This message of individual/student responsibility demonstrates to us that the university has instituted a plan that inadequately protects students, faculty, staff, and community members. We believe the Penn State administration has the power to continue fully supporting a remote learning scenario just as other institutions have done, like Michigan State University⁵, Notre Dame⁶, Princeton⁷, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill⁸ and many others.

In response to the Back to State plan, the Coalition for Graduate Employees (CGE) at Penn State has recently published a statement on social media⁹ accompanied by several demands. The statement reads “The only safe decision for the fall is to move to online instruction. The later Penn State chooses to make this decision, the more drastic the consequences.”

In addition to calling for full remote instruction, CGE outlines the following COVID justice demands:

1. Penn State must invest in resources for online pedagogy and commit to providing all materials necessary for instructors (e.g. computers, adequate internet, etc.). In this inevitable shift, grace periods must be provided to undergraduates, graduates, and faculty to prepare for the shift to remote instruction and any requirement to leave campus.

2. Penn State must pay for all COVID-19 related expenses including testing and treatment. This includes ensuring continued payment of stipends should COVID-19 prevent graduate students from completing their assistantship duties.

3. Penn State must provide financial support to all employees including both instructional and non instructional staff, at pre-COVID levels. This includes guaranteed extension of funding and assistantships in accordance with delays caused by campus shutdowns.

4. Penn State must have graduate student, faculty, staff, and other student representation on any and all decision-making boards regarding COVID-19.

5. In the event of fully-remote instruction, Penn State must ensure that international students continue to receive their assistantship stipend, and protect their visa/enrollment status.
Recommended Course of Action:
By adopting this resolution, the Graduate and Professional Student Association formally supports the demands outlined above, created by the Coalition of Graduate Employees (CGE) at Penn State. This will be communicated to the Vice President for Student Affairs, the Provost, and the President of Penn State by the Executive Board.

1 https://virusinfo.psu.edu/back-to-state
3 https://cjupsu.org/home
9 https://twitter.com/cge_psu?lang=en

Respectfully submitted,

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