Resolution # 70-08

The Graduate and Professional Student Association (GPSA)
The Pennsylvania State University

of the 70th Assembly
September 16th, 2020

Be it decided by the Assembly of Elected Delegates,

University Response to COVID-19: GPSA Concerns and Recommendations
(Decided: [ Y / N / A ])

Nature of the Situation:

The spread of COVID-19 has continued throughout both the Penn State and Centre County communities. As of September 11, 2020 the Penn State COVID-19 Dashboard has reported a cumulative 708 cases since testing began August 7, 2020. Furthermore, Centre County has reported 1,012 confirmed cases since monitoring began in March, with a large increase coinciding with the return of students. A total of 739 of those county cases are reported in the 16801, 16802, and 16803 area codes surrounding Penn State. These numbers have put Penn State and State College on the map. The New York Times recently published statistics indicating that State College is the #2 metro area where new cases of COVID-19 are rising the fastest, adjusted for population. What remains unsettling is the university’s response to COVID-19 in our community. On September 16, 2020 the Big 10 Conference announced the return of fall football, now scheduled to begin October 23rd. Regardless of whether fans are in the stadium, this will likely lead to congregation among students, both in bars/restaurants and in apartments/dormitories. Additionally, the Penn State Athletics reported 50 new positive cases of

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1 https://virusinfo.psu.edu/covid-19-dashboard
2 https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/disease/coronavirus/Pages/Cases.aspx
3 https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/disease/coronavirus/Pages/Cases.aspx
COVID-19 on September 16th, 2020, bringing the athlete positivity rate to greater than 5% which would normally trigger a forced pause on all athletic activities. Penn State has already shown a lackluster response to student congregations that flout social distancing guidelines. At the beginning of Fall 2020, a freshman gathering that went viral was given little rebuke other than a strongly worded letter for those who break COVID-19 guidelines (i.e. social distancing, mask requirements).5,7 Additionally, transparency remains an issue. The university still will not release the guidelines for what would trigger an earlier than expected move to online learning, despite concern from university and state college community members. Penn State’s COVID-19 response leaves much to be desired.

A comparison of the measures taken by other large universities with student populations comparable to that of Penn State’s highlights the lack of rigorous planning and a stringent testing protocol on Penn State’s part. While Penn State’s pre-arrival testing plan involved testing only students and employees arriving on campus from hotspot areas,5 other universities such as Purdue University and the University of Maryland, required all of its students to get tested before they were allowed on campus.6,7 Other universities also have routine testing protocols far more rigorous than that of Penn State’s. Twice a week, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign undertakes the massive task of testing all of its students and employees who report to buildings on campus,8 and has conducted at least 274,696 tests as of September 11, 2020.9 Some universities have also taken innovative measures for identifying and isolating cases before they become large-scale outbreaks. For instance, the University of Arizona is testing wastewater from dormitories in an attempt to promptly identify cases among students residing on campus, and successfully prevented an outbreak in late August using this technique.10 While the Penn State Go app allows students and employees to monitor any COVID symptoms on a daily basis, its usage is only encouraged and not required - an approach that differs from that of Drexel University, which uses a similar app for both mandatory symptom reporting and contact tracing.11

Comparing these measures taken by other universities to Penn State’s daily testing of 1% of the campus populations,12 combined with reporting numbers only twice a week,13 does little to alleviate the concerns about Penn State’s ability to effectively identify and isolate cases among the student body. Despite the recent increase in cases as of September 11, 2020,1 the university announced that it plans to make no changes to the plans for the fall semester.14 This is in sharp contrast to the measures taken by the State College Area High School, which announced an abrupt but not permanent shift to remote learning on September 4th, 2020, and plans to evaluate the situation on a week-by-week basis.15

5 https://studentaffairs.psu.edu/covidtesting
6 https://protect.purdue.edu/students/student-testing-details/
7 https://uhr.umd.edu/coronavirus/return-to-campus/covid-19-testing-information/
11 https://drexel.edu/coronavirus/health-safety/monitor-your-health/drexel-health-tracker/
12 https://news.psu.edu/story/627214/2020/07/30/administration/back-state-testing-contact-tracing-and-monitoring-plans
15 https://www.scsasd.org/Page/37975
Graduate and professional students not only come into contact with other members of the graduate community, but also undergraduate students. Graduate and professional students often share spaces with undergraduate students, such as laboratories and classrooms. This interaction increases the risk of infection and transmission among both student populations. While some graduate and professional students are not observing the recommended guidelines, the majority of reported instances of guideline non-compliance resides within the undergraduate student population. In order to make the current environment safe for graduate and professional students, a clear course of action must be created to hold students accountable for non-adherence, whether they are members of the undergraduate or graduate and professional student body.

In addition to the health risk that graduate and professional students endure, graduate instructors are particularly prone to disruption if and when the move to online learning occurs. Often, professors rely heavily on teaching assistants to ensure the structure and flow of the class is appropriate. This means that graduate instructors are largely left to operate behind the scenes to move an in-person or hybrid class to completely online. This kind of labor impedes graduate and professional students’ ability to perform research, takes away from time spent completing important required milestones (qualifying exams, theses defenses, comprehensive exams, etc.), and goes unpaid and unrecognized by the university. Ultimately, this can result in delayed graduation, regardless of a student’s funding. If the university were transparent with the thresholds that would trigger a shift to online instruction and report the current state of that threshold, graduate instructors would be able to prepare for the onslaught of work. Additionally, resources should be extended to graduate students through the Keep Teaching platform. Specifically, graduate instructors should have access to 1 on 1 Tech Tutors (as faculty do) throughout the semester and provisions should be made should the university pivot to remote learning earlier than expected.7

Graduate and professional instructors are also particularly prone to the burden of Zoom fatigue, which will increase if and when learning moves to completely online. Zoom fatigue describes the tiredness, anxiety, or worry resulting from the overuse of virtual meeting platforms.16 Zoom fatigue occurs as a result of how we process information over video compared to in-person communication. With the switch to online learning, graduate students have and will continue to experience increased time spent in Zoom meetings related to their responsibilities as teachers and teaching assistants, in addition to time spent in Zoom meetings related to their own coursework and research. This can result in decreased productivity and contribute to mental and physical health risks.

Journalists and researchers have suggested several methods for combating Zoom fatigue, including shortened meetings, incorporating breaks, and reducing on screen stimuli by avoiding video use.17,18 The administration at Fordham University has suggested that during remote learning, class meeting times should be reduced by half or even two-thirds and compensated with added asynchronous work to combat Zoom fatigue and promote student engagement.19 The Penn State

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17 https://hbr.org/2020/04/how-to-combat-zoom-fatigue
18 https://connected.unmc.edu/blog/2020/05/05/how-to-mitigate-and-combat-zoom-fatigue/
administration should promote healthy Zoom use by considering the adjustment of synchronous meeting lengths and implementing policies allowing students and teachers to avoid video use during class meetings.

**Recommended Course of Action:**

The Penn State GPSA formally recommends the university take the following actions. These recommended actions will be communicated to the Vice President for Student Affairs, the Provost, and the President of Penn State by the Executive Board.

1. Free COVID-19 testing and treatment for all on-campus graduate and professional students who are teaching or practicing in-person. Testing should occur at least every week.

2. The university should update the COVID-19 dashboard daily, rather than twice a week. Graduate and professional students, as well as undergraduates, faculty, and staff, have a right to know of the conditions in which they work.

3. The university should provide information on what would trigger a complete shift to online learning. The information provided should include but not be limited to: the prevalence and incidence rates of COVID-19 cases in the Penn State community, as well as local mortality rate.

4. Resources to assist in an earlier-than-expected transition to online learning should be provided to graduate and professional students who teach.

5. The university should promote healthy Zoom use and accommodate the added strains of remote learning by shortening the amount of time spent in synchronous online classes and prohibit penalization of students who opt to use voice only options.

6. Explicit and stringent penalties for students that do not adhere to social distancing and mask wearing.

7. The university should immediately retract their recently announced plan to start the football season in late October. The football season should not be allowed to start in the present public health conditions.

8. The university should advocate for its international students who may choose to travel over winter break and face issues in re-entering the country if any sort of travel ban is imposed.

Respectfully submitted,

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President _______________________________ Affirm Veto

The Graduate and Professional Student Association