

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 ])

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**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.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Centre County has reported 1,012 confirmed cases since monitoring began in March, with a large increase coinciding with the return of students.<sup>2</sup> A total of 739 of those county cases are reported in the 16801, 16802, and 16803 area codes surrounding Penn State.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 .5 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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<sup>1</sup> <https://virusinfo.psu.edu/covid-19-dashboard>  
<sup>2</sup> <https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/disease/coronavirus/Pages/Cases.aspx>  
<sup>3</sup> <https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/disease/coronavirus/Pages/Cases.aspx>  
<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/23/upshot/five-ways-to-monitor-coronavirus-outbreak-us.html>

17 COVID-19 on September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020, bringing the athlete positivity rate to greater than 5% which  
18 would normally trigger a forced pause on all athletic activities. Penn State has already shown a  
19 lackluster response to student congregations that flout social distancing guidelines. At the  
20 beginning of Fall 2020, a freshman gathering that went viral was given little rebuke other than a  
21 strongly worded letter for those who break COVID-19 guidelines (i.e. social distancing, mask  
22 requirements).<sup>6,7</sup> Additionally, transparency remains an issue. The university still will not release  
23 the guidelines for what would trigger an earlier than expected move to online learning, despite  
24 concern from university and state college community members. Penn State's COVID-19 response  
25 leaves much to be desired.

26  
27 A comparison of the measures taken by other large universities with student populations  
28 comparable to that of Penn State's highlights the lack of rigorous planning and a stringent testing  
29 protocol on Penn State's part. While Penn State's pre-arrival testing plan involved testing only  
30 students and employees arriving on campus from hotspot areas,<sup>5</sup> other universities such as Purdue  
31 University and the University of Maryland, required all of its students to get tested before they  
32 were allowed on campus.<sup>6,7</sup> Other universities also have routine testing protocols far more rigorous  
33 than that of Penn State's. Twice a week, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign undertakes  
34 the massive task of testing all of its students and employees who report to buildings on campus,<sup>8</sup>  
35 and has conducted at least 274,696 tests as of September 11, 2020.<sup>9</sup> Some universities have also  
36 taken innovative measures for identifying and isolating cases before they become large-scale  
37 outbreaks. For instance, the University of Arizona is testing wastewater from dormitories in an  
38 attempt to promptly identify cases among students residing on campus, and successfully prevented  
39 an outbreak in late August using this technique.<sup>10</sup> While the Penn State Go app allows students  
40 and employees to monitor any COVID symptoms on a daily basis, its usage is only encouraged  
41 and not required - an approach that differs from that of Drexel University, which uses a similar  
42 app for both mandatory symptom reporting and contact tracing.<sup>11</sup>

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

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<sup>5</sup> <https://studentaffairs.psu.edu/covidtesting>

<sup>6</sup> <https://protect.purdue.edu/students/student-testing-details/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://uhr.umd.edu/coronavirus/return-to-campus/covid-19-testing-information/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/US/inside-university-illinois-massive-covid-19-testing-operation/story?id=72686799>

<sup>9</sup> [https://splunk-public.machinedata.illinois.edu/en-US/app/uofi\\_shield\\_public\\_APP/home](https://splunk-public.machinedata.illinois.edu/en-US/app/uofi_shield_public_APP/home)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/08/poop-tests-stop-covid-19-outbreak-university-arizona>

<sup>11</sup> <https://drexel.edu/coronavirus/health-safety/monitor-your-health/drexel-health-tracker/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://news.psu.edu/story/627214/2020/07/30/administration/back-state-testing-contact-tracing-and-monitoring-plans>

<sup>13</sup> <https://news.psu.edu/story/630309/2020/09/01/campus-life/91-penn-state-releases-weekend-covid-19-testing-results>

<sup>14</sup> <https://news.psu.edu/story/631457/2020/09/11/campus-life/911-covid-19-dashboard-updated>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.scasd.org/Page/37975>

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53 Graduate and professional students not only come into contact with other members of the graduate  
54 community, but also undergraduate students. Graduate and professional students often share  
55 spaces with undergraduate students, such as laboratories and classrooms. This interaction increases  
56 the risk of infection and transmission among both student populations. While some graduate and  
57 professional students are not observing the recommended guidelines, the majority of reported  
58 instances of guideline non-compliance resides within the undergraduate student population. In  
59 order to make the current environment safe for graduate and professional students, a clear course  
60 of action must be created to hold students accountable for non-adherence, whether they are  
61 members of the undergraduate or graduate and professional student body.

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

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

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

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<sup>16</sup><https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/the-desk-the-mental-health-lawyer/202005/virtual-platforms-are-helpful-tools-can-add-our-stress>

<sup>17</sup> <https://hbr.org/2020/04/how-to-combat-zoom-fatigue>

<sup>18</sup> <https://connected.unmc.edu/blog/2020/05/05/how-to-mitigate-and-combat-zoom-fatigue/>

<sup>19</sup><https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/08/19/advice-how-make-zoom-classes-energizing-and-community-building-opinion>

93 administration should promote healthy Zoom use by considering the adjustment of synchronous  
94 meeting lengths and implementing policies allowing students and teachers to avoid video use  
95 during class meetings.

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97 **Recommended Course of Action:**

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

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- 103 1. Free COVID-19 testing and treatment for all on-campus graduate and professional students  
104 who are teaching or practicing in-person. Testing should occur at least every week.
- 105 2. The university should update the COVID-19 dashboard daily, rather than twice a week.  
106 Graduate and professional students, as well as undergraduates, faculty, and staff, have a  
107 right to know of the conditions in which they work.
- 108 3. The university should provide information on what would trigger a complete shift to on-  
109 line learning. The information provided should include but not be limited to: the prevalence  
110 and incidence rates of COVID-19 cases in the Penn State community, as well as local  
111 mortality rate.
- 112 4. Resources to assist in an earlier-than-expected transition to online learning should be  
113 provided to graduate and professional students who teach.
- 114 5. The university should promote healthy Zoom use and accommodate the added strains of  
115 remote learning by shortening the amount of time spent in synchronous online classes and  
116 prohibit penalization of students who opt to use voice only options.
- 117 6. Explicit and stringent penalties for students that do not adhere to social distancing and mask  
118 wearing.
- 119 7. The university should immediately retract their recently announced plan to start the football  
120 season in late October. The football season should not be allowed to start in the present  
121 public health conditions.
- 122 8. The university should advocate for its international students who may choose to travel over  
123 winter break and face issues in re-entering the country if any sort of travel ban is imposed.

Respectfully submitted,

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Affirm

Veto

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The Graduate and Professional Student Association