

August 9, 2020

Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

Legislative Office Building, Room 1800

Hartford, CT 06106

Re: Colleges and Universities Re-Opening Listening Session

Dear Members of the Higher Education Committee:

My name is Valerie Martin and I am a resident of Hartford, CT. I am writing as a concerned citizen who has many colleagues and friends who are debating sending their children to school.

As I think about colleges/universities re-opening in 2 weeks, I am filled with increased anxiety and concern. I question if we are setting ourselves back and believe we are prematurely moving into this plan. Isabel Kershner, a reporter in Jerusalem and Pam Beeluck, a health and science writer, in their New York Times article write, "As the United States and other countries anxiously consider how to re-open, Israel, one of the first countries to do so, illustrates the dangers of moving too precipitously". Israel was pretty confident that they had beaten the virus and invited the entire student body back in late May. Within days, infections were reported at a Jerusalem High School and which finally "mushroomed into the largest outbreak in a single school in Israel, possibly the world". It eventually spread to the students' homes, other schools and neighborhoods, infecting hundreds of students, teachers and relatives. Israel advised other countries not to do what they did. The lesson, experts say, is that even communities that have gotten the spread of the virus under control need to take strict precautions. Dr. Hagai Levine, a professor of epidemiology at Hebrew University-Hadassah School of Public Health states, "If there is a low number of cases, there is an illusion that the disease is over- But it's a complete illusion".

We are dealing with an airborne virus that is deadly. Before students and faculty step into their classrooms, the university needs to be looking at the ventilation systems in their old buildings. Research suggests that risk is highest in crowded indoor spaces with poor ventilation. At CCSU, some professors are expected to teach a class of 90 students 2x a week for a prolonged period in a building which is well known to have ventilation issues. Why would we allow so many students to be in a classroom setting that large when the CDC advises workplace settings to use videoconferencing for meetings when possible, hold meetings in open, well ventilated spaces and consider adjusting or postponing large meetings or gatherings. This is an accident waiting to happen. Dorms, which are congregate settings, (and poorly ventilated), are also breeding grounds for the coronavirus. We can expect college students to share many spaces, bathrooms, hanging out in their dorm rooms where their masks will be removed, eating together, studying together, "hooking up" and sleeping with one another.

Another major concern is around COVID-19 testing. At CCSU, for example, students are expected to take a COVID-19 test at least 2 weeks prior to moving into their dorms. What happens if

they get exposed after they take the test (for example, attend a party before moving onto campus or engage in some form of risky behavior)? How is this plan keeping students and faculty safe? They can easily bring the virus onto campus exposing their roommate, peers and faculty (and may be asymptomatic). Since CCSU is not doing any other testing, how would one know if the students have the virus? Is the university going to wait until it is too late? Many of the students have jobs off campus, relationships with people off campus and/or at other universities. They will be attending parties on and off campus and visiting family members. This is a plan that is going to have some serious repercussions. Governor Lamont and Public Health Commissioner, Dr. Deidre S. Gifford even expressed concern with recent COVID -19 outbreak clusters among teens and young adults in Connecticut. Commuter students and faculty will not be expected to take a COVID -19 test. People are not taking this pandemic seriously. By re-opening our state, this gave people, particularly teens and young adults a false sense of security. CCSU really needs to revise its re-opening plan should they decide not to go fully online (which would be safer and keep people alive). All students should be mandated to take a COVID-19 test prior to moving on campus. Those whose results are negative should be allowed to move in, but undergo another round of testing and should not be allowed to leave campus grounds for 2 weeks. Throughout the semester, there should be more tests. Testing is essential. All commuter students, faculty and staff should be tested before starting classes as well. Anyone who tests positive must quarantine at home for 14 days and should be expected to take another test before they return to campus.

We want to keep our coronavirus cases low and keep people safe. It appears as though university administrators are very much aware of the fact that students and faculty may lose their lives and have sent COVID-19 waiver forms to students. This is very unfortunate, because people do not have to die. Administration has made the decision to not go fully on-line and does not appear to be listening to faculty concerns. Are there any other options that we can think of? I understand that universities are concerned about going into financial exigency, but that should not be the priority. This is a moral issue. We need to think about the safety of the students and faculty and think about other options. Possibly waiting another semester? Starting school several weeks later? A year later until we have a better sense of how the coronavirus will play out? Holding classes outdoors? Just starting on-line classes? Changing the ventilation system, adding air purifiers in classrooms (research has shown that air conditioners and fans spread the virus as well). Could you please look into this? We do not need any more casualties.

Thank you,

Valerie R. Martin