

**Testimony to the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee
of the Connecticut General Assembly
for the**

**LISTENING SESSION REGARDING RE-OPENING COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES
August 13, 2020**

Senator Haskell, Representative Turco, and Members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee, thank you for seeking input on responsible re-opening of colleges and universities in Connecticut. I am a Professor of public health at Southern Connecticut State University with 46 years of faculty service. I bring you the perspective of my field.

As you know, science is the basis of making sound policy decisions; among other things, here is what science is telling us about coronavirus:

- It is highly contagious, even when symptoms are mild.
- College students are susceptible and can suffer severe illness and death.
- It is airborne, lingers and can travel 16 feet in indoor spaces, challenging the sufficiency of a 6-foot radius as a protective bubble.
- Minority populations, prominently represented in our state universities and community colleges, suffer disproportionately from the disease.
- A sound framework for re-opening requires faithful wearing of masks, screening, a well-defined program of testing, and effective contact tracing.
- Those in their 60s and above are at heightened risk for infection, severe illness, and death.

In Connecticut, we are about to embark on a natural experiment, with students, faculty and staff, in a sense, as human research participants. You are like the “human investigations committee” with responsibility to determine if risks have been minimized and made known to participants, if participants have given “informed consent,” and if the system’s financial incentives, like opening residence halls, present a conflict of interest.

Other speakers have identified areas where we have fallen short on guaranteeing the safety of students and employees – insufficient testing at the universities; no testing at the 12 community colleges; no plan to screen students, staff and faculty members as they enter academic buildings; no acknowledgment of age is a risk factor. The lower level of those protective strategies at institutions with the most vulnerable students, including minority populations that are most adversely affected by coronavirus, is less like a natural experiment, and more like Russian roulette. Can any of us justify such a disparity of protection as fair?

And here is another glaring deficit. There is no plan to make sure that information on cases among students, faculty and staff will be readily available. I believe this calls for an executive order from the Governor, a mandate to make sure that there is complete transparency in real-time in the form of daily reporting of the cases that occur on our campuses.

I respectfully conclude with this: The SARS-CoV-2 virus has not changed. It is as virulent now as it was last March. Connecticut's currently favorable numbers are the result of changes in human behavior, guided by public health experts and elected officials. By contrast we have seen that premature and poorly planned "re-openings" have been disastrous. Let us not be the next example on the evening news of a revisited outbreak resulting from neglecting to do those things that are so plainly necessary.

Respectfully submitted,

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