

As young people drive infection spikes, college faculty members fight for the right to teach remotely

“Our expectation is that faculty who are able to teach will return to the classroom,” a Penn State spokesman said, with exceptions for teachers with health problems. (Matt Rourke/AP)

By [Danielle Douglas-Gabriel](#)

July 1, 2020 at 2:00 p.m. EDT

As a new academic year approaches, colleges and universities across the country say they are taking every precaution to safely bring their campuses back to life. But with [coronavirus](#) cases surging, especially among young people, college faculty members are demanding the right to teach remotely this fall — no questions asked.

Thousands of professors, increasingly rattled by reopening plans that they say place tuition revenue above their well-being, have signed petitions calling for more flexibility to teach remotely. They argue they should not be forced to disclose medical information or make a case for keeping themselves and their families safe in the middle of a pandemic that has [killed more than 125,000 Americans](#).

In the rush to bring students to campus, professors ask: What about us?

“Football players have the right to attend classes remotely,” said Sarah Townsend, an associate professor of Spanish and Portuguese at Pennsylvania State University. “Yet faculty . . . are being expected to expose themselves to contagion with no more guarantee than a very sloppy plan.”

Nearly 1,100 faculty members across 24 Penn State campuses have signed [a letter](#) urging the administration to give them autonomy to teach remotely without requiring health records for justification. Faculty members at several other schools have made similar appeals, including the University of Notre Dame, Appalachian State University, North Carolina State University, Boston University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

In Virginia, professors at James Madison University, George Mason University and Virginia Commonwealth University have signed similar petitions.

Penn State, like other schools, is requiring masks, enhancing cleaning, testing and social distancing as it welcomes back some 96,000 students statewide this fall. Penn State

spokesman Wyatt DuBois said the university will make adjustments for employees who are immunocompromised, are otherwise at high risk or live with someone at risk. “Safety is our first priority,” DuBois said. “Our expectation is that faculty who are able to teach will return to the classroom as part of a flexible approach to in-class instruction that will include remote learning too. We are asking faculty to develop their teaching plans . . . and to discuss them with their unit and department leads.”

But Townsend, who has the autoimmune disease lupus, said faculty members have been given no assurances that their requests will be honored or decisions can be appealed. She also worries that [adjunct instructors](#) without job protections will feel pressure to teach in person or risk being passed over for a course.

With spotty sick leave and health care, adjunct professors worry about the spread of coronavirus

“In a few colleges and departments, sympathetic deans or department heads are stating that everyone will have the right to choose, yet this contradicts what faculty in most other colleges and departments are hearing,” Townsend said.

At Boston University, Russell Powell, a philosophy professor, said despite the administration permitting exemptions from face-to-face instruction, departments have been told they will be limited. Faculty members were given one week to submit paperwork and no clarity on whether they can appeal a rejected request.

“They’re using some kind of criteria that was developed deliberately without any input from the faculty to make decisions,” said Powell, who created a petition that yielded 1,400 signatures from faculty and graduate assistants. “This is a moral issue. Even if I can take leave, it breaks my heart that my colleagues may feel forced to return to the classroom.”

A spokesman for BU pointed to a memo, sent last week by Provost and Chief Academic Officer Jean Morrison, as evidence that the university has worked alongside faculty members and taken their concerns to heart in planning to reopen. Powell disputes that assertion and says if it were true, faculty members would not have to jump over so many hurdles.

A common thread in the petitions is the belief that everyone deserves the right to teach remotely regardless of their health or age. With so little known about the virus, faculty members worry about the risks to everyone.

“I’m 52. I’m in pretty good health, but faculty here are terrified,” said Michael Behrent, a history professor at Appalachian State University in North Carolina. “There is no serious plan for covid testing in the fall. We have 20,000 students, and when they come back in August, the town is also frightened that we’re bringing cases here.”

Appalachian State spokeswoman Megan Hayes said the provost has been working with deans and department chairs to determine the teaching preferences of faculty members.

“With each new development,” she said in an email, “we assess, review, apply what it means for our campus and work to minimize the stress and strain on the members of our campus community.”

The tension between faculty members and their schools is borne out of frustration and distrust. Eager to get students back into classrooms this fall, some colleges are pledging to hold most courses in person with little input from instructors. Even when schools assure faculty members of their willingness to be flexible, some instructors say, that promise has its limits.

Jason Helms, a tenured English professor at Texas Christian University, said he was stunned when the private school in Fort Worth denied his request to work remotely this fall. Helms worries about bringing home the virus to his 2-year-old daughter who has a congenital heart defect and sought accommodation under the Americans With Disabilities Act.

TCU said Helms did not meet the criteria as a caregiver. Livid, he sent a [tweet](#) about the ADA denial that went viral. Soon after, Helms said, the head of human resources called and encouraged him to make another request under the Family and Medical Leave Act. But Helms found that route puzzling because he wants to teach, just not in the confines of a classroom.

“If I’m taking leave to work remotely, what if I fall down the stairs and need to take leave? Can I take leave while I’m on leave?” Helms questioned. “It shouldn’t be this complicated to protect my daughter.”

In the time since Helms’s case went public, TCU has updated its policy to give faculty the choice of offering their courses online. Details of the plan are being hashed out. Still, Helms, who had decided to stay out of the classroom no matter what, said he was “exhilarated, relieved and exhausted” after learning of the university’s decision. In an email to faculty members announcing the policy Thursday, TCU’s provost and vice chancellor for academic affairs, Teresa Abi-Nader Dahlberg, said: “In your messages, I hear anxiety, frustration, optimism, grace. I remain focused on developing solutions that keep our community intact, especially during this difficult time.”

Arlene S. Kanter, director of the disability law and policy program at Syracuse University, said there are legal protections for faculty members concerned about the risk of returning to campus.

Those with disabilities or conditions that put them at higher risk for severe illness from the novel coronavirus can ask to work from home under ADA rules. Even though the law does not require accommodations for family members of people who are disabled, employers can be flexible to limit the risk of exposure, Kanter said. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has encouraged colleges to provide that flexibility. “The role of law is important,” Kanter said. “But the law should always be considered the minimum. Universities say they are committed to inclusion, but to be respectful to your

community, you have to do the utmost to protect the welfare of your community. That means going beyond what the law may require.”