

Faculty push back on how colleges are planning for the fall

On some campuses, proposals for how to restart the academic year have exacerbated longtime conflicts around governance and communication.

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At the University of Pittsburgh, the student newspaper seems to get news about fall reopening plans before the faculty.

In early June, the public research university emailed plans for the fall semester to incoming first-year students — but not to faculty members or staff. The university told the student-run Pitt News this was inadvertent, but four days later, the publication ran another story about fall plans based on an update to the academic calendar that hadn't been formally communicated to faculty. Later in June, it reported that students could choose to attend classes online or in-person, but faculty members reportedly said the university hadn't explained how to implement that approach.

Even the student journalists saw a problem.

"We're thrilled that we've been of service ... but really, the administration should be taking the lead on getting this information to students and faculty," the Pitt News editorial board wrote on June 23.

Some faculty members are organizing in response. A petition is circulating that argues the university is having instructors ask too

much of their students and colleagues by suggesting faculty members could ask someone else to be in the room to facilitate while they are teaching remotely. However, a Pitt spokesperson as well as University Senate President Chris Bonneau say this is not a requirement. Faculty members are also raising concerns about the logistical demands of hybrid courses.

In an email to Education Dive, a university spokesperson emphasized that the institution is committed to communicating with campus in a "transparent and timely manner." But, they added, "[w]e understand the concerns that have been raised, and are working to address them as we move forward with our planning for the Fall and beyond."

Across the U.S., faculty members concerned about virus safety, or unhappy they were excluded from the decision-making process, are pushing back against administrators. While safety concerns are at the forefront, higher education experts say the virus is forcing confrontations on longstanding issues, including faculty input into administrative decisions.

Faculty at many institutions perceive shared governance as having been watered down over time, said Lorenzo Baber, a professor and the higher ed program chair at Loyola University Chicago. He believes that tension is being exacerbated by the crisis conditions created by the pandemic and its fiscal effects.

"I think what faculty feel is that administrative leaders in general have kind of doubled down on that move away from shared governance," Baber said.

Focus on shared governance

Faculty members' concern isn't only for their health or that of their families, though they tend to be older than most students and may

also have health conditions that make them more vulnerable to the virus.

They're also worried about their students and communities.

Andrew Koricich, a higher ed professor at Appalachian State University, in Boone, North Carolina, expects the local healthcare system will be quickly overwhelmed if there's an outbreak on campus.

"When this starts to get worse ... and students line up at bars, go to apartment parties, all these things that we know will happen, it's not going to take very long" to fill area hospital beds, he said.

There are also concerns about the mechanics of teaching. At Pitt, which plans to offer its fall classes online and in person, faculty members were concerned about the perceived directive to recruit another instructor to be in the classroom while they taught remotely. In the petition, they question whether faculty, staff or students would feel free to say no if they were asked to sub in. A university spokesperson said students or staff helping out wouldn't be compensated for the time.

But pushback from faculty members often has as much to do with how the decisions are made as what approach is picked. Purdue University engineering education professor Alice Pawley, who heads the university's chapter of the American Association of University Professors, is circulating a petition asking the university's administration for the freedom to decide what and how they teach this fall, as well as for stronger shared governance.

"There are a lot of faculty who feel they are being pressured into teaching in the classroom and they don't want to," Pawley said. "There are other faculty who are perfectly fine teaching face-to-face but haven't been given the choice the way they should be."

A Purdue spokesperson said the university continues to seek faculty members' input and has "taken extensive actions" to create safe classrooms.

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Lorenzo Baber

Professor and the higher ed program chair, Loyola University Chicago

Sarah Townsend, a professor of Spanish and Portuguese at Pennsylvania State University, said amplifying faculty voices was one of her motivations for helping organize an open letter from faculty, staff and grad students across the 24-campus system.

"The faculty have not been involved in any of the decision-making that has gone on around the pandemic, either in terms of reopening for the fall or in terms of how to respond to the economic crisis," said Townsend, who works at the flagship's main campus.

A Penn State spokesperson said the university has made it clear that it does not expect high-risk faculty to teach in person, and it continues to work with faculty and staff on its fall plans.

Top-down communication is not a problem at every university. Baber said his institution, Loyola University Chicago, "did a really good job of asking us at the beginning what we think. And at the end, they had some options for us." However, he added, "I think there's a gap in that middle, that we don't get to be involved in the process itself."

'A culture of fear'

The open letter from Penn State instructors and staff also pointed out job security as a concern. Colleges anticipate losing substantial revenue as a result of the pandemic, and they employed 161,600 fewer people in May than in February, according to seasonally adjusted figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Against that backdrop, Penn State introduced new contract language in May making it clear that non-tenure-track faculty are at-will employees — meaning they could be fired at any time. That was always true, but pointing it out made Townsend concerned it was a sign of bad things to come.

A Penn State spokesperson released a statement attributed to Kathleen Bieschke, vice provost for faculty affairs, saying the change was intended to "give our deans and chancellors the certainty they needed to offer fixed-term contracts when they might not have otherwise done so."

"We worded the language carefully to indicate that Penn State and the hiring unit must be facing serious budgetary and enrollment challenges ... if considering ending a contract," the statement reads.

Leslie Gonzales, an education professor at Michigan State University, noted that graduate instructors, postdocs and adjuncts may feel less free to push back against in-person teaching mandates.

"I think you see some variation in terms of how people are able to navigate a response based on their position and their status," she said.

Even tenure-track faculty may worry.

"Folks are nervous to speak out," said Brittany Williams, a higher ed professor at St. Cloud State University, in Minnesota. "There's certainly a culture of fear related to job safety and job security, as permanent positions are becoming scarce in higher education."

But academics who study higher ed have some sympathy for the decisions facing administrators in light of current revenue woes. Loyola's Baber said faculty members aren't hostile, they just want to be heard.

"We have invested ourselves in this space," he said. "We don't want to see that go away or be harmed, but at the same time, I think we want to have a voice ... throughout the process."