

January 10, 2022

Dear Provost Folks,

Like many in the University of Arizona community, we were dismayed to hear that our administration will not institute temporary online teaching at the beginning of the semester to mitigate the rapid surge in the Omicron variant. A growing number of institutions of higher learning, including Harvard University, the University of Texas-Austin, Michigan State University, and the University of California system, will start the semester virtually to curb the spread of Omicron.

As you know, Arizona is once again on its way to becoming a national and global hotspot for per capita infections and is the second worst state in the US in pandemic death rates. With no attempt made to assure the adequate ventilation safety of all classrooms, the lack of a concrete plan to distribute N95 masks to staff and students, and weak enforcement of masking requirements during the fall Delta surge, we worry that our entire community is subject to even more dangerous conditions than this time last year. Preemptive claims that Omicron is “mild” do not take into account the growing body of literature on the disabling effects of long covid, nor is the administration qualified to predict mild outcomes for all employees, students, and community members. Our healthcare system is overwhelmed and on the brink of collapse. The calculated acceptance of viral spread and its collateral damage has no place in a top-tier academic institution that prides itself on being one of the best universities in which to learn, research and work.

The memo of January 7th reasserts that all instructors are expected to deliver courses “in the modality students signed up for.” This should never preclude instructors from convening a class session or sessions remotely if they see fit. Any attempt to prevent instructors (tenured, career track, tenure track, or graduate students) from using pedagogical techniques and technologies that are standard tools of the COVID pandemic era and pre-COVID teaching - including D2L, email, and Zoom - is an infringement on our academic freedom. Our CAFT Statement on Academic Freedom approved by the Faculty Senate in 2009 clearly states that “academic freedom protects faculty from any and all arbitrary interferences with their ability to carry out their missions in research, creative activities, teaching, service and outreach.” As instructors, we take into account our own health, our family’s health, and the health of our communities as we carry out our mission. We also assess students’ health risks based on attendance patterns, observable symptoms, and student health status updates delivered in confidence. Logistical matters such as the progress, consistency, and equity of course delivery to all students can only be decided by individual instructors. These matters must not be dictated by those who do not work in a classroom.

If the central administration will not guarantee safe classrooms, then individual instructors must use their discretion to prevent disease spread and ensure equitable delivery of curriculum to all students. Any attempt to discipline instructors for using standard remote learning

technologies as part of their course will be seen as a breach of academic freedom. Individual instructors are endowed with academic freedom not only to teach content they deem necessary, but also the academic freedom to deliver that content in ways they deem necessary.

For many of us, conscience dictates practice of public health evidence-based ethics to prevent the spread of disease. Surely this is as important a consideration as religious objections to masking and vaccination. No business model is worth the health of our employees, students, and community, especially our most vulnerable people and our critical healthcare systems. The challenges of the financial management of the university can and will be addressed by a healthy, respectful and collaborative shared governance process. Please join us, Provost Folks, in protecting our university and our state with all the tools and power at your disposal, including temporary remote learning. Thank you in advance.

Sincerely,

Currently signed by 125 UA instructors (and still accepting signatures)