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Faculty Senate

August 10, 2021

Dear President Wilson:

The Faculty Senate Officers feel compelled to ask: Is the University of Iowa doing enough to protect campus this fall?

Think back to August 2020. Iowa students, faculty, and staff were preparing to start the semester amid the Covid-19 pandemic. No vaccines had been made available yet. There was no mandatory testing, except in athletics. If members of the UI community tested positive, making that data public required voluntary disclosure. Pursuant to guidance from the CDC and other public health agencies, the UI mandated masks inside campus buildings and shifted most classes to an online or hybrid format. And through it all, our community saw a dramatic spike in Covid cases. Over 1,100 UI students self-reported as positive by September 2. Iowa City made international news as one of the most infamous viral hotspots in the world.

Are things shaping up differently this year? The plan is for a mostly “normal” in-person learning experience. Yet, with last August still in our memories, many questions remain about the viability of the UI’s current virus strategy. Thankfully, now there is a widely available and successful vaccine. UI researchers were key to the vaccine’s development. But the UI is not mandating the vaccine. No data is available on how many students, faculty, and staff will be arriving on campus fully vaccinated. The campus incentive plan is to offer students a \$10 gift card in exchange for proof of vaccination. That’s it. Unlike our peer institutions, we are not offering incentives like scholarship lotteries or additional health fees for the unvaccinated. Maybe those ideas wouldn’t work. We’re not epidemiologists nor public health experts. But those people are around, and UI leadership should explain in detail why its current vaccine policy will—or will not—adequately protect students, faculty, and staff when classes resume.

What about masking? Masking is taking on new urgency due to the emergence of the highly contagious Delta variant. Throughout the pandemic, the UI [said](#) it would follow the guidance of the CDC and the Big 10. Now, the CDC [recommends](#) masking indoors, even for fully vaccinated persons, because of the Delta surge. The Press-Citizen [reports](#) that Iowa is the only Big 10 institution without a mask requirement. The Press-Citizen also quotes the Board of Regents’ spokesperson as saying nothing in Iowa law prohibits Regents universities from requiring masks. Presumably UI leadership will remain true to its word and follow the CDC and Big 10 by issuing a mask mandate for the Fall? So far, the answer appears to be “no.” Again, we’re not epidemiologists nor public health experts. However, access to those experts is readily available on our campus, and the UI should explain how the current mask approach will—or will not—sufficiently protect our community.

Classes start soon. CovidActNow.org [says](#) local ICUs are 99% full. There are a lot of confused and worried people on campus. So, our plea to UI leadership: please explain the basis for your public health decision-making. Is it driven by science? Are there actions you want to take but cannot because of political pressure? On masks, is the UI right and the rest of the Big 10 wrong? Please be transparent and tell us. That way, history can judge who should be held responsible for the success or the failure of the UI's latest Covid response.

Respectfully yours,

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