

We are writing on behalf of the Augusta University (AU) Chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). We are addressing Provost Caughman and Chief of Staff Keen as the two Project Leaders for the AU Reopening initiative tasked by the University System of Georgia (USG)

We appreciate both Augusta University's and AU Health's commitment to keeping the faculty informed and basing all opening activities on the best practices of medicine and epidemiology, as evidenced by the preliminary changes on campus – signage, social distancing guidelines, allowing faculty to require masks in laboratories, increased emphasis on hygiene, etc. Along these lines and as a group response to widespread faculty concerns and the on-going discussions between AU and the USG on this vital matter, the chapter would like to bring the following concerns to your attention, along with specific requests for policy changes and information. We recognize the USG is managing these recommendations under shifting state and federal guidance, and to that end, we promote the use of the latest scientific evidence to guide our requests.

Masks: The current policy of “strongly encouraging” rather than requiring mask-wearing as mandated by the USG is insufficient and is not based on sound public health guidance and scientific evidence from a systematic review and meta-analysis published in *The Lancet* ([Chu et al., 2020](#)). The CDC has reiterated repeatedly that masks (and other face coverings) in concert with social distancing are by far the most effective means to reduce transmission of respiratory diseases, including COVID-19. Furthermore, science tells us that COVID-19 is spread through droplets. We have a responsibility to protect our colleagues and students. Having a mask mandate is the responsible choice.

Policy Change Request: Whether allowed by USG policy or not, the AU administration should publicly advocate making mask wearing mandatory when on campus other than in a private setting. AU should issue a “Statement of Intent” which addresses masks and carry out that intent as soon as legally allowed to do so. Wearing a mask should be required inside buildings other than private offices, and this practice should be mandatory as a precondition to enter any building or hallway on campus, including classrooms. The only exception should be granted to those with documented medical conditions that prevent them from wearing a mask/face covering (and they should take other measures to reduce exposure and transmission risk).

Testing: Large-scale testing is necessary to improve Augusta University's ability to identify those with COVID-19 on campus. Given ongoing case rises in the state of [Georgia](#), it is likely that many dozens of students returning to campus and employees returning from vacations will be infectious, potentially with asymptomatic or mild infections.

Policy Change Request: Reliable broad testing of all students, faculty, and staff returning to campus should be conducted on campus by AU Health. All students should face mandatory testing on arrival, early enough that results are known before classes start, even if this requires pre-arrival testing or that the start of classes for individual students be postponed until test results are known. Recent news articles regarding the return of student athletes to campuses in the Southeast for fall team sports indicate that a significant percent of them tested positive for the SARS-CoV-2 virus but were asymptomatic; they were immediately quarantined in order not to infect their teammates and the

coaching staff. This should be the norm for all students at AU, including but not limited to student athletes. Periodic random follow-on random testing should continue throughout the semester, at a frequency and volume commensurate with the reported prevalence of COVID-19 in the surrounding community.

Teaching Modes: Information disseminated to faculty includes a list of different modalities, including distinguishing among differing sorts of hybrid teaching. The existing AU Policy on Academic Rights and Responsibilities (December, 2016) was drafted with the help of our AAUP Chapter, and it states that academic freedom “generally includes the right of the faculty to select the materials, determine the approach to the subject, make the assignments, and assess student performance in teaching activities for which faculty members are individually responsible, without having their decisions subject to the veto of a department chair, dean, or other administrative officer.” In various presentations regarding teaching modalities during COVID-19, the statement has been made that “Chairs / Deans in concert with Faculty, are given decision authority to choose which modified format is most appropriate” for a faculty member to use in teaching her or his class. This is a clear, but perhaps unintentional, breach of the principles of academic freedom contained in existing AU Policy.

Policy Change Request: In discussing the available face-to-face, online, or hybrid teaching methods available to AU faculty during COVID-19, the academic freedom of faculty members to be the sole determinant of their teaching method as clearly stated in AU Policy must be emphasized. Faculty members, not department chairs or administrators, are responsible for making these choices for their individual classes.

Contact tracing: Identifying and contacting individuals who may have been exposed to the SARS-CoV-2 virus is critical to responding to positive test results and to contain the likely outbreaks of COVID-19 on campus during the Fall semester and beyond. Current plans are to have local Public Health contact tracers assume responsibility for faculty and students determined to be infected with this disease.

Information Request: More information should be provided to the AU faculty community regarding the specific scale and mechanism of contact tracing, including the number of trained, contact tracers who will aid in AU response efforts, and any additional information on apps that will be used to identify potential contacts and assist in the work of trained contract tracers. Specifically, if a student or employee is determined to be infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus, then each of his or her instructors and/or students should immediately be informed and be encouraged to provide feedback to those conducting contact tracing, as to where that student habitually sits in the classroom, whether or not that student habitually wears a mask, and what other students sit and/or conduct lab work nearby. In the case of faculty or staff, the types of in-person meetings or spaces used would be necessary to gather to inform contact tracing.

We also ask you to give more information on what is expected from Faculty members who test positive for COVID-19. Are they expected to shift their classes fully online? Or are they expected to take sick-leave? Who will be responsible for replacing the sick colleague? How will they be compensated?

We respectfully request that you implement each of these matters, including plans to address them well before the start of the Fall term, in order to allow time for faculty, staff, and students to plan accordingly.