



Cornell University

Martha E. Pollack
President

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Eve De Rosa
Dean of Faculty
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Dear Eve,

Thank you for sharing the Faculty Senate comments and vote tally for Resolutions 172 and 173. We deeply appreciate all that you and the faculty are doing to support our students and honor our commitment to them during these challenging times.

While 50.1% of the eligible voters supported the first resolution, and only 39.8% supported the second, we thought it might be helpful if we reiterate the comments that Martha presented to the Faculty Senate about both resolutions.

To set the context: the goal for the current semester is to provide our students with the best possible education experience we can, consistent with protecting the health of our community. We are a residential university, and when the public health situation permits it, we are committed to providing our students with a residential experience.

As was true last year, we have relied on faculty experts for rigorous scientific analyses and modeling that *are continually updated* to inform us on risk analysis and risk mitigation. We have involved a group of stakeholders from across the campus in the team that is responsible for making and implementing plans, and we have held several town halls to update the community and to answer questions. And throughout we have included deans and associate deans, as active participants in our planning and in the decisions taken.

We'd like to address the question at the heart of Resolution 172, that of requests for medical or disability accommodations, because there unfortunately has been confusion about the university's policies on this issue.

As always, we remain fully committed to providing medical and disability related accommodations. There have been no changes in the process of seeking and receiving such accommodations. Medical and disability accommodations are, by definition, ways of enabling people to fulfill the essential functions of their job. As a residential university, many our faculty and staff have essential functions that require being present on campus. For faculty—again, when the public health situation allows it—that generally includes teaching in person. Our Medical Leave Administration staff can, and have, approved accommodations that make the essential functions safer and easier to perform; and when appropriate, they can also approve medical leaves, at full pay.

Beyond that, we have encouraged all units, colleges, and schools to be creative in providing arrangements for faculty and staff outside of the formal medical/disability accommodation process. These arrangements can include online teaching for faculty when that is appropriate to achieve the desired educational outcomes for our students. The process includes discussions with chairs and deans, followed by approval by the Deputy Provost John Siliciano and Vice Provost Avery August, to ensure consistent responsiveness to faculty needs across the university.

These arrangements and decisions need to be made balancing the needs of all the stakeholders. It would be very

difficult for faculty if they were required to provide hybrid or online teaching whenever a student requested it, and it would be difficult for students if individual faculty were given full discretion to decide to teach online. As a community that values the contributions of all employees, we are also committed to ensuring fair treatment for non-instructional faculty and staff whose essential functions require them to be in-person.

Finding the right balance is not always easy, but it is important, and it has been working. It is certainly not the policy of Cornell to force someone with a legitimate medical concern to put themselves at risk.

Regarding Resolution 173, proposing that individual faculty and instructors have the sole discretion to decide to teach online, as teaching in person is an essential function of the job for many instructors and staff, and as we are balancing the needs of all stakeholders, it is not possible to provide individual faculty and instructors with sole discretion to decide to teach online. We understand that this resolution is motivated by real anxiety about teaching in person while Covid-19 is still present in our community, yet we have been and must follow the science. We cannot say that the science tells us that mask wearing is important, and that students should be vaccinated, and then turn around and ignore what the science tells us about risks of transmission in the classroom. All the evidence to date is that with the policies we've put in place—including upgraded ventilation, mandatory masking, and a very high vaccination rate—the risk of acquiring Covid-19 in the classroom is extremely small. We saw no cases of transmission in the classroom all last year, and we similarly have no evidence to date of classroom transmission this year.

Cornell has very high vaccination rates: 96% of our campus community, including 99% of our faculty and students. We do aggressive testing: we regularly test all our undergraduates, we test the contacts of anyone found positive, *and* we test anyone who *might* be a contact—for example, because they live on the same hallway, or in the same sorority, or are on the same team. By identifying and isolating as many cases as possible, we aim to break the chain of transmission, as we successfully did with the early spike last Fall and the initial spike this term. We remain vigilant and continue to track and monitor. The extensive testing and tracing also lets us understand where transmission is happening, and we want to reiterate: to date, as was the case last year, there is no evidence of transmission classroom or in structured on-campus activities.

The risk is not zero: we do not live in zero-risk world. But the layered protections provided by high vaccination rates; mandatory masking; enhanced ventilation; and aggressive testing, isolation, and tracing together lead to a situation in which the risk is minimized. As long as it is safe to teach in the classroom, the university must be able to ensure that our students have access to in person instruction, just as we ensure that staff with student facing jobs are available to our students, with approved accommodations or arrangements for those for whom the risk is higher.

Thank you again Eve. We look forward to our continuing work with the Faculty Senate.

Sincerely,



Martha E. Pollack, President



Michael I. Kotlikoff, Provost