

On 6/16/20, Graduate Assistants United (GAU) and other union leadership met with SIU administrators to discuss plans for fall instruction. At this meeting, GAU president Anna Wilcoxon proposed a plan based on accessibility and equity which would have campus operating under the clear assumption that any class that can be taught online, will be taught online, unless individual instructors opt-in to teaching face-to-face (F2F). Also during that meeting, the administration shared a rough outline of their “Planning Document for Fall 2020 Instruction.” In that document, point number five stated, “Aim is for freshmen to have some courses F2F [UNIV101; ENGL; CMST].” Wilcoxon asked Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Meera Komarraju to clarify this point. Does point five mean **some sections** of those **some courses**, or **all sections** of those **some courses**? Komarraju responded that those details had not yet been decided. Wilcoxon was sure to remind the Provost that Graduate Assistants (GAs) are both the demographic on campus most likely to teach those 100-level courses, and are also the demographic on campus who have voiced their preference for teaching online, more than any other group of instructors on campus. Therefore, requiring GAs to teach F2F would not only be disregarding the opt-in proposal brought by the GAU president, but also disregarding the plurality of GAs on campus, who expressed their preference for teaching online through a survey that was conducted by the administration.

Since that meeting, GAU and the Faculty Association (FA) outlined “[Principles for a Safe Fall](#)” as a proposal for how the opt-in method could work on our campus. Our proposal situates health and safety as our first priority, and our second priority is preserving the quality of our teaching, research, and service. Our third priority is the long-term financial health of the university. We believe we can only meet our third priority, SIU’s financial health, if the first two priorities are met first. In addition, we do not believe that the first two priorities are achievable if individuals are forced to work on campus when doing so poses a notable threat to physical and psychological health. This threat will not allow for quality educational experiences. Instructors of freshman-level classes and their students (many of whom will already be experiencing the stress of adapting to a new lifestyle) will bear the brunt of any social distancing and cleanliness mandates that come with being forced in to face-to-face settings, as would be the case under the administration’s current plan. This will add another unavoidable layer of anxiety to their lives - not just whether they can keep their grades up or assignments and responsibilities fulfilled, but whether they might end the week having caught a deadly virus. Teaching during a pandemic in a country that has handled it disastrously, and has become the worldwide hotspot for COVID-19, is not teaching under “normal” circumstances. Any face-to-face course taught or taken this fall by anyone who did not make the personal choice to do so would be severely hampered by anxiety and fear that could have been avoided were the class taught online. No amount of “pandemic fatigue” or desires for increased enrollment negate the fact that our country is in a crisis, and pretending that we can carry on as if we are *not* in a crisis is irresponsible, short-sighted, dangerous, and a direct reason our country is still in this crisis in the first place.

Shortly after our proposal was dispersed, the administration rolled out an updated draft of their [Provisional Planning Document](#) (on June 30th), and SIU's [coronavirus information](#) website was updated to include the goals of that document. GAU immediately noted a distinct lack of clarity, such as the sixth bullet point under "Guiding Principles," which states, "Some core freshman courses, such as English 101, Communications Studies 101, Math 101 and University 101 will be offered face-to-face." Not only does this directive lack justification for *why* these freshman courses are deemed necessary for face-to-face instruction, but just as before, this directive is unclear – does this mean all sections of these freshman courses will be taught face-to-face, or just some sections of those courses? Due to this lack of clarity (even after GAU's request for such clarity), department chairs began soliciting teaching preferences from their instructors, including GAs, for online, hybrid, or F2F instruction. However, on July 7th, chairs of departments with 100 level core curriculum courses were told that all 101 sections were expected to have at least some F2F components in the fall, if not taught entirely F2F (even though most of these courses already have an online version ready to use).

We find this distressing for many reasons:

1. This "plan" disregards the more comprehensive opt-in approach laid out in the FA and GAU joint proposal. It also disregards the administration's own COVID-19 instructional preference survey, which indicated that a plurality of Graduate Assistants prefer teaching online. Since Graduate Assistants are the instructors most likely to teach 100-level courses, this decision impacts them the most severely.
2. This directive was sent out to campus without input from campus constituencies. On June 11th, GAU provided contact information for two of our members who were nominated to serve on Provost Komarraju's Planning Task Group. On June 22nd, GAU President Anna Wilcoxon reached out to inquire about why neither GAU member had yet been chosen to serve on this task group. That same day, a reply was given that stated, "We have not yet convened the group." As of today (July 14th), that group has still not yet convened, *or even been fully selected*. GAU and FA members have still not been notified of their selection on the task group, and the administration has not followed up with any communication. Therefore, these planning decisions for the fall were made without input from campus constituency groups or stakeholders. Our questions to the administration are: Why put out an instructor survey, soliciting the opinions and concerns of the individuals who would be carrying out your plans, if you are going to disregard the results? Why solicit members for a planning task group if you are going to make decisions without input from any of the constituency groups from whom you solicited members?
3. This directive makes no attempt at detailing what will happen to these 100 level classes that will be conducted F2F *when* (not if) either instructors or students (or more likely, both) get sick. Who will be expected to cover these classes when the instructors get sick? How will these classes be conducted when one student gets sick and the entire class has to quarantine? As we learned in the spring, adapting classes between formats takes time and energy, neither of

which an instructor will have if they are sick with COVID-19. Refusing to plan for (or even, apparently, consider) the “worst case scenario” puts the entire university at risk. Once again, we are in crisis management; we are not able to offer the traditional “on-campus experience” that is being exalted.

4. Given the recent ICE directive that international students are not allowed to take all online courses, our administration’s directive for 100 level core curricula to be conducted F2F puts international Graduate Assistants at particularly dangerous crossroads. International GAs (like all GAs) are more likely to teach 100 level courses, and under the administration’s current directive, those courses are required to have at least a F2F component. With the ICE directive, international students are also required to attend courses as students that have a F2F component. Therefore, international students are not only at more at risk of contracting COVID-19 in the classes they teach, but also in the classes they take as students. This also amplifies the risk they pose to their students, their advisors and professors, their housemates, any staff they interact with, and the Carbondale community.

5. The administration’s current plan disregards trends across the country. Many of the states that are experiencing a surge in COVID cases (and recently, [deaths](#)) are states that opened up in early May. Illinois did not enter phase 4 until the end of June, which means we still do not have a clear picture of how opening up bars, restaurants, travel, and other businesses and activities will affect our positive cases and deaths. This directive is based on short-term and short-sighted desires for first-year student enrollment, rather than the long-term health of students, staff, faculty, the Carbondale community, and the long-term economic health of the university. Additionally, the administration’s current plan states that courses will all be completed remotely after Thanksgiving break because the risk of people traveling and bringing COVID-19 back to campus is too high. If this is the case, why are we not also adopting the same precautions regarding summer break? If the risk of a week’s worth of holiday travel is enough to move the entire school to remote learning, what exactly makes almost three months of students and employees being home and/or traveling for the summer during a widespread and deadly pandemic any less of a risk?

There are many other issues with the administration’s vague plan for the fall. Their “Provisional Planning” document states that “As students enter each classroom / lab they will pick up disinfectant wipes and clean the seat / desk / workspace that they will occupy,” and that “Students and instructors will wear masks upon entering the classroom (and in public areas).” Once again, these vague instructions (what exactly constitutes a “public area?”) leave the burden of responsibility on students, both undergraduate and graduate, to ensure that surfaces are being sanitized, and that social distancing guidelines are being maintained. This vague guideline not only poses a hazard to students with allergies to chemical cleaning agents (an allergy that can cause anaphylaxis and death), but also disregards the growing evidence that SARS-CoV-2 is spread through both large respiratory droplets [as well as small aerosols](#) that can linger in the air of enclosed spaces. It seems that, under this provisional planning document, the university would force undergraduate and graduate students into F2F settings whether or not

the students felt safe in those settings, and then relieve themselves of the responsibility of ensuring the safety of the students by placing the burden on undergraduate students who are paying to be there, and graduate students who earn an extremely small salary to teach them. We believe that, to say the least, campus morale under this plan would be low.

The GAU and FA proposal makes the case that the opt-in approach to teaching F2F or hybrid reduces ableism by taking the onus off of people with disabilities (physical, invisible, psychological, etc.), seniors, and other folks at risk or in proximity to those at risk to provide medical documentation and make a case justifying why they shouldn't be forced to teach or learn F2F. As our proposal states, requiring medical justification can lead to discrimination, stigma, and lack of opportunities for years to come. Additionally, women, people of color, people with disabilities, poor people, and people with high body weight are significantly less likely to have access to adequate health care which would allow them to get proper documentation. People in these groups are often treated dismissively, or outright not believed by doctors, which means that medical conditions continually go undiagnosed. We believe taking the onus off of "at risk" populations will resituate the current crisis we are enduring in a much more realistic way. Opting-in acknowledges how we all share vulnerability in this crisis, rather than perpetuating the myth that young and able-bodied people are immune to COVID-19 while further marginalizing people with disabilities, seniors, and other at-risk populations. If we are truly "all in this together," our policies should reflect that.

We still hold on to our position that opting-in to teaching F2F or hybrid is the most ethical approach for the fall. It allows autonomy for even contingent instructors (including GAs), it avoids the discriminatory practice of asking for medical justification, and it signals to the students who wish to enroll in those F2F sections that their instructor *actually wants* to be there. This approach also allows for international students to register for classes that have a F2F component while protecting them from having to teach F2F. Under our proposed opt-in policy, all groups would be afforded greater peace of mind and confidence in the university than if they are to be forced into situations where they feel unsafe.

GAs are contingent workers contracted on a semester-to-semester basis. We make roughly 13,000 dollars per year, lack adequate health care coverage, and have no guarantee of future employment, income, or health coverage. These factors inevitably affect how comfortable GAs feel working F2F. We are workers in already precarious conditions, and are being asked by people who make over 250,000 dollars a year to sacrifice our health and wellbeing for the sake of new student enrollment numbers. We will not stand for this.

SIU has the distinct opportunity to be a leader in this moment, and to demonstrate what an ethic of care at the university level actually looks like. If the message going out to the public is that students will have a terrible experience with online learning, that's what people will believe. Instead, the message SIU sends could acknowledge the ways this virus has exposed our deep-seated racism, classism, ableism, ageism, and sizeism, among other prejudices, and the ways that the U.S. doesn't have this virus anywhere near under control. SIU could send the

message that we are forming a plan where we put consideration for marginalized groups at the forefront of our priorities. As educators, we could take the time to educate students, parents, staff, instructors, and the community as to why operating mostly online with the opt-in option is the best plan to protect the health and safety of all, demonstrating our excellence in *innovation and creativity*. Instead, the message going out to the public right now is that our laboring bodies are worth sacrificing for the good of the abstract “institution.”

The vague plans proposed by the administration frequently include phrases like “quality education in a safe and healthy environment.” A safe and healthy environment is not one that disregards the economic insecurity of a region and the disproportionate negative effects on black and brown populations. A safe and healthy environment does not disregard the ableist assumptions implicit in forcing people with physical and psychological disabilities to choose between disclosing their health history and being assigned a less prestigious position on the one hand, or putting their health at stake in order to avoid discrimination and bias on the other. A quality education doesn’t happen when people live in fear and feel unheard and coerced into working in-person when their jobs can be done remotely. Some people have a preference to be in-person in the fall, and we can still honor their preference. But under the administration’s proposed plan, the difference between those who prefer in-person not getting their preference, and those who prefer online not getting their preference, is monumental. Those who prefer in-person being required to teach online won’t be living in fear every day, won’t be putting themselves at higher risk of infection or death by working from home. They simply wouldn’t get their preference. For those whose preference is online, ignoring their preference is a matter of the physical and psychological wellbeing. Ignoring this group’s preference places them at higher risk of infection and death for themselves, their families, their communities, and their students at SIU.

SIU’s Coronavirus Information website states that “Our plans may change as new information is available and as state and health agencies adapt their guidance and direction.” We believe that the time for those plans to change is now. The administration’s current plan disregards the recent surges of cases and deaths around the country. Their plan disregards the mounting evidence of airborne spread of SARS-CoV-2. Their plan disregards the disproportionate effect this virus has on marginalized communities, and disregards the precarious demographic of Graduate Assistants who prefer to teach online. Making decisions based on where the virus is *right now*, rather than where it *could easily be* in less than a month’s time, is short-sighted, dangerous, and does a disservice to SIU’s students, its faculty, its staff, and its mission. We ask that SIU administrators “adapt their guidance and direction” to meet the needs of all the students, instructors, and staff. We ask them to reconsider their position to force precarious, low-wage workers into dangerous working conditions. We ask them to consider, again, the opt-in model proposed by GAU and FA. We call on the administration to explain [why they are making the choices they are making](#) and why they are deeming certain classes F2F or “essential.” We call on the administration to convince us how their plan is more in line with SIU’s [mission](#) of *access, opportunity, and inclusive excellence* than the plan put forward by GAU and FA.

We also call on SIU faculty to stand with SIU Graduate Assistants, many of whom are scared for their lives and health. We stood with you at the picket line when you went on strike in 2011, we ask you to stand with us today. Help us demonstrate to the university that requiring F2F instruction from a vulnerable and precarious population is unethical and dangerous. Now, more than ever, we need your solidarity and advocacy. If we don't receive the support we desperately need now, in the midst of a pandemic when those in the most vulnerable and precarious positions are affected the most severely, then when is the right time? If you are willing to stand with Graduate Assistants, we urge you to contact Chancellor Austin Lane (chancellor@siu.edu), or write to the SIU Board of Trustees (via Misty Wittington – mistyw@siu.edu) and tell them why the administration's current plan is wrong for SIU and urge them to reconsider. We also invite you to contact us at gau.siu@gmail.com to be added to our growing list of faculty members who stand in solidarity with us, or for more information on how you can help.