



PRESS RELEASE: SIUC Faculty and Graduate Students Call for Remote Learning this Fall

Leaders of the unions representing SIUC graduate assistants (Graduate Assistants United) and tenured and tenure-track faculty (the SIUC Faculty Association) called today for SIUC to commit to remote learning, teaching, and working this fall semester, with exceptions only for those courses and other university functions that absolutely must take place on campus.

With the COVID-19 pandemic continuing to worsen across the United States, Illinois, southern Illinois, and Jackson County, union leaders believe the time has come to put safety first. Only those courses that absolutely must be offered on-campus should be offered on-campus, they believe. And students should be encouraged to remain off-campus if they have a safe place where they can effectively continue their studies off-campus.

“If we encourage students to congregate in Carbondale, we will not only endanger their health and safety, but that of SIUC instructors and staff, as well as everyone else in the Carbondale area,” said Dave Johnson, president of the SIUC Faculty Association.

The unions are negotiating with the university in an effort to reduce risks in the classroom, and report that both sides are negotiating in good faith, and that progress has been made. The university is taking steps to reduce risks on campus. But these measures can’t address the issue of transmission outside of classrooms and dorms. Most students don’t live in dorms, and the average student spends no more than fifteen hours a week in the classroom.

“Masks and social distancing on campus are essential,” Johnson noted, “but the university can do very little to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 outside on-campus housing and classrooms. We are already seeing far too many cases among the college-age population in Jackson County. We have to listen to what the scientists are telling us, rather than just hoping for the best. Even if we take many prudent precautions on campus, if thousands of students return to Carbondale, the virus is almost certainly going to spread widely and endanger everyone in the Carbondale community.”

If students need to come to Carbondale for classes that can only be offered in person, or if Carbondale is the safest and most practical place for them to pursue their studies, they should be welcomed back, the groups believe. But many students may be in a safer and more productive learning environment if they study at home.

Leaders of both unions also worry that the on-campus experience would not meet students’ expectations, due to the constraints posed by the pandemic. Even under the current reopening plan, most courses would be partially or completely online, and campus services and activities would be limited. This compromised on-campus experience could hurt SIUC’s reputation in the long run, they point out.

“Students and families should make the decisions that are right for them,” Johnson noted. “The on-campus experience simply isn’t going to resemble what it’s been like in years past, and we shouldn’t be asking students to return to campus just to fill dorms and pay fees.”

Another issue of concern for the groups is transparency about COVID-19 cases on campus. While the university quickly reported COVID-19 cases this spring, there has been no clear public reporting about the cases that have occurred on campus since then. This makes it impossible for students, families, and others to make informed decisions about safety on campus.

SIU faculty and graduate assistants believe the best way for SIUC to ensure a safe and productive teaching and learning environment this fall is to take the following steps:

1. Offer all courses remotely unless they can only be offered face to face and are required for students to graduate.
2. Encourage students to return to Carbondale only if they are registered for courses that must be offered face to face or can only safely and effectively continue their studies by returning.
3. Focus planning and resources on ensuring the safety of students and staff who do need to study and work on campus.
4. Work urgently to address the digital divide by providing all off-campus students with reliable access to the internet.
5. Repurpose fees to address the digital divide and refund other on-campus fees for students who remain off-campus.
6. Work with unions to advocate for state and federal funding to make universities whole for economic losses suffered due to the COVID-19 crisis.
7. Work with unions to push the state and federal government to provide extended unemployment benefits for any workers who are laid off or cannot work safely on campus.

“We all want to return to the classroom as soon as we can do so safely,” said Anna Wilcoxon, president of Graduate Assistants United. “But it’s just not safe yet, physically or psychologically, and an unsafe learning environment does not lead to a quality education. If we act now to switch to remote learning, we can provide students with a high-quality educational experience while protecting our communities against the deadly threat of COVID-19.”