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June 12, 2020

Dear President Brown, Provost Morrison, and Dean Sclaroff,

We, the undersigned members of the BU Department of English, write in order to urge the administration to allow all instructors at BU the choice of whether to teach remotely or in person during Fall 2020. We recognize the financial concerns of the university, but we believe that the public health risks involved in re-opening campus are too high, and fear that the university's plans will disproportionately impact some of the most vulnerable members of our department.

The English Department is united in its desire to resume in-person teaching as soon as it is safe. Yet we are also aware of the standing condition of the spaces in which we work, and the difficulty of equipping these spaces in a few short weeks to meet CDC and other guidelines for adequate ventilation, cleaning, and social distancing. Many of our faculty, graduate students, and instructors—our black and brown colleagues, our colleagues over age 60, our colleagues with preexisting medical conditions, our colleagues caring for older dependents, and our colleagues with childcare responsibilities—are at higher risk for health and life complications from Covid-19. We believe the wise and ethical course of action at this time is to give faculty, instructors, and graduate students the choice whether to teach in person or remotely during Fall 2020.

We endorse many of the points in the recent "Open Letter to Members of the Boston University Community" (June 2, 2020) by Professors Russell Powell and Daniel Star of the Department of Philosophy, which insists that that the BU Administration not place the economic interests of the institution above the physical safety of its faculty and staff. In particular we agree that a "blanket requirement that faculty teach in person without regard to their medical and family situations would be an unconscionable breach of the university's moral fiduciary duties to faculty members, one that places the overwhelming weight of the health burden. . . on important and vulnerable stakeholders."

We further acknowledge and endorse the letter sent by Instructors in the Writing Program to Dean Sclaroff and Associate Dean Bizup (May 25, 2020), a copy of which is included in the Minutes for the English Department meeting of June 7, 2020. We share this letter's concern that vulnerable members of our community, especially individuals of color whose communities have been severely impacted by the pandemic, will be disproportionately affected by the order to resume in person teaching.

We also wish to add that the same concern applies to members of our departmental staff. Working long hours in closed spaces, fielding questions from a steady stream of faculty and students, office staff will be especially vulnerable to a resumption of normal operations in September. Even with the proposed safeguards, their safety cannot be adequately ensured.

Moreover, we fear that the university's plans will have the effect of pressuring those on our instructional staff who have the least job security—junior professors, lecturers, graduate teaching fellows—to make uncomfortable decisions they should not be required to make. More than our tenured faculty, these individuals are liable to feel compelled to teach in-person if an in-person mode is the presumed preference of undergraduates—even if these instructors are themselves deeply uneasy about re-entering a classroom. A similar dilemma is liable to face some of our students. Students eagerly seeking to impress their instructors may be more liable to attend in-person classes if doing so is believed to make them look "serious"—even if these students, too, are deeply wary of going back into a classroom.

We note in addition that the requirement to teach in September unless adequate reason is given for not doing so will require faculty, instructors, and staff to divulge to their employer confidential medical and personal information that may be covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act. (<https://www.eeoc.gov/wysk/what-you-should-know-about-covid-19-and-ada-rehabilitation-act-and-other-eeo-laws>).

Public statements by Dean Sclaroff, Provost Morrison, and President Brown have acknowledged with gratitude our work in making a rapid and successful transition to online formats during the second half of Spring 2020. We are a department that prides itself on pedagogical innovation, and on meeting the needs of our diverse student population. Whether teaching online or in person this fall, we are confident in our ability to offer the same excellence of instruction that motivates our students to attend Boston University in the first place. But the current plans leave us with strong reservations. We appreciate that our leadership team is working night and day to sustain our institution. But the university's current plans carry their own serious financial costs and risks. There is no guarantee that the plans to re-open campus will produce the tuition dollars needed, but they will almost certainly produce unethical health costs—potentially even deaths. We urge you to collaborate with faculty and staff on a more realistic and ethical plan to meet the challenges of our moment.

Robert Chodat, Chair and Professor

Robert Pinsky, Professor; Director of Creative Program

Xuefei Jin, Professor

Leslie Epstein, Professor

John Paul Riquelme, Professor

Maurice Lee, Professor

Louis Chude-Sokei, George and Jean Wein Chair; Director of African American Studies

Jonathan Foltz, Associate Professor; Director of Cinema and Media Studies

Anita Patterson, Professor

Susan Mizruchi, William Arrowsmith Professor of Humanities; Director of the BU Center for Humanities

Charles Rzepka, Professor

Laurence Breiner, Professor

John T. Matthews, Professor

Michael Prince, Associate Professor

Amy Appleford, Associate Professor

Erin Murphy, Associate Professor

James Siemon, Professor

Christopher Martin, Professor

Laura Korobkin, Associate Professor

Adriana Craciun, Emma MacLachlan Metcalf Chair of Humanities

Kate Snodgrass, Professor of the Practice; Artistic Director, Boston Playwrights' Theater

Susan Bernstein, Research Professor

Anna Henschman, Associate Professor

Carrie J. Preston, Arvind and Chandan Nandlal Kilachand Professor; Director, Kilachand Honors College

Joseph Rezek, Associate Professor

Swen Voekel, Clinical Associate Professor

Takeo Rivera, Assistant Professor

Thomas Otten, Lecturer

Leland Monk, Associate Professor

Sanjay Krishnan, Associate Professor

William Hunting Howell, Associate Professor