

Dear Provost Morrison and Associate Provost Kleinman,

We, the undersigned graduate students and faculty of the English Department, write to express our collective solidarity and concern regarding the “Back2BU” COVID-19 response plan for Fall 2020. While we recognize the financial uncertainty incurred by our global health crisis, the Learn *from* Anywhere (L/A) plan clearly prioritizes the university’s bottom line over the well-being and economic security of its undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, and staff. It is particularly painful that, in this week of ‘Collective Engagement’ organized around racism and antiracism, the university overlooks the disproportionate vulnerability of our black and brown communities to the global pandemic and its economic ramifications. It is unacceptable and incomprehensible for the university to demonstrate this level of negligence towards both its students and staff by subjecting all of us to such unnecessary risk.

The university’s plans for a residential campus in the fall systemically undermine our collective right to teach, learn, and work in a safe, secure environment. The reality of working in small offices, classrooms, and libraries will make it extremely difficult to comply with CDC recommendations for adequate social distance, sanitization, and ventilation. The Provosts’ June 19 Memo “University Guidance for PhD Programs” therefore dictates that graduate students must return to an unsafe teaching environment. Although medical waivers have been offered, it remains unclear how easily and for what conditions graduate students will be able to obtain these waivers. At present, our only means of protecting ourselves is dependent upon an opaque process that has been poorly explained. If graduate students do not return to campus, they will be forced to take a leave of absence and have their stipends withheld and so will lose integral financial support as well as health insurance in the middle of a global pandemic. Such a policy neglects the myriad health and social risks all graduate students face with in-person teaching—even those without a documented medical condition that legitimates a waiver. Moreover, this policy discriminates against international students who are unable to return to campus under governmental travel and immigration restrictions. Although BU purports to value its international community, this policy represents an active choice not to protect international students. Rather, this policy illustrates that the university does indeed treat BU community members differently based on where we come from and where we live.

We work for, advocate for, and pour our hearts and minds into this institution. Inside our classrooms, we teach texts that narrate the experiences of marginalized and oppressed peoples, hoping to inculcate courage, compassion and, above all, a sense of justice in our students. In this time of unprecedented risks, it is especially vital for all members of our society to practice justice and care. Yet, the university chooses to overlook the vulnerabilities of its employees and students, as well as the wider community of Boston, instead utilizing graduate student precarity to ensure its own financial stability. These tactics are undeniably coercive.

Fortunately, the university does not need to continue down this path. Instead, BU can permit its instructors to teach *from* anywhere, affording us the choice to offer classes in-person or via Zoom. After all, we are best poised to make decisions regarding our own and our families’ safety, as well as the optimum learning environment for our students. Although online learning leaves something to be desired, many instructors reported success during the spring semester in using this platform, impressively adapting

to the demands of the moment—a feat BU has repeatedly celebrated. To pretend that the Fall 2020 classroom experience will be as safe or as valuable as previous semesters is both unrealistic and short-sighted, particularly given the realities of a health crisis that has yet to be contained in Massachusetts and many other states.

Instead of using our resources to resist a plan with clear fallibilities and health-risks, we might instead be using these resources to reimagine our teaching plans for the Fall, adapting our pedagogical skills to generate the best possible learning environment for our students in these challenging times. For example, instructors who do not wish to conduct in-person seminars, might elect to offer more one-on-one support—either online or in-person—to enhance student learning. By rescinding instructors’ autonomy, the University stymies our ability to cultivate an equitable and effective educational experience—one in which no individual is coerced into taking risks against their will.

Forcing us to choose between our lives and our livelihoods is not only unnecessary but actively undermines BU’s mission to provide an interconnected, innovative education that addresses “the needs of students and an ever-changing world.” BU must adapt to the reality of our global pandemic by enabling us to remain socially distant. Otherwise, the university will not only endanger the BU community but the greater Boston community by increasing the spread of the virus through person-to-person contact. We already know that BU’s faculty, staff and students are well-equipped to forge connections and develop innovative solutions to these challenges without endangering ourselves and others.

We remain committed to our students and our studies and want, above all, to continue our important work in a community where we feel safe and supported. We need you to address, with complete clarity and transparency, faculty and graduate concerns with the LfA plan and offer instructors the freedom that BU ostensibly values and the respect we deserve.

Sincerely,

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