

Dear Provost Morrison and Associate Provost Kleinman,

We, the undersigned graduate students and members of the faculty of the Philosophy Department, write to express our collective alarm at the “Back2BU” COVID-19 response plan for Fall 2020. In our view, Boston University administration has developed its policy for the Fall, particularly its proposed Learn from Anywhere (LfA) plan, without adequately consulting and without adequately addressing the security and safety concerns of the Boston University community (particularly the students, faculty, and staff who are most affected by the plan). It appears to many of us that the plan subjects students, staff, and faculty to unnecessary risks, for the sake of a supposed threat to the university’s economic viability. The BU administration has not made clear either how dire that threat is or why, in any case, it demands the sort of response that places the BU community in a position of unnecessary risk – particularly when other alternatives exist. Therefore we wanted to add our voices to those of our department’s Russell Powell and Daniel Star, who have spoken out against the LfA plan elsewhere.

In our view, the university’s present plans for a residential campus in the Fall fail to allow us 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, sanitizing, and ventilation. Moreover, regardless of its intentions, the Provost’s June 19 Memo “University Guidance for PhD Programs” has the effect of dictating that graduate students 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, for those of us who are graduate students, the 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 in the middle of a global pandemic, as well as the teaching experience they would otherwise gain. The policy which requires that graduate students be on campus even applies to incoming first-year students, whose funding is not tied to any service obligations (e.g., teaching fellowships), and who, like undergraduates, are only enrolled in courses. Such a policy neglects the myriad health and social risks that all graduate students face with in-person teaching and learning, many of which do not correspond to a documented medical condition that legitimates a waiver. Furthermore, the present 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, it is hard to see how this policy does not represent an active choice to leave the interests of international students unprotected, thereby illustrating that the university does indeed treat BU community members differently based on where we come from and where we live.

We work and advocate for this institution. One of the subjects philosophy faculty and graduate students will be required to teach this fall is medical ethics; it is ironic that the university will be requiring them to take serious risks with their own and their family’s health to instruct future medical professionals on the ethics of medical decision-making. In this time of unprecedented risks, it is especially vital for all members of our society to practice justice and care.

Yet, the university's present policy for implementing the LfA model puts at risk the safety of its students, staff, faculty, and the wider community of Boston and, indeed, it does so coercively as long as it does not allow members of the university the freedom to opt out with impunity.

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. Other major research universities like University of Chicago have adopted such a policy. After all, we are best positioned to make decisions regarding our own and our families' safety, as well as the optimum learning environment for our students. Although online learning presents unique challenges and disadvantages, BU's administration decided this past Spring that the transition to an online platform would not substantially lower the quality of classroom education. The quality of online or distance learning has not changed. And it is doubtful that the risks have decreased. So the university's change of heart on this issue stands in need of justification.

Instead of using our resources to resist a plan with clear shortcomings, 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 this key aspect of instructors' autonomy under the present pernicious circumstances, the University stymies our ability to cultivate an equitable and effective educational experience—one in which no individual is coerced to take unnecessary 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.” We strongly urge that BU has a moral responsibility to 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, supported, and respected. To this end we ask you to address, with complete clarity and transparency, faculty and graduate concerns with the LfA plan, and we urge you to offer instructors the freedom that BU ostensibly values, and the respect we deserve.

Sincerely,

Cansu Hepcaglayan, Philosophy Ph.D. Student

Daniel Maceo Mendez, Philosophy Ph.D. Student

Mallory Medeiros, Philosophy Ph.D. Student

Paul Goldberg, Philosophy Ph.D. Student

Caroline Wall, Philosophy Ph.D. Student

Zach J. Joachim, Philosophy Ph.D. Student

Kuizhi Wang, Philosophy Ph.D. Student

Joel Van Fossen, Philosophy Ph.D. Student

Aja Watkins, Philosophy Ph.D. Student

Rebecca Leiby, Philosophy Ph.D. Student

Jordan Kokot, Philosophy, Ph.D. Student

Curtis Snyder, Philosophy Ph.D Student

Gozde Yildirim, Philosophy Ph.D Student

Elliott Risch, Philosophy Ph.D Student

Federica Bocchi, Philosophy Ph.D Student

Leticia A. Castillo Brache, Philosophy Ph.D Student

Brian K. Moen, Philosophy PhD Student

Zara Amdur, Philosophy Ph.D Student

Marie Kerguelen Feldblyum Le Blevenec, Ph.D Student

Jack Harris, Philosophy Ph.D Student.

Anthony Jannotta, Philosophy Ph.D Student

Whit Henderson, Philosophy M.A. Student

Amber Sheldon, Philosophy Ph.D student

Jaleel Fotovat-Ahmadi, Philosophy Ph.D Student

Katherine Holbert, Philosophy Ph.D Student

Micah Trautmann, Philosophy Ph.D Student

Joshua Lo, Philosophy Ph.D Student

Merve Rumeysa Tapinc, Ph.D Student

Seowon Baek, Philosophy Ph.D. Student

Matt Dill, Philosophy Ph.D. Student

Erin Seeba, Philosophy Ph.D. Student

Russell Powell, Associate Professor of Philosophy

Aaron Garrett, Associate Professor of Philosophy

Daniel Star, Associate Professor of Philosophy

Marc Gasser-Wingate, Assistant Professor of Philosophy

Susanne Sreedhar, Associate Professor of Philosophy

Daniel O. Dahlstrom, Professor of Philosophy

Walter Hopp, Associate Professor of Philosophy

Sally Sedgwick, Professor of Philosophy

Juliet Floyd, Professor of Philosophy