

Dear City Councillors,

Recently, while discussing BU's reopening plan with a reporter for the student newspaper, President Robert Brown described himself as an optimist. Apparently, I am not an optimist, and I'm not paid to sound like one, and I believe that the stakes of this matter warrant being a little impolite. I'm one of 102 BU Writing Program faculty members who endorsed a letter in opposition to BU's reopening plan, one of over a thousand people who added their names to an online petition demanding changes, and one of two people who co-authored a critique of the university's teaching and learning plan for this coming fall, a letter that has been widely circulated and supported throughout the university and beyond. Already, we've heard a lot of reassuring talk from the representatives of Northeastern's administration. Later this afternoon, we'll listen to some more optimistic views. As we do, I hope we keep in mind some overarching things.

First, what we don't know: COVID-19 is still poorly understood. This past week was one of several that significantly altered our understanding of the disease and raised new questions about it -- and that should raise new questions about the universities' plans.

Second, what we know for certain. We know that, nationally, the pandemic is out of control. We know that massive outbreaks flair up quickly and that the decisions of a single organization or industry can have terrible consequences for an entire region. We know that misplaced optimism, from the beginning of this crisis through the current day, has magnified human and economic costs. Finally, we know that the less power a person wields, the more they bear the brunt of these costs.

BU's plan for reopening is dangerous. And for what? Representatives of the administration say that students will benefit from the university's Learn *from* Anywhere plan (LfA). However, as someone who has led successful pedagogical innovations impacting thousands of undergraduates at BU, particularly innovations involving teaching with technology, I'm convinced that LfA is riddled with pedagogical and technological problems. I wish to highlight these problems because they reveal important things about the overall reopening, particularly the administration's misguided, opaque, top-down decision-making and misplaced priorities, which should make us think twice about BU's assurances concerning safety.

As LfA was developed, faculty, the institution's experts on teaching, were not consulted. LfA was announced to faculty, in bits and pieces, often by articles in the university's public newsletter. Only in late May, when faculty began to protest, did the administration begin to schedule town-hall meetings. After the first of these, when I came away with more questions than answers, I asked a dean for a written description of the plan and some scholarship supporting it. This dean was unable to provide this: such basic information had not been shared even with him. With some of my colleagues I began researching the hybrid instructional model BU (and Northeastern, it seems) had in mind. A detailed account of our findings is attached to my written statement. For now, I'll summarize.

LfA is a teaching model in which the instructor teaches in-person and online students at the same time. Even under normal circumstances, without face masks and social distancing, this model poses distinct challenges for both teachers and students. Teachers must split their attention between the students in front of them and those on a Zoom call. Students become frustrated by their inability to hear or participate equally and by delays caused by troubleshooting technology.

Contrary to BU advertising, LfA will not result in the rich experience students expect from in-person classes. In fact, because of social distancing, less than a quarter of students may be permitted to attend in person at any given time. For many classes -- especially those that rely on active learning -- LfA is not better than purely online instruction. It's worse.

My critique of LfA, which I wrote with a colleague, was shared with BU's upper administration. In response, an associate provost told us he was "optimistic" that LfA would work and he suggested we could get some tips from the university's Center for Teaching and Learning, which was absurd for two reasons. First, because BU's Center for Teaching and Learning played no role in the development of LfA. Second, because the Center for Teaching and Learning had already come to me and my coauthor for assistance with learning about LfA.

Faculty concerns about safety have received similar inattention. How will classrooms be adequately ventilated -- especially now that it seems the virus may be transmitted by much smaller, aerosolized particles than previously thought? How will social distancing and wearing of masks be enforced? What in the scholarship of adolescent psychology leads administrators to believe that students, ever mindful of public health and communities of caring, will stay in their "platoons" or "families" and abide by official exhortations? On a less complex topic, will disinfecting supplies be provided for shared classroom equipment? When a student or instructor tests positive, will the whole class self-isolate for 14 days? If so, who will cover the instructor's classes? These and similar questions have yet to receive serious attention, and there is no track record for meeting challenges of these kinds at this scale.

If BU's priorities are not safety or teaching and learning, what are they? Primarily, to minimize short-term financial losses by maximizing revenue from tuition. More than anything else, LfA and the larger reopening are means of getting as many tuition dollars from as many students as possible. In emails to faculty, the message from the administration has been that if BU does not re-open as a residential campus, with as many faculty and students as possible in person, it will lose huge amounts of revenue, and there will be layoffs. From an employee perspective, this boils down to, if you don't risk your health (or your colleague's health, or your student's health, or your partner's health, and so on), then you risk losing your job. That's quite a choice.

None of us at this meeting should blindly trust President Brown's calculus or his priorities, which have been developed behind closed doors and without meaningful faculty, staff, student, or community input -- even though all of us are stakeholders in BU's reopening.

Thank you,

Jason Prentice
Senior Lecturer, CAS Writing Program
Boston University
617.358.1517 | prentice@bu.edu