

Columbia University pressures faculty into teaching in-person classes, triggering backlash

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Faculty and graduate instructors at Columbia University In New York City recently received an email from the administration urging them to commit to teaching in-person classes at the start of the upcoming Fall semester to “meet important student needs.”

The email, sent in reaction to the preference of the vast majority of faculty to hold courses online due to the uncontrolled coronavirus pandemic after being promised the option to choose course modality, crudely demonstrates the administration’s priority of the securing of student tuition over the health and lives of its faculty and students.

After stating that Columbia invited sixty percent of its undergraduate residential students (approximately 5,000) and all of its approximately 22,000 graduate residential students back to campus, the email, sent July 27 by Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences Amy Hungerford, brazenly claims that students and instructors “will be safer in class than at the grocery store” due to weekly student testing.

Hungerford adds, “foremost in the minds of many students who will be on the campus” will not be health concerns for themselves, their peers or their instructors from the deadly pandemic, but “the desire to have some dimension of their academic experience be in person.”

She continues: “To invite students back to a prepared campus only to offer them mostly Zoom classes in their dorm rooms and apartments will be a great disappointment to them.” The email states that students “prize the classroom experience” and, getting at the heart of the matter, that “many simply will not continue their studies without it.” A two percent tuition increase was put in place for the upcoming 2020–2021 academic year at Columbia, whose \$10.9 billion endowment makes it the tenth largest university endowment in the country.

Hungerford’s letter also ~~sidesteps~~ ^{sidelines} the international students—who make up 36 percent of its student body—and references a recent US Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) memo clarifying that first year international students enrolling in a completely online program “will likely not be able to obtain an F1 or M1 visa.” The Columbia administrator makes the argument that faculty and graduate instructors not willing to teach classes in-person “may jeopardize their [international students] capacity to either begin or continue their academic experience.”

Altogether, the letter seeks to place blame for any student disappointment and barring of international students on seemingly-selfish instructors not willing to reconsider teaching in-person classes starting in only a few weeks, when thousands of students from around the country and world will congregate on campus. The letter concludes with a moral appeal, saying, “The individual choices that we all make about teaching go to the heart of our collective mission,” apparently indicating that “individual choices” means the sacrifice of health and safety.

Columbia’s mission statement is “to support research and teaching on global issues.” The fact that Columbia is pushing for in-person classes in the midst of the current leading global issue, the COVID-19 pandemic, and at a time when leading scientists strongly oppose school and university in-person reopenings, speaks loudly to the fact that the university’s financial interests take precedence over anything else.

In response to the email, many faculty and graduate instructors at Columbia, as well as students, have issued statements in strong opposition.

One doctoral candidate in biology at Columbia posted to Twitter that, “I believe that Columbia University is risking the lives of graduate students, postdocs, faculty,

and staff in their rush to re-open. This is a transparent bid to recuperate as much tuition and grant money as possible... Holding in-person classes is premature and irresponsible, and faculty were right in their initial decisions to hold the majority of their classes online.”

Another Twitter user summed up Hungerford’s email, saying, “Stop being so selfish and come die in the classroom,” while a comment left on an article by the Columbia student news site, Bwog, about the email stated, “Dear faculty, and graduate students... please help us satisfy our paying customers.”

A Columbia graduate student planning to teach an introductory course with up to 300 students spoke with *Gothamist*, saying, “It just is clear that money is what’s important and not people’s safety.”

Hungerford’s letter comes amid a rent strike by a group of Columbia graduate students living in University housing in reaction to the university’s inadequate response to the pandemic, as well as the pandemic’s economic stress on students. In response, Columbia has barred these students from registering for classes until their rent is paid.

Columbia’s Planning and Policy Committee of the Arts & Sciences also issued an oppositional response to Hungerford’s email, emphasizing, among other things, a concern for junior faculty and graduate instructors “who can least afford to withstand such pressure [to teach in-person] and who may fear that future performance reviews will take their choices into consideration.”

Speaking to *Columbia Spectator*, Columbia professor of music Aaron Fox spoke disapprovingly about the campus reopening. “You’re bringing in people from all over the world to be on campus,” he said, “including from states which are completely out of control at the moment.

“What we do, what Harvard does, what Princeton does, models for all of those schoolteachers in Arizona and community colleges in Texas for their deans and their administrators, that this is best practice. This is what an institution that has a huge knowledge base of science at its disposal would do.”

Columbia’s reopening plan has also raised concern in its surrounding Manhattan neighborhood. The Morningside Heights Community Coalition has issued an oppositional letter to Columbia over fears of the virus spreading into the urban community when

campus becomes flooded with students.

While New York City—previously the global epicenter of the coronavirus—has seen a low number of COVID-19 cases recently, bringing thousands of students from around the world to cramped city campuses at the same time New York City public schools reopen is a recipe for disaster.

The push to reopen campus and have in-person classes at Columbia is part of a broader national campaign to prematurely reopen society, including the reopening of schools, and send workers back to work in order to secure private profits at the expense of the health and lives of workers, students and youth.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) appeals to university faculty, staff and graduate workers and students to form rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the corrupt unions, to demand safe working and learning conditions. These organizations must link up with university and public school workers across New York City, as well as broad sections of workers and youth throughout the US and internationally, who confront the same enemy in the capitalist system.

The SEP and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), are spearheading this fight. We urge educators to contact us for assistance in organizing your struggle. We call on students and youth to support this struggle and join the IYSSE.

Sign up for the *World Socialist Web Site Educators Newsletter* for updates on this fight.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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