

Pennsylvania nursing students demand refunds, financial support due to COVID policies

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A collective of nursing students at the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing (SON) have published an open letter expressing opposition to the failure of university administrators to provide adequate financial support to dozens of struggling students and sufficient clinical training for confronting the coronavirus pandemic.

As of early this month, the letter had been signed by 125 nursing students and is a damning exposure of the willful neglect and callous disregard on the part of university officials toward students and young health care workers in waging its reckless school reopening drive.

The letter was released August 24 and published on a WordPress page to express the outrage growing among students in the SON toward UPenn's COVID-19 policies. In particular, it points to the refusal to grant students refunds for the enormous drop-off in education quality due to the transition to remote learning.

While Penn Nursing has been named one of the premier nursing schools in the world, the letter's authors say that their repeated efforts to demand adequate support and transparency, quality education, reduced costs and licensing accommodations have been met with indifference and even hostility from university administrators.

UPenn nursing students are advancing a number of demands of the university to meet its commitment to students, including the following:

- an itemized bill for summer and fall 2020 delineating the costs of clinical experiences and the general fee;
- a retroactive refund for all clinical-related costs for summer 2020 and a retroactive 10 percent reduction of the summer 2020 general fee commensurate with the reduction students received for fall 2020;
- the formation of a nursing student working group to meet biweekly with SON administrators to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on students' education and ways in which the school can provide more adequate financial and academic support.

Since the shutdown of the UPenn campus on March 17, nursing students in the latter half of the spring and entirety of the summer semesters were largely cut off from accessing vital resources and instruction. Students are claiming that even standard and basic training for nursing experiences, such as in-person simulation lab and clinical training, have not been adequately delivered to the vast majority of nursing students in the program.

Nursing students across UPenn SON programs first began voicing their anger in mid-April to the nursing school dean and dean for academic programs, as well as other Penn administration officials. Their concerns highlighted the significant drop-off of education quality following the campus-wide shutdown and the refusal of the university to alleviate the financial burdens being placed on students.

On August 11 the university announced a paltry 10 percent fee reduction to the school's \$2,677 per semester general fee and other minor cost changes meant to "address the financial challenges" of students. This also included a cancellation of a tuition hike that was planned for the 2020-2021 school year.

The nursing students' letter notes that this meager support barely equals the loss of resources due to the impact of the pandemic. The authors state that the UPenn administration "claims it is supporting students by offering a fee refund of less than \$300 and canceling a tuition increase that never should have been implemented in the first place."

On April 17, SON Dean Antonia Villarruel sent an email to students promising that education during the pandemic would be "no different" in character or quality. In fact, the transition to remote learning has been marked by decline in quality and poorly implemented coursework. Many students have pointed to the inadequacy of the online program "iHuman," which was adopted for students to complete clinical trials and physical assessments virtually. Villarruel claimed that the initiative had been "thoroughly vetted" and has an "evidence-base affirming the outcomes and values"

of the program.

The student letter notes, however, that the computerized nature of the application did not have any real value and does not sufficiently teach students to prepare for and apply physical assessment skills in an actual health care setting. In addition, students are forced to replace conversation and interaction with patients with artificial dropdown menu sentences which fail to reflect actual nurse-to-patient interactions.

During the summer semester, the so-called “clinical experience” students received consisted of only 30 hours of a variety of videos and podcasts that are available in the public domain for free. The new online format also did little to nothing to address the needs of students with disabilities.

In spite of all these glaring problems, the administration maintained that reduction of tuition and fees for the spring, summer and fall semesters was “off the table.” When asked in a meeting on May 7 whether the administration would consider the ways in which nursing students have struggled, Dean Villarruel refused to even address the question.

Administration officials also failed to fulfill their promises of creating work-study position referrals or other employment programs, which weren’t put in place until Aug. 10, four months after the start of the pandemic, despite the massive loss of income following the campus closure.

As far as financial assistance, the university directed students to an emergency funding webpage source called “Emergency and Opportunity Funding.” While the webpage claims students may receive a one-time grant of up to \$1,000, actual funding is of a highly limited and restrictive character and cannot be used to pay for living expenses such as rent or utilities, expenses during the summer semester or to cover university tuition and fees.

SON students claimed in the letter that “this funding is inadequate and not meant to address the needs we have repeatedly outlined.” Emphasizing the deplorable economic conditions students face, the letter notes, “many of us rely on Medicaid and EBT (food stamps). EBT qualification depends on proof of work-study, so cutting off work-study opportunities has serious implications for students.”

In response to this, the university has since referred students to the Office of Financial Aid, which has encouraged students to take out more student loans, something that will certainly exacerbate already astronomical debt. Dean Villarruel responded to a question about COVID relief funding at a public meeting on August 3 with the insulting suggestion that students share the contact information of their “rich aunts or uncles” so the school could request funding from them. The dean also said students should make fruitless attempts to contact their congresspeople to enact legislation providing financial relief.

UPenn is one of many institutions of higher learning that have witnessed student opposition to exorbitant tuition and fee costs despite the inaccessibility of student services during the pandemic. In April, students at two colleges, Drexel University and the University of Miami, filed class-action lawsuits in South Carolina federal court against their schools in the hopes of receiving some form of reimbursements.

All over the country, anger is brewing over the high cost of undergraduate and graduate instruction on college campuses amidst the swift turn to online remote learning. At Rutgers University in New Jersey, more than 30,000 students have signed a petition started in July calling for an elimination of unnecessary fees associated with on-campus activity and a 20 percent tuition cut. In the University of North Carolina system, more than 40,000 have signed a demand for a refund of housing charges to students in the event of another COVID-19-related shutdown, which occurred in March after the virus forced the closure of campuses.

Universities have responded to the economic fallout due to the pandemic with savage austerity measures to offset shrinking revenues. At Chapman University in Southern California, President Daniele Struppa has described “brutal” spending cuts that have included a hiring freeze, slashing expenses and ending the retirement match for new employees.

At Temple University, the founder of the campus relief agency Hope Center for College, Community and Justice told the *New York Times* that the organization has been “bombarded” with pleas for help from students who can’t cover their rent and are unable to apply for food stamp benefits.



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