

Interview with Dr. Jeremy Fischer, philosophy professor at the University of Alabama at Huntsville, who resigned over COVID-19 safety and morality concerns

Emma Arceneaux
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The following is an interview with Dr. Jeremy Fischer, former associate professor of philosophy at the University of Alabama at Huntsville, who resigned his position in protest of the university's inadequate COVID-19 health and safety policies. In his resignation letter, Dr. Fischer said he did not want to be complicit in a moral atrocity and pointed to the political nature of the current health crisis. His areas of specialization include ethics, moral psychology, philosophy of emotion and philosophy of race. The interview was conducted by email.

Emma Arceneaux: Why did you resign? What developments led to you concluding that you should leave?

Jeremy Fischer: As you can imagine, this is a long story. In the end, I resigned because the university refused to implement readily available measures that would greatly protect the public health. After extensive advocacy efforts failed, I chose to distance myself from—and sound the alarm about—what I fear is an impending moral disaster.

I will note, though, that the University of Alabama (UA) System initially responded fairly well to the COVID crisis. For the 2020-2021 school year, UAH (University of Alabama in Huntsville) and the UA System moved most classes online. Most staff were also permitted to work from home. On-campus mitigation policies included indoor mask requirements, six-foot indoor social distancing, re-entry COVID testing at the start of each semester, and regular random-sample testing throughout each semester. UAH also set up a vaccination clinic in March 2021. Even as late as February 2021, UAH administrators liberally granted requests to teach entirely online in the upcoming fall semester.

It became clear by April 2021, however, that the UA System and the state of Alabama would be downplaying coronavirus risks for the fall. At that time, as word came down from the Chancellor and/or the Board of Trustees that all workers would soon be required to report to campus, the permission I received to teach online in the fall was revoked.

Then in May, the state of Alabama passed a law prohibiting public universities from mandating either COVID vaccinations or even that proof of such vaccination be shown (Act No. 2021-493). (Other legal guidance which might prove relevant is the state's liability shield law, Act No. 2021-4, implemented on February 12, and discussed below.) In June, the UA System Health and Safety Task Force plan for the fall in effect eliminated social distancing requirements, among other changes. The plan, in my judgment, was to allow largely uncontrolled spread of the coronavirus and hope for the best.

By June, it was clear from news reports out of India that a Delta crisis might soon threaten the U.S. As the crisis spread to the UK and then to Israel, I reached out to colleagues in the faculty senate (of which I was a member) and across the campus. Several of us decided to draft and

distribute a petition urging the UA System leadership to adopt a more protective health and safety plan. Our demands were modest: (1) To require mask use of all persons inside classrooms and all university facilities (with few exceptions); (2) To require six feet of distance between all persons inside classrooms and all university facilities (with few exceptions); and (3) to permit any faculty or staff who is concerned about the safety of returning to campus workspaces to (a) work remotely or (b) take unpaid leaves of absence. The first two demands drew on C.D.C. guidance for universities where not everyone is fully vaccinated. The third was grounded in both public health considerations that favor more aggressive intervention, as well as basic principles of academic freedom .

By the end of July, the petition attracted signatures from 135 UAH faculty, instructors, staff and researchers from 29 departments, seven colleges, and numerous additional units across campus.

On August 3, we sent the petition to the UA System leadership. UAH President Dawson acknowledged receipt, but the petition received no substantive response.

On August 13, we followed up with President Dawson by emailing him with further specific questions and suggestions. By that time and to their credit, the UA System modified its policies to require university indoor face coverings. However, we asked the president to comment on our demands for social distancing and for being able choose whether to work from home, as well as on the following possible mitigation policies:

- (1) Introducing MERV13 HVAC filters in all buildings, offices and classrooms.
- (2) Measuring CO2 levels in all classes to ensure sufficient outside air is being introduced and circulated.
- (3) Providing stand-alone HEPA filters in all classrooms to supplement HVAC filtration.
- (4) Resuming regular random-sample testing of the UAH community.
- (5) Mandating re-entry testing requirements for faculty, staff or students who are coming back to campus for Fall 2021.
- (6) Testing wastewater in buildings in order to rapidly alert large numbers of people of possible exposure.
- (7) Publicizing the percentage of UAH community members who are vaccinated.
- (8) Requiring high quality (e.g., N95) masks indoors.

We received no reply to this follow-up email. Informal communication with senior faculty led me to suspect that administrators lacked good reasons for declining to implement all of these measures.

Meanwhile, UAH announced to the community that we could be “confident” in the university’s response to COVID and implied that the campus was “a safe environment for all students, faculty and staff” and

that “the well-being of Charger Nation remains our top priority.” These assurances struck me as severely downplaying the dangers (especially given UAH COVID-policies) of the Delta variant and as introducing a false sense of security into the community. They also ignore the impact that COVID spread within Charger Nation might have on the broader community surrounding our campus. After all, about 85% of UAH undergraduates live off campus. Since the fact that UAH is a public institution of higher education gives it tremendous credibility with our students, I worried that these students would be lulled into taking health risks they might come to regret and/or spreading the coronavirus into the broader Tennessee Valley region.

So, for reasons I discuss at further length below, I decided to publicly resign in the hopes of drawing some public scrutiny to the matter.

EA: Can you describe the 2020-2021 school year at UAH/UA? What measures were in place, including remote learning/instruction, masks, ventilation, distancing, etc.? Were there known outbreaks? Were there any deaths within the school system that you know of?

JF: See above for details on the 2020-2021 measures at UAH.

In the first year of the pandemic, UAH recorded 393 COVID cases. To my knowledge, UAH did not publicize COVID-related deaths on campus. But I happen to know of one person who died from COVID.

EA: You noted that UAH President Darren Dawson acknowledged receipt of the petition. Has he since responded further to the petition or directly to your resignation?

JF: No UAH or UA System administrator ever responded to the substance of the petition or to my resignation letter.

EA: What has been the reaction to the petition/your resignation, particularly by those with sentiments like yourself who are deeply concerned over community transmission?

JF: The most common reactions have been disbelief and outrage about the UA System’s meager policy response to the Delta crisis. Colleagues elsewhere have told me that they are hesitant to return to the classroom—even though they live in states like Washington with much lower transmission rates and even though their university mandates vaccines and regular testing. Most importantly, several instructors from across the U.S. have reached out to me to brainstorm about what they might do at their own institutions. Some campuses, like nearby University of Georgia and also Georgia State University, are holding demonstrations. At other institutions, at least two instructors have chosen to resign in protest. Some have organized their campus with petition efforts. Some instructors are unilaterally moving their classes online, or unilaterally requiring in-person mitigation measures (like face coverings).

These stories are heartening, and the possibilities for constructive action are numerous. I suspect that instructors—especially tenured professors—greatly underestimate their power, especially when it comes to unilaterally moving their classes online.

EA: I am interested to know what you have heard from students to your resignation. In addition, can you discuss the impact of both the pandemic and the response to it by policy makers, from politicians to university administrators, on your students—how they see the world, how this will alter their lives, and the socioeconomic, political system within which they live?

JF: It’s hard to know how the pandemic, and the policy response to it, has affected students. I have heard from about a dozen students, all of whom support my decision to sound the alarm about the local COVID policy response. I suspect that many students share my sense of disappointment, frustration, and outrage. But the situation is complicated. Many students also seem eager to get “back to normal” and believe that it is now safe to do so.

I hope that social scientists are surveying students’ attitudes on the questions you ask. Some universities are soliciting and then publicly sharing feedback from students about campus safety measures. I’d like to

see more of that.

EA: The *World Socialist Web Site* calls for the eradication of the virus, not merely mitigation. Mitigation measures are only effective, scientists have shown, in combination with efforts to eradicate the disease. How would you respond to that?

JF: The policies of the University of Alabama System—especially the rejection of C.D.C. recommendations for six-feet social distancing indoors, the promotion of flimsy low-quality masks, the absence of supplemental HEPA filtration and the elimination of regular random-sample testing—can barely even be categorized as aiming at mitigating, let alone eliminating, COVID. Robust mitigation policies would be a huge improvement for Alabama.

That said, I agree that the debate between elimination- and mitigation-based approaches is extremely important. I applaud your efforts to present these issues to the public. Moreover, I respect epidemiologists and concerned members of the public who advocate elimination by means of paying workers for a few months to stop engaging in nonessential activities.

However, I am still studying the issue. In particular, I am still figuring out what concrete practical differences there are between a genuinely robust mitigation effort (which we have hardly glimpsed in the US) and an elimination effort. A vigorous public debate between prominent advocates of these approaches would be useful. Until I learn more, I’d prefer not to comment further.

EA: The powers-that-be are trying to claim the solution to the pandemic is “personal responsibility.” We believe this requires a global, coordinated scientific response. That is, this is a social responsibility. Could you comment?

JF: The “personal responsibility” slogan is widely deployed in Alabama as well. But notice the extraordinary steps taken to protect workplace managers from accepting their own personal legal responsibility for how they treat their subordinates. The passage of Alabama’s liability shield law, Act No. 2021-4, suggests that, as is often the case, decision-makers escape personal responsibility for their mistakes while the rest of us are made to bear the costs.

In my view, even though the disproportionately powerful have a correspondingly disproportionate responsibility, at the end of the day responsibility is broadly shared. Yes, the situation requires a global, coordinated scientific response; but (as I suspect you’d agree) such a response will only come about if vast numbers of private individuals demand it. I make this obvious point to push back slightly against the tendency, common among professors, to shift all responsibility onto administrators and other powers-that-be. Academic administrators certainly play an important role in these matters; but faculty (especially senior faculty) sometimes have more power than they choose to exercise.

EA: In your resignation letter, you said you did not want to be complicit in a “moral atrocity.” Can you elaborate on what you consider to be the “moral atrocity” in this situation? Is it limited to UAH? What does it mean on a world scale?

JF: There is a good chance that classes and other in-person events on campus will accelerate COVID transmission in the wider community. This is a huge problem for a state like Alabama, in which only about 76% of senior citizens are fully vaccinated. (Compare that number with 99% in Vermont, 98% in Maine, 96% in Washington State and 95% in Maryland.) Already, as the school year begins, Alabama hospitals are packed with COVID patients and running out of ICU beds (and workers to staff them).

In such circumstances, large institutions like schools and universities need to take all reasonable steps to minimize coronavirus transmission. (See, for example, the possible mitigation policies, numbered (1)-(8) above, as well as our petition demand to move at least some classes online and implement C.D.C.-recommended social distancing guidelines.) But,

despite their modest efforts, the UA System failed to take even most of these steps. In my judgment, this failure is morally atrocious.

My particular role at the university complicated matters further. At UAH I taught various philosophy courses, including courses on the philosophy of mind and ancient Greek philosophy. Most often, though, I taught ethics courses. For the upcoming year I was scheduled to teach a course called, “Advanced Moral Philosophy.” The last time I taught this course, the texts included Jeff McMahan’s important book, *The Ethics of Killing*. Teaching this material again in the present context would have been a fascinating experience. But sitting around a seminar table during a moral emergency, cogitating—rather than spending more of my time agitating—seemed somewhat in bad taste. The fear that my students might transmit the coronavirus to each other during these “ethics” seminars, moreover, horrified me.

On reflection, I concluded that it might be best to publicly distance myself from the disaster that I fear is taking place in Alabama, and to use my resignation to focus attention on the moral seriousness of our situation, as well as on the low-hanging fruit still available to schools and universities that want to minimize coronavirus transmission in the region. I have some hope that persuasion and other kinds of coordinated campus actions might still hasten UAH’s move to online classes—or at least its implementation of additional, if ultimately inadequate, mitigation measures.

Regarding your last question, it does seem that administrators at UAH are merely responding to intense outside political pressures. As far as I see, they are not, for the most part, personally opposed to taking adequate measures against the coronavirus. They were perfectly willing to support these measures last year. Rather, their decisions take place downstream from state and federal policy decisions, including general funding policy decisions, as well as specific coronavirus policy decisions. So, there is likely a role for all concerned citizens to play in shaping these upstream decisions.

EA: In your letter, you state that the pandemic involves not only a public health but a political crisis. What do you see as the nature of this political crisis? A political problem requires a political solution. In your view, what would that be?

JF: These are hugely important questions, but ones that I hardly even attempt to answer in a satisfying way here.

Here is one thought. I alluded already to state and federal actions that, in my view, improperly constrain universities’ decision making. We can speculate about the various interests that guided these decisions. But clearly one enabler of this political problem is the considerable lack of voice that workers suffer in the workplace—even in the academy, where “shared governance” is the dominant buzzword. This lack of voice, for example, legally enabled UAH administrators (who were not in the first place elected by workers) to shrug off the strong concerns of 135 workers who signed their names to our petition. I believe this response reflects a management structure that Elizabeth Anderson has called workplace dictatorship (in her book, *Private Government*).

If that assessment of the political crisis is sound, then the solution presents itself: Workers should have significant and formal input in workplace decisions that greatly impact their interests. If that is so, then one political solution to consider is workplace democracy (as David Ellerman discusses in his recent interesting book, *Neo-Abolitionism*).

EA: What do you think about the call by the WSWS for the formation of rank-and-file workplace committees as a means of organizing against unsafe work and school reopenings? Are you familiar with, and what are your thoughts on, the statements from the rank-and-file committees, including the Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (founding statement here: <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2021/01/20/alab-j20.html>)?

JF: After only glancing at this founding statement of the Alabama

Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, I am inclined to agree with most of its demands including (1) full transparency from school boards about the spread of the coronavirus, (2) more democratic decision making, (3) robust opportunities for educators to receive vaccinations, (4) income protection for parents, (5) the halt of nonessential production in the state (again, with income protection for workers), (6) increased funding for ventilation system upgrades in schools, and (7) free, high-quality mental health and social services for students and families who request it.

Because I am not an expert on K-12 pedagogy or child development, and because (as I said above) I am still a bit unsure about whether robust mitigation efforts might suffice to minimize suffering and death from the coronavirus, I would prefer to withhold my public judgment from some other demands until I study the issue more carefully. On those demands, I would rather defer to “rank-and-file committees of educators, school workers, parents and students in each school in collaboration with trusted scientists and health experts” (in the words of the Safety Committee).

EA: What do you hope others take away from your story?

JF: I hope to encourage faculty to further organize around and voice their concerns about campus safety issues, in particular, and the lack of shared governance more generally. Regarding the former, it’s also important to consider the long history of higher ed institutions neglecting the well-being of their members. And I would hope that people who are now rightly concerned about COVID on campus might broaden their concerns to encompass these related issues as well—issues such as the harassment that students sometimes face from campus police and the barriers to accessibility that immunocompromised and disabled people sometimes face, not to mention the costly tuition bills that often force already burdened working-class students into wage work during the school year.



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