

Best Practices for Reopening Colleges and Universities

Summary

On May 15, 2020, the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) announced the establishment of the IBHE Reopening Committee (IBHE RC) to prepare guidance for Institutes of Higher Education (IHE) in IL with regards to reopening for Fall 2020 (IBHE Guidelines). The Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) identified 3 IHE faculty members, Dr. William Mills, Dr. Sheila Simons and Dr. Gabriel Guzman, with expertise in health and safety, public health, and infectious disease, who were subsequently appointed by the IL Governor's office to IBHE RC.

During these meetings, the three faculty members advocated for providing actual technical information, rather than policy type statements to help an IHE provide a safer reopening. However, the administrators and IBHE officials on the committee ignored their expertise and stated that there was no need for technical information in the report. Instead, the IBHE Guidelines simply refer to Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) and Centers for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines. Due to professional concerns about the technical integrity of the IBHE Guidelines, the faculty members requested that their names be removed as contributors.

The IDPH and CDC guidelines represent minimum benchmarks, and IHEs must be able to apply more stringent benchmarks if they are scientifically warranted. Contrary to existing guidance from IDPH, CDC and World Health Organization (WHO), scientists worldwide have stated that the "airborne" transmission of Covid-19 has been downplayed or appears to have been affected by political interference. It is now generally accepted in the scientific literature that the term "airborne transmission" can involve indirect (e.g., respiratory droplet deposition on surfaces (fomites) and then transmitted via touching) and direct (e.g., inhalation or deposition in mucous membranes of eyes, nose, mouth) airborne transmission routes.

Demands:

- 1) That proper social distancing, wearing of face masks and proper hand hygiene are REQUIRED practices.
- 2) If any student refuses to follow these practices, they should be barred from the class.
- 3) If any employee refuses to follow these practices, other employees can refuse to work with them.
- 4) Where a course can be taught online or remote or where job duties can be done remotely, the instructor/employee should be able to decide whether they want to do it in person or online, without penalty or pressure.
- 5) Plans must be put in place to address how vulnerable populations will receive instruction and interact with others at the IHE.
- 6) Where a course is going to be offered with in-person instruction, a risk assessment needs to be performed for each class session to evaluate the type(s) of hazard control that can be implemented and the basis for a decision for choosing the type of hazard control will be documented.
- 7) For in-person instruction, air quality, air flow, and air purification should be considered by the institution to protect students and faculty.
- 8) Employees who do not feel safe with the proposed level of hazard control should not be required to teach in person.
- 9) If the IHEs wish to offer instruction in person, and the instructor is not comfortable with this, a reasonable accommodation must be made.
- 10) Any employee can request a higher level of hazard control. IHEs should set up a procedure for external review of such request.
- 11) Employees need to be informed what the options are, in the event an agreement cannot be reached with the IHE. Note that the impact of Covid-19 represents a change in working conditions for anybody working under a collective bargaining agreement and have a right to bargain over the impact of any change in working conditions.
- 12) Recognize the need for special precautions for hands-on in-person instruction (music, dance, film, labs, cosmetology, auto tech, etc.)