News for Faculty: Penn State’s Preparations for Fall 2020

This twice-weekly email is designed to provide faculty with Penn State’s pandemic-related news and updates as the University prepares for the Fall 2020 semester. Watch for these emails on Tuesdays and Fridays, with additional “special editions” delivered periodically. Previous faculty news digests are archived here.

QUESTIONS FROM FACULTY

Q: Is it safe for my class/lab to continue meeting in person if one of my students tests positive for COVID-19?

The identification of a student who has tested positive for COVID-19 is evidence that our plan is working as anticipated. We expected that some students and employees would test positive for the virus, and the goal of a robust testing program is to minimize the likelihood of an outbreak occurring. Early detection is critical to this goal. Our precautions and protocols are layered and designed to reduce the risk of spread from an individual who has tested positive for COVID in the class or lab. Assuming instructors, researchers, and students have adhered to the University guidance regarding mandatory mask wearing and physical distancing, neither the instructor nor researcher, nor the student’s class- or lab-mates will be identified as at-risk close contacts under CDC and Pennsylvania Department of Health guidelines.

Providing students who have contracted COVID with support and flexibility is important. Students who contract this virus will have varying symptoms, from mild cold symptoms to flu-like symptoms to possible hospitalization (the least likely). Mild to moderate illness can last up to 14 days. Students are being encouraged to communicate with their faculty to describe their level of illness and the work that they can accomplish while they are ill. Other related challenges that might impact attendance should be communicated to faculty in a similar fashion. As always, it is important to keep student health information confidential.

Senate Policy 42-27 on Class Attendance emphasizes the importance of regular attendance, but also grants faculty a great deal of latitude in providing reasonable opportunities for students to make up work for legitimate and unavoidable reasons including illness, family emergency, etc. Although faculty can use their judgment in assessing a student’s illness claim, students are not required to secure the signature of medical personnel and faculty do not need to secure documentation to support their professional judgement.

Q: What happens in those rare instances when a faculty member does not adhere to Penn State’s health and safety guidance?
A: Before we answer this question, many thanks to those faculty members and instructors, including graduate assistants, who in addition to providing high quality in-person instruction are also hard at work following and enforcing Penn State’s safety requirements as outlined in the Instructor Guide to Fall 2020. A new Penn State policy, AD101 (COVID-19), outlines Penn State’s requirements and expectations with respect to masking, social distancing, surveillance testing, contact tracing, gatherings, and other COVID-related health and safety measures. In those few instances when an instructor or faculty member willfully refuses or chooses to not comply with these requirements, such as not wearing a face mask in instructional or research settings, encouraging students not to follow face mask wearing requirements, or refusing to participate in surveillance testing, guidance documents have been developed so that situations involving faculty members and instructors are handled fairly and consistently across all Penn State campuses. Please see the Guidance on Instructor/Researcher Violation of Face Mask Requirements and Guidance for AD101 Violations for Faculty and Instructors for more details. Graduate students serving as “Instructors-of-Record or Teaching Assistants (TAs) can find guidance here.

Q: August 31, 2020, is approaching rapidly, and I am trying to decide whether to confirm my acceptance of the one-year extension of the provisional tenure period due to COVID-19. What will happen if I confirm my acceptance of the extension?

A: If you confirm acceptance of the extension by August 31, 2020, your tenure clock will be immediately adjusted and any formal review you have scheduled for the 2020-2021 academic year (e.g., 2nd or 4th year review) will take place in 2021-2022. If you are going up for your sixth-year review, this deadline does not apply as the confirmation of the extension for those in their penultimate year must be received by April 1 of that year. Faculty who wish to confirm acceptance of the extension may do so by completing this form.

If you confirm your acceptance of the one-year extension after August 31, 2020 and by August 31, 2021, your extension will be applied to 2021-2022 academic year. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the Office of the Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs at vpfa@psu.edu.

LATEST NEWS OF IMPORTANCE TO FACULTY

- To support the health and well-being of the University community this fall, Penn State is implementing a contact tracing process in coordination with the Pennsylvania Department of Health as part of a layered tracing and testing approach for students and employees across all campuses.

- Faculty, staff, and students will be contacted by email and text message if they are selected to participate in Penn State’s randomized COVID-19 surveillance testing program to identify asymptomatic carriers of the virus and monitor the
prevalence of COVID-19 across all campuses. Participation is required for those who have returned to campus.

- Penn State Learning staff and tutors will provide in-person and remote tutoring as well as Guided Study Groups to support students in the fall 2020 semester.

- WE ARE...social distant!

- Landscape Architecture faculty created a virtual studio course for those students who otherwise would not have graduated in August because of study abroad restrictions that were put in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

KEY REMINDERS FOR FACULTY

- An updated “Instruction, Universal Masking and PPE Recommendations” document has been posted that includes guidance about neck gaiters, cleaning procedures for clear masks, and recommendations for performance settings (music/vocal/theater).

- Faculty have a number of resources available to them during these challenging times. Resources include the Employee Assistance Program and an Employee Assistance Fund.

- President Barron welcomed students via a video message and reminded all Penn Staters that they each have a responsibility to help keep the University community safe.

- Penn State launched a publicly-accessible COVID-19 dashboard to share data on its COVID-19 surveillance testing program as well as the number of individuals in isolation and quarantine. The dashboard can be accessed here.

- Penn State students and employees should continue to take precautions against COVID-19, such as wearing face masks, practicing physical distancing, washing your hands, not touching your face, and avoiding contact with those who are sick. This article offers guidance about what to do if you are sick or think you may have been exposed to COVID-19.

- Faculty can still submit questions related to Penn State’s plans for a return to classrooms in the fall. Questions may be submitted here.

• Professional development and training opportunities are available to faculty in preparation for the Fall 2020 semester. Upcoming webinars for instructors at all Penn State campuses include:
  
  o Monday, August 31, 12 – 3 p.m., Ask the Experts: Virtual Office Hours

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To obtain comprehensive, updated information at any time, please review:

• The University’s comprehensive resources on its “Back to State” page and updated FAQs regarding plans to resume on-campus work and learning this fall
• Penn State’s “Keep Teaching” and “Keep Learning” websites, including many Fall 2020 instruction-related FAQs and new webinars
• The online archive of video messages from Penn State leaders and experts, previous news digests, and pandemic-related University news stories
• The Office of Human Resources COVID-19 information site and “Return to Work on Campus” resource site
• The “University Measures” webpage, which summarizes steps Penn State is taking in response to COVID-19
• The University’s health information page focused on personal safety practices for individuals at all campuses
• A robust, updated list of contacts and resources for the University community
• The Social Science Research Institute website featuring pandemic-related insights from University experts and other resources