DATE: September 15, 2021

FROM: Eric J. Barron

TO: Bonj Szczygiel

I apologize for the delay in responding to the recent resolutions. As you know, there was recent agreement that I would not respond to such communications from the University Faculty Senate, though of course they are reviewed and seriously considered, as are all communications from the Faculty Senate. That said, in this case you have communicated that a formal response is desired, so I am happy to provide one.

I have responded publicly to many of the concerns that were raised in the resolutions, notably in my open letter of August 12 in advance of the Faculty Senate plenary meeting (https://news.psu.edu/story/665967/2021/08/12/administration/open-letter-penn-state-community-president-barron), as well as on August 13 in my statement (President Barron, Board leadership respond to Faculty Senate resolutions | Penn State University (psu.edu)). In addition, the article (https://news.psu.edu/story/666787/2021/08/20/academics/answers-questions-faculty-input-class-modes-and-ongoing-resources) published on August 20 responded to concerns about transparency and involvement of our faculty experts and representation in COVID planning and operationalization.

Over the course of the last month, a number of additional announcements have been made about other areas of concern that were raised in the resolutions, including a masking mandate for all employees and students in buildings and consequences for noncompliance and enforcement strategies.

I know that there are concerns remaining in at least two areas—the lack of a vaccine mandate and the question of faculty choice in selecting course modality.

I know that many universities and colleges have gone the mandate route. We chose an alternate path, fully believing that the Penn State community would respond positively to our approach and that we would achieve results that are similar to those who applied mandates. A careful review of public universities with mandates indicates that this is the case. Our on-arrival testing results (Penn State releases on-arrival COVID-19 testing results for University Park | Penn State University (psu.edu)) were reported on August 23, and vaccination rates were reported on August 30 (Penn State releases vaccination rates for students, employees at University Park | Penn State University (psu.edu)). Both demonstrate that tremendous progress has been made. Since that release, vaccination rates have continued to increase, especially across the Commonwealth Campuses, and we are anticipating that we will get an additional boost as
President Biden’s strategies are implemented. Vaccination data are now available on the COVID dashboard and will be updated regularly.

As you know, faculty were given the opportunity to request work exceptions through a process managed by Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs Kathy Bieschke. That process was open from mid-spring through July, then re-opened for further applications before the semester began to be responsive to concerns associated with the Delta variant. In total, about 70% of the requests were approved. As we have discussed and shared publicly (https://news.psu.edu/story/666787/2021/08/20/academics/answers-questions-faculty-input-class-modes-and-ongoing-resources) it is important that this be a managed process. While we respect the role of the faculty in all academic matters, the intersection of this aspect with administrative considerations (such as accreditation and regulations governing international students) require this to be a shared responsibility.

Please know that this administration respects and embraces the vital role of shared governance, and we have acted accordingly throughout my presidency. Please be assured that we are committed to continuing to do so and look forward to working with the Faculty Senate as we move forward through the remainder of the pandemic and beyond.

cc: Dawn Blasko
    Nicholas P. Jones