

July 1, 2020

To All Faculty and Staff:

Last Friday I received two communications from some faculty and staff that outline a number of concerns that I believe most or perhaps all of us have grappled with during the uncertainties of the current global pandemic. I wish to respond to the main questions in those messages by first saying that such messages are entirely welcome. They show the deep engagement of members of our community in this crucial decision as well the sense of all participants that they do have a voice, even if some feel that that voice needs to be anonymous. They also guide me and the Administrative Committee (AC) in how to further communicate around our decision and our planning going forward.

**I respond first to the message that centers on why the AC made the decision to invite all students back, which as submitted was signed by 42 faculty, staff, and administrators, some anonymously.**

**Everyone faces difficult choices and decisions in the era of COVID-19**, and college students everywhere are no exception. They earnestly desire to continue their education and want to progress toward their career goals. Yet, they are surrounded by risk and uncertainty, knowing that the choices they make affect themselves and potentially many others. For students at Berea College, the stakes are even higher. They realize that their tuition-free education is the most significant opportunity that has come their way, but they also often take on heavy responsibilities dealing with the circumstances of their family members and loved ones.

The process for evaluating reopening options was extensive, spanning over two months, as the AC began meeting between four and six days each week once on-campus instruction ceased in March. That process was also inclusive, with four different working groups—the AC, the Division Council, and two different logistics groups—examining the issues relating to reopening, including health/safety matters, academics, student life, labor, facilities, financial aid, and more. The logistics groups are comprised of administrators, faculty, staff, and student representatives. Countless hours have been dedicated to finding the best choice for Bereans during this challenging and difficult situation.

A variety of information was solicited from the campus community through surveys as well as a town hall meeting conducted with faculty and staff. Extensive examination of data regarding COVID-19 has been undertaken and will continue to be considered, from Johns Hopkins to the Commonwealth of Kentucky and other states. Finally, the AC carefully considered the decisions on reopening made by other higher educational institutions, public as well as private.

In addition to the Division Council's report, the AC also considered the Final Report of the Logistics II planning group that stated, it "is committed to providing the best possible co-curricular experience during the 2020 Fall Term, regardless of the scenario chosen." The team also concluded from its gathering of information from staff on planning for fall co-curricular activities and programming that, generally speaking, "there were very few differences in planned procedures between the three scenarios" that the AC considered for the fall.

**The decision from this extensive and inclusive process can be distilled into the following three principles.**

**First**, the decision seeks to maintain as much educational efficacy as possible amid a global pandemic by inviting as many students as wish to do so to return to campus. The Final Report of the Division Council seemed to agree: “Berea faculty,” the report says, “are trained to teach in person and Berea College is designed to be a residential campus. Therefore, we should bring back as many students to campus as possible.” Doing so honors the Berea learning model that all Bereans believe in and support.

**Second**, the College seeks to provide agency to students to decide, after being informed by an extended statement already released from the College, which educational option each student prefers:

- return to campus and abide by extensive restrictions,
- remain away from campus and continue education remotely, or
- opt for a leave of absence for the Fall 2020 Term.

Many of our students are in impossibly difficult situations when away from campus, and it is not feasible to evaluate each student’s case. By allowing students to evaluate their own circumstances and educational goals, we are allowing **all** students the opportunity to further their education within Berea’s integrated learning environment.

**Third**, agency is also applied to faculty and, where possible, staff. The administration is offering faculty significant flexibility by supporting a faculty member’s choice between teaching courses on campus or remotely as long as a course’s learning objectives can be met remotely. Faculty were also offered training opportunities and support for their summer work transitioning classes. The College is supportive of telework for staff members whose work can be accomplished remotely while acknowledging that not all work can be undertaken in such fashion. These decisions also seem to agree with the Division Council’s recommendation that “faculty who request to teach remotely should given the opportunity to do so if their teaching responsibilities allow it. Academic support staff, when their jobs allow it, should also be given this option.”

Berea’s decision in March to cease on-campus instruction early in the U.S. COVID-19 outbreak was prudent, in spite of asking students, faculty, and staff in a matter of days to transform the educational mode of inquiry and support services to remote learning. By making available professional development and summer stipends to faculty, the AC does not wish to replicate the difficulties of the spring remote learning experience. In fact, because of the agency offered to faculty with this decision, the College is supporting faculty development in distance learning techniques and best practices for those who wish to start the fall term online and others who might be forced to return to such a mode should the College again have to cease on-campus instruction.

Hence, **Berea’s decision to reopen is one built on choice—for students, faculty, and staff to the greatest extent possible—while still carrying forward Berea’s enduring educational mission.**

**One thing is certain: in spite of careful and prudent oversight by all members of the AC, and the hard work of so many faculty and staff members, there is no guarantee against risk.** Leaving home to attend residential higher education involves some risk. Sadly, in nearly every year of my presidency tragedies of various sorts have befallen students, and others have left the College, greatly disappointed that things had not gone well for them. Collegiate life is even more risky during a global pandemic, as the articles cited in the letter indicate. That added risk is why steadfast vigilance to personal and communal safety is incumbent on all residents of any community, as Kentucky’s governor and his staff indicate in every press conference. It is also why choice is so important, so that individuals for whom that added risk

would be imprudent or unacceptable, whether they are students, faculty or staff, can choose to avoid the in-person contact that increases their risk.

Our students have been informed that they are welcome to return to campus and also advised to consider carefully all relevant factors about the COVID-19 pandemic, including their own health histories and those of other members of their households, rates of infection in their home communities, and resources available to them at home and at Berea. In addition to learning on campus or remotely, new students have been given the option to defer admission, and continuing students may take a leave of absence with confidence that their Tuition Promise Scholarship and all institutional aid will be available when they return. All students have been cautioned that this will not be a “normal” year at school. The academic environment, residence life, dining, the motor vehicle policy, off-campus travel, and other facets of college life will be very different this fall. Students have been informed about strict requirements for virus testing, social distancing, and other extraordinary health and safety measures that will be in place should they opt to return to campus. They have been cautioned, in the clearest terms, about the risks they and all members of our community are undertaking. And, importantly, the College’s decision to reopen on campus is subject to reevaluation at any time if local conditions pertaining to COVID-19 warrant.

**Finally, I want to be clear about the logic of this decision.** First, we do not minimize either the severe danger of COVID-19 infection for some populations or the highly contagious nature of this virus. To the contrary; we are taking special measures to reduce the risk to those returning to campus. Neither do we make optimistic assumptions about progress toward more effective therapies or vaccines. Unfortunately, national consensus on the best way to respond to threat of the pandemic has not been achieved, so we cannot assume that our country will make the best possible decisions as to federal and state policies. (Our own Commonwealth has done better than many areas of the country, but, of course, our students come from many parts of the U.S., including some where the situation is quite dire at the moment.) And we do not assume that testing and contact tracing will be nearly at the level they need to be in order to really get control over this pandemic. We will be in compliance with all Commonwealth of Kentucky and Madison County regulations for testing and contact tracing, and we will work diligently to shift the culture to one that focuses on the well-being of the entire community.

We do, however, put significant trust in the advice of public health leaders as to how one can successfully combat the spread of COVID-19 and any similar viral pestilence. These are the low-tech behavioral adjustments of social distancing, universal masking, and hand hygiene, all rigorously pursued. Should an infection occur on campus, those measures will very significantly limit the number of additional persons who need to be isolated until found to be free of the disease. We also do take seriously the relatively mild impact that COVID-19 infection has for most persons not in high-risk categories. Quarantine for two weeks is certainly an unwelcome prospect, and perhaps that prospect will help us all be diligent in pursuing all the necessary behavioral modifications, both at work and beyond, but in itself is not such a fearful prospect. Relatively few of the Madison County cases have required hospitalization; most infected persons have recovered at home. We have also taken careful note of the advice of our state’s public health authorities with regard to the testing regimen that will be necessary.

So, while most residential colleges and universities have announced decisions to re-open their campuses for the fall term, expecting all of their students to return, Berea College has taken a different course. Recognizing the significance of this decision for our students, we have instead given them a choice. No matter their choice, Berea students will be fully supported by their *alma mater*. Likewise, the College, realizing that faculty and staff also face difficult choices and decisions, has provided an

extraordinary degree of flexibility and support. Berea College is most fortunate that it can make this decision without regard to the impact on tuition and other program revenues, thanks to its enduring mission and support from alumni and friends.

**I turn next to the governance issues related to process, transparency, and communication raised in the message sent by Professor Foster with 32 co-signors.**

First, we are attaching to this letter more information about the survey work done to support decision-making. This includes data from the results of the faculty surveys as well as the Division Council report, the appendices of which offer a detailed analysis of the various faculty surveys. (That report had been released earlier to faculty.) Please see Appendix A below for the participation statistics on the various faculty surveys that were conducted. The principle focus of this work was to obtain faculty input on how educational objectives could best be accomplished in the three scenarios we were considering. Also, Summer Student Government Association President Brady Willis, a rising senior, was part of the Logistics II group, and he conducted a survey of continuing students, which received 58 responses. Finally, the AC has asked Staff Forum leadership to work with staff to provide input on how best to manage the complex and varied work of our dedicated staff members in the upcoming fall term. The information obtained from that effort will be shared later.

Regarding governance, this global pandemic has required decision-making outside of normal procedures. The AC affirms its commitment to shared governance but also recognizes that some decisions, such as the decision to close the College in March, must be made in a timely and even urgent manner when difficult issues arise. All of the current measures are temporary, and will not pertain long term, unless a situation arises where we would need to extend the critical responses to this current or another future crisis. Should such an occasion occur, AC members would work diligently to collect input from the entire community in a timely fashion.

The Board of Trustees, realizing this extraordinary situation, specifically charged the president and the AC at its meeting in late May with decision-making throughout the COVID-19 process. Each decision and every substantive communication has been and will continue to be shared with the Board of Trustees.

While we now understand that some persons have expressed surprise at the decision to offer all students the ability to return if they so choose, we affirm that this option was always one of the three under consideration. None of the three had been ruled out or characterized by the AC as unlikely. We know that the Logistics II report and the Division Council's report put a great deal of focus on the hybrid option of 500-800 students, and we understand that the Division Council's report left the third option largely undiscussed.

As we proceed, our desire is to share that decision with the community as soon as possible, even though doing so may mean that we must provide more details after sharing the decision. We will certainly prioritize communications going forward, and we will place all decisions and policy statements in an accessible central location as soon as they are complete. The AC will continue to share its decisions in the timeliest manner possible, and we do apologize to those in the community who believe that the decision-making has been opaque, as that was never the intention.

To conclude, please know that I and the AC welcome continued dialogue and engagement, and we thank each member of the community for your work, for your commitment to our mission and our students, and for remaining excellent and engaged community members during what has been an unprecedented time in history. Every decision we make is ultimately guided by our signpost, the Great

Commitments of Berea College. We hope you will join us as we all work together to preserve to the best of our ability the learning community that we all value as we continue to invest in lives of great promise, even in the midst of a global crisis.

### **Appendix A – Faculty Surveys**

The first faculty survey was conducted on 4/28/20. That survey is attached as the document named, “Initial Faculty Survey 4-28-20.pdf.”

This was an anonymous survey and 48 faculty responded. A summary of the responses was attached to the Division Council report submitted on 6/8/20. The text of the email is attached to this message as well as the final Division Council Report.

A second faculty survey was conducted on 5/26/20. Its prompts are attached as file name “Faculty Teaching Survey 5-26-20.pdf.”

This survey was not anonymous. Response was excellent with 145 of 169 faculty weighing in; there were only five continuing faculty non-respondents. A summary of the responses was included as an appendix to the Division Council report. The text of the email requesting this information is included as an attachment.

Finally, on 6/5/20, Dean Saderholm asked department chairs to indicate which classes had to be taught in an in-person, on-campus format. All responded and the report was included in the Division Council report.