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DEPARTMENT OF WOMEN'S STUDIES

08/20/20

An Open Letter to
Chancellor Jay Perman,
President Darryll Pines,
Senior Vice President and Provost Mary Ann Rankin,
Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion Georgina Dodge,
Associate Vice President for Finance and Personnel Cynthia Hale,
Chair of the UMD Senate Laura Dugan, and Chair-Elect, Ellen Williams,
Dean of the College of Arts and Humanities Bonnie Thornton Dill

cc. AFSCME Local 1072

WGSS Statement (in solidarity with "19 August 2020 Letter of Faculty Support for Staff
Colleagues")

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought us to an unprecedented moment. We exist in a context where every decision, no matter how small, now holds life and death ramifications for those of us who are part of the University of Maryland community. At present, we exist in a context of differential levels of privilege and access. As faculty, we have been given the opportunity to choose how we will deliver our classes and when or whether we will come to campus this fall. For some, this means that we will offer face-to-face modality, others a hybrid delivery, and for many, we remain entirely online and away from campus. The staff in our College have not been given any such possibility. In fact, departments have been mandated to maintain offices with a 9-5 on-campus staff-presence.

In the spring, it was the staff who did the work of facilitating a smooth transition for both students and faculty: advising continued, schedules were posted, APT and other committees were appropriately assisted. The staff did the work of successfully maintaining a sense of connection with students, supervising student workers, and other tasks that made for the efficient administration of our respective departments. The only thing that has happened between then and now is that the numbers of COVID-19 infections and deaths have increased.

As the university has planned for the Fall Semester, many departments have been open remotely, maintaining a standard set of hours and providing a full range of services to students, faculty, and administrators in a way that has allowed our staff colleagues the same ability to protect themselves and their families as faculty have taken for themselves.

A number of universities around the country have had to rescind their decision to fully open given the rapid spread of the virus upon the arrival of increased numbers of people on campus. At present, the University of Maryland has not shown evidence of having the ability to test faculty, staff, and students with any reasonable frequency and with any timely communication of results that would make said testing meaningful. This increased presence, coupled with the absence of an efficient testing model increases the likelihood of spread within the university and extending into the Prince George's community, a predominantly Black and Brown community, which we know to be already disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 virus.

One mark of excellence in any institution is the ability to be innovative and dynamic enough to change and revise to meet ongoing circumstances. We have seen what is happening around the country when universities have insisted on adhering to an old model, to return quickly to what they were as if what they were is the only thing that they could be, when the business model of the university has taken precedence over the lives of the university. The University of Maryland now has an opportunity to demonstrate

how we maintain a sense of community in a moment in which we are all under a ~~form of~~ threat. It would be a powerful example of leadership if the University of Maryland imagined itself as a leader among universities -- taking the health and safety of ALL its community into account, modeling a sense of responsibility to the larger community in which we reside, and working WITH staff in an open and collaborative way, which allows that their input, their sense of safety, their changed circumstances be acknowledged in the university's decision-making process.

The present plan places a disproportionate burden on our staff in terms of their life and livelihood and that of their extended family networks. This is a university that has seen too much death, some of it preventable death, not to understand now the urgency of taking every possible step to ensure that we do not lose any more of our community. In light of the aforementioned factors, we ask that our colleagues not be mandated to have an on-campus presence and that departments be trusted to make decisions that maintain the necessary functions of the department while protecting the lives of members of staff.

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