

June 30, 2020

Dear President Choi,

I am an emeritus professor at MU.

I just read the [announcement that MU plans to hold in-person classes this fall](#).

I believe that this plan is based on unrealistic assumptions about how people will behave, and it will put many people at risk of preventable illness and death.

Unfortunately, many American adults of all ages don't act responsibly to limit the spread of the virus, and research shows that, as a group, younger adults are especially bad at making decisions about risks.

So I urge the University to hold classes exclusively online this fall.

I am very concerned that holding classes in person would increase the risk of spreading the coronavirus to the full range of University stakeholders including students, faculty, staff, and residents of the communities where University campuses are located.

Several months ago, when most of the country was under substantial restrictions to control the spread of the virus, it appeared as if the situation might be under control by the fall so that it would be safe to hold classes in person.

Unfortunately, the restrictions have largely been lifted and many people do not follow public health guidance that would limit the spread. As a result, the number of new cases is increasing rapidly in many parts of the country. Considering the current trends, it seems unlikely that the trend will reverse dramatically in the near future.

The New York Times lists Boone County as a "hotspot," where there is an average of 13 new cases per day compared with 3.1 new cases per day two weeks ago. This is during the summer, before thousands of students would converge on Columbia from many places, some of which have much higher rates of infection. The situation is much worse in St. Louis County, where the infection rate rose from 44 to 81 new cases per day.

It seems likely that the rate of infection around University campuses will rise dramatically if classes are held in person during the fall. In that situation, the University presumably would need to abruptly shift to online instruction as it did in the spring.

It would be much better to make the decision now to hold classes online so that everyone can plan accordingly.

I am sure that you and your colleagues have been considering these issues carefully. I can imagine that there are many reasons why the University would try to hold classes in person if possible.

From my perspective, the financial and intangible costs of in-person classes far outweigh the benefits.

This also is the view of Susan Dynarski, a professor of education, public policy and economics at the University of Michigan, who wrote an article in the New York Times, [“College Is Worth It, but Campus Isn’t.”](#) She writes, “Bringing millions of students back to campus would create enormous risks for society but comparatively little educational benefit, an economist says.” This article describes the short-term economic interests of colleges and universities to hold classes on campus – and why this would not be in their real economic interest considering the foreseeable risks.

I recognize that you and your colleagues are in a very difficult situation and none of the options is desirable.

Under the circumstances, I believe that holding classes online during the fall is the least-bad option. I realize that this option would have some negative consequences, especially for some employees and online instruction is imperfect. I trust that you would do what you can to minimize these problems.

I appreciate your consideration.

Sincerely,

John Lande