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Educators warn: Staff cuts leave Massachusetts campuses unprepared for Fall

Public higher ed. executives are failing to do their jobs of securing funding to allow for a safe and successful college semester for students and educators

Failure to advocate for funding, vague plans, lack of PPE, furloughs have Mass. public higher ed campuses headed for COVID-19 disaster, say education professionals

BOSTON, MA – From UMass Boston to Springfield Technical Community College in Springfield, MA, public higher education faculty and staff have launched a new campaign warning the Commonwealth that campuses are currently unprepared for the return of students in the fall.

“UMass President **Marty Meehan**, Board of Higher Education Commissioner **Carlos Santiago** and other public higher education executives are failing to do their jobs of securing funding to allow for a safe and successful college semester for students and educators,” said Darcie Boyer who was recently laid off from her job at UMass Lowell “Instead, they are doing the opposite — using the pandemic as an excuse to layoff and furlough employees, which hurts our campuses over the long term, and makes them unsafe for the fall.”

UMass Lowell is just one of 29 public higher education institutions in the state to experience deep cuts before the fall semester begins. Workers from all 29 have banded together as part of a new and emerging “**Massachusetts Agrees: Defend public higher education now**” campaign that will take a leap forward this week when they launch a sweeping multimedia campaign to warn parents, students, and elected officials about what they say is a lack of preparation on public higher education campuses.

“Above all, this is an appeal to the employers within the public higher education system to work with us, not against us, as we attempt to preserve safety and the integrity of education for public higher education students this fall,” said Margaret Wong, an English professor at Quinsigamond Community College “Our employers are shirking their responsibility to not just the students, faculty, and staff, but to the surrounding communities.”

The town of [Amherst recently issued a blistering rebuke](#) to the UMass system,

expressing concerns about its vague and shifting plans for the fall. UMass faculty and staff, along with faculty and staff from the state's 22 other public college campuses, are raising similar alarms in a new video message being released on **CNN, MSNBC, ESPN**, and other top rated channels across the Commonwealth. The new campaign seeks to highlight the concerns and voices of the thousands of workers across Massachusetts public higher education campuses who have been laid off or furloughed according to recent reports.

"In a rush that puts revenue above human life... behind closed doors, they are ignoring the voices that make public higher education what it is: The staff. The faculty. The parents. The students. The workers. The community," read the message, which will air across the state not just on television, but also on social media platforms including **Facebook, YouTube**, and more.

"'The Equity Agenda' of the Board of Higher Ed promises to make a commitment to equity for our students of color and students from low income families, but without adequate funding this is a hollow promise," said Wong. "Springfield Technical Community College is closing 7 certificate programs and laying off tenured faculty. This destroys good jobs and career paths in the community."

Salem State University is shuttering student programs despite having reserves of \$11-13 million dollars, plus a multi-million dollar line of credit. "We've been told that SSU needs to save their reserves in case they decide to build a new science building," says Tiffany Chenault, Professor of Sociology at Salem State University. SSU has a student population that is 40% students of color, many the first generation in their families to attend college.

"This disorganized approach without adequate investments has not worked for our country, it did not work for our campuses when the pandemic started, and we are concerned it will fail us all again in the fall if public higher education leaders don't start investing rather than cutting," said Chenault. "And we're failing our students who can't complete needed course work for their degrees because their faculty are gone." Salem State faculty and professional administrators have taken layoffs, a four week furlough, and a 13% pay cut.

"How are we supposed to do our jobs and keep students safe when they are laying off hundreds of UMass workers? We need more staffing — not less — to ensure these campuses are safe for return," said maintenance worker Steve Turcotte, who was also recently threatened by layoff from his job at UMass Lowell. "We have a real concern that there will be more layoffs in maintenance after we finish getting dorms ready for students. Plus UMass is spending money to outsource to outside contractors who are not being held responsible for wearing masks or social distancing."

"Through these cuts, the public higher education administrators in Massachusetts are creating not just a potential public health crisis, but also a crisis of equity," said **Merrie Najimy**, President of the Massachusetts Teachers Association, which represents more

than 18,000 workers in the community colleges, state universities and UMass statewide. “Using the pandemic as an excuse to dismantle programs and cut thousands of higher ed staff at the universities and colleges that disproportionately serve low-income students and students of color is a disturbing approach, one that needs to be reversed and rebuked. That’s why we are taking this campaign to the airwaves statewide.”

“It is a mystery to us why higher ed leaders are sitting on their hands and not pounding on doors at the State House and in Washington D.C. for the funds our campuses need to reopen safely,” said **Max Page**, Vice President of the **Massachusetts Teachers Association**, “There is a general feeling that public higher education leadership is simply trying to cut their way out of the COVID-19 crisis instead of doing their job and utilizing available funding to maintain staff who are essential to safety and learning.” The campaign calls out higher ed leaders including UMass President Marty Meehan, UMass Board of Trustees Chair Rob Manning, Higher Education Commissioner Carlos Santiago, Board of Higher Ed Chair Chris Gabrieli, Secretary Peyser and Presidents and Chancellors of each college.

Educators say that like the Trump administration, the Commonwealth is lacking a strong, centralized plan to combat the virus on campuses when students return, and that the furloughs and cuts to essential staff and faculty alike will make it even harder to maintain the academic integrity of the learning environment, which they fear will be further compromised by safety and infection issues if staffing is not restored.

“It is clear that there is little or no appreciation for what faculty and staff do” said Aruna Krishnamurthy, a faculty member at Fitchburg State University. “We have just come out of a grueling spring semester, and now have the threat of furloughs hanging over our heads, even as we prepare for a challenging fall semester. In all my years serving the public higher education system, I’ve never seen this level of insensitivity and lack of transparency.”

On the other hand, educators say they do have a plan and a direction that the public higher education campuses should be following.

First, they say, higher education leaders should be leading the charge for additional funding to restore staff cuts, and should be tapping into reserves. The UMass Foundation’s total portfolio, which includes some of the endowment and some of UMass’s investments, totaled \$973.3 million in 2019 (and increased by more than \$100 million in just one year). System President Marty Meehan has reportedly taken a 10% pay cut, but is still slated to earn nearly \$1 million in total compensation, counting his perks of a driver and housing allowance.

Meehan is known for touting his relationships with “Chuck and Nancy,” a reference to U.S. Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer (D-NY) and U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA).

“If those relationships are real,” said Risa Silverman, Director of the Office for Public Health Practice and Outreach at UMass Amherst, and co-chair of the Professional Staff Union. “It’s time for Marty Meehan to start exercising them and ensure we can return to campus safely. It shouldn’t be faculty and staff calling D.C. and phoning into Beacon Hill on our own. There has been no meaningful action from public higher education leadership on funding for the fall semester, just layoff notices and unenforceable or ludicrous plans for health and safety.”

Public higher education employees also say that campuses were too slow to suspend work at the outset of the pandemic, and many got sick from COVID-19 as a result.

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Second, the campaign is calling for robust health and safety measures to be implemented across all campuses, including mandatory wearing of masks, free testing and close coordination with community health metrics. Many buildings on public higher ed campuses have inadequate ventilation and crowded facilities.

Third, they are calling for a full restoral of all layoffs and program cuts made since the onset of the pandemic. Dozens of student programs have been cut in the past month including the 7 degree certification programs at Springfield Technical Community College, and the Childcare/ Early Education Center at Quinsigamond Community College .