

The Challenges of COVID-19 on Lincoln University of Pennsylvania

**Testimony before the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania House Education Committee
Representative Curtis G. Sonney- Chair**

**Wednesday, February 24, 2021
10:00 am to 12 Noon**

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Thank you for this opportunity to present testimony before the Pennsylvania House Education Committee. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Lincoln University placed top priority on (1) the health and safety of students, faculty, and staff, and (2) continuity of instruction.

As a brief recap, on March 11, 2020 Lincoln University suspended all face-to-face classes for the remainder of the spring semester, making it among the first institutions of higher education in the southeastern region of the state to do so. Students vacated the campus and soon after, all nonessential employees were asked to work remotely. In order to provide adequate time for faculty to move from face-to-face to alternative modes of instructions, courses resumed beginning March 30, 2020.

Operating the campus in the age of COVID-19 required that we all enter into a “social exercise” to design a “new normal” for engagement both inside and outside of the classroom. I am pleased to report that Lincoln University’s COVID-19 Task Force has put protocols and processes in place which made it possible for mass testing as well as periodic testing of faculty, staff and students to protect the campus community and reduce the spread of the virus among members of the campus, including the student body.

This made it possible for Lincoln to develop a Fall 2020 reopening plan for the Main Campus designed in concert with several guidelines and best practices provided by various sources during the continued threat of the COVID-19 virus including Governor Tom Wolf and the CDC. We were able to reopen in fall 2020 with the return to campus of approximately 220 freshman and other students requiring campus facilities to complete coursework.

As you can imagine, we have had to re-examine many of the processes and protocols that were originally implemented as we reviewed and analyzed data to determine effectiveness, challenges encountered, and outcomes, particularly in the areas of academic instruction, student success and finances.

As we try to transition back to in-person instruction for all of our students, we are well aware and considerate of the obstacles and insecurities that have caused many of our students to choose the option to continue to study remotely. While we have offered the opportunity for all of Lincoln’s students to return to campus to resume classes on March 1st after the Spring Break, only 425 have indicated that they will come back to campus for in-person instruction. This will mean that

revenues for room and board for over 1,700 students will not be realized by the University, which will have a negative impact on the budget. Enrollment numbers also lag behind as families grapple with the uncertainty of sending their students off to an unfamiliar environment while the threat of the COVID virus is still of grave concern.

A major concern of so many students choosing virtual learning is the disconnect/decrease in student engagement, demonstrated by many students with the switch from in-person to virtual instruction. Recent reports indicate that this problem is affecting many students across the country at all levels of their education. In light of this nationwide event, the University gave our students the choice to request a Pass or Fail grade instead of a letter grade for the 2020 fall semester.

Additionally, faculty have concerns about being able to provide adequate instruction during this period of a mix of virtual, hybrid and in-person delivery of coursework. Initially, the modalities for instruction utilized included; Zoom meetings, YouTube, instruction through Moodle, email, and telephone instruction where needed. While we have been able to provide in-house instruction on the components of our new CANVAS Learning Management System, there is still a need for development of technological skills to be able to better utilize all the features available to them to enhance the learning experience for our students.

Lastly, the State Appropriation and Cares Act allotment coupled with the support from the Federal government helped Lincoln sustain employment across the University throughout the pandemic. We are hopeful that with the majority of our students choosing remote learning, additional support from these sources will enable us to continue to provide employment to our current workforce as well as employee additional faculty and staff needed to provide a quality education to our students.

I want to close by saying that, unfortunately, the COVID-19 Pandemic has hit African-American communities especially hard. As the nation's first degree granting Historically Black College or University (HBCU), we continue to serve an important role in providing a quality higher education experience for the young people who choose Lincoln. As such, it is important that as an institution, we maintain as much as possible our historic relevance and purpose of providing a nurturing campus environment where our students can flourish and develop into contributing members of society. It is imperative that we return to these defining attributes as soon as safely possible if our institution is to carry its legacy well into the future.

I will be pleased to answer any questions and provide any details you would like regarding the challenges outlined above that our Institution and students are facing because of COVID-19.