

August 21, 2020

An Open Letter to the Town of Mansfield:

A few weeks ago, UConn partnered with the Town of Mansfield to conduct a Thoughtexchange to understand the questions and concerns that Mansfield residents, local business owners, and those who work in the Town of Mansfield have about the UConn Storrs campus reopening. We heard from nearly 600 people. We are sharing with you today what we learned and what actions are in place to address some of the concerns raised.

You can see the results of the Thoughtexchange, in full, <https://my.thoughtexchange.com/report/09508f198353b03152007344dbfb582b>, or a summary, <https://chip.uconn.edu/uconn-town-of-mansfield-thoughtexchange/>.

We also published a joint message on August 19 to our UConn community emphasizing the importance of keeping ourselves and our neighbors safe through many of the practices and protocols you shared and we outline below. You can view that message here: <https://today.uconn.edu/2020/08/message-president-provost-community-responsibility/>.

Community spread: We heard from you a great concern that COVID-19 will spread from the campus to the community, particularly through anticipated off-campus events like parties and large social gatherings but also through exposures at downtown businesses and with UConn students teaching and volunteering in local schools.

In response, we are strengthening UConn's messaging to students, faculty, and staff at the Storrs campus about how their choices impact campus and the local community. An example of this is the email we sent to all faculty, staff, and students on August 19. We will continue to create high visibility messages emphasizing that our campus sits within a larger community and that mutual respect is needed to keep each other healthy. We are also examining what additional safeguards can be put into place for our students with educational placements in the community.

Off-campus students: Many shared concerns about off-campus students. There is a perception that the de-densification of our residence halls has pushed more students into off-campus housing.

According to our Off-Campus and Commuter Student Services office, the demand for off campus housing has been lower than normal, which has been highlighted by the increase in vacancies at properties that are typically fully leased at this point in the year. In response to concerns about large gatherings, we are working with the state government to support the Town of Mansfield's request to enact a local ordinance that will ban gatherings of 25 or more people. We have also stepped up our efforts to educate off-campus students about COVID-19 prevention recommendations including how to reduce risk when socializing (limiting the number of visitors, hosting gatherings outside, wearing masks).

We are requiring all students living off-campus and taking classes on our Storrs campus to take a COVID-19 test prior to the start of the semester.

Adherence to COVID-19 prevention recommendations: We heard from many of you some skepticism about adherence to behavioral recommendations such as wearing masks and maintaining physical distancing, and many questions were raised about how compliance with COVID-19 prevention behaviors will be enforced, most notably in off-campus settings.

In response, we have been monitoring compliance closely during our pre-semester quarantine. In one highly publicized case, a party in a residence hall that violated our health and safety rules resulted in the students involved being removed from campus housing. Separately, over the first weekend, seven students were written up for minor infractions. Across our community, several offices and organizations are also involved in initiatives to promote safe practices. For example, our School of Fine Arts is running a student contest and awareness campaign to promote mask wearing; off-campus housing is working with landlords about how to have safe gatherings and how to talk with roommates about being cautious outside their residence; and the police chief will start a campaign to catch students making good choices and reward them with a T-shirt.

We have also initiated a COVID-19 information center (<https://today.uconn.edu/2020/08/uconn-establishes-covid-19-information-center/>), where students, faculty, staff, and the community can call with their COVID-19 questions related to our campuses (as in non-emergency or non-medical inquiries).

We hear your concerns and we want to strengthen our commitment to the town, to be good neighbors, and be a source of pride for Mansfield. We strive to be transparent in our response. We have created a COVID-19 Dashboard (<https://reopen.uconn.edu/covid-dashboard/>) to keep you up-to-date on the number of COVID cases detected on campus. You can also find detailed information about testing and tracing plans, etc. at our Reopening UConn site (<https://reopen.uconn.edu/>).

Please continue to reach out to us at president@uconn.edu with your ideas about how to navigate these challenging times.

Sincerely,
Tom and Carl

Tom Katsouleas
President

Carl Lejuez
Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs