



February 1, 2021

Dear Governor Pritzker:

The Presidents and Chancellors of the public universities in Illinois appreciate your continuing efforts to address the Coronavirus pandemic in our state. We send you the attached document to show why our faculty and staff need to be included in Phase 1B or Phase 1C vaccination priorities and that students returning to their homes at the end of the academic year be moved up on the priority list so as to curb potential spread of COVID-19.

Prospective students and their parents are making their decisions now about attending college in the fall. Without a strong statement that vaccinations will be available for university faculty, staff and students well in advance of the fall term thereby permitting campuses to return to predominantly in-person instruction, students are even more likely to consider universities in neighboring states. Many of these states have made vaccinating faculty and staff on university campuses a priority.

The Federation of Independent Illinois Colleges and Universities learned we were contacting you and reached out to us to lend their support to make higher education employees a higher priority for vaccination. The Federation voiced that the impacts in the attached document affect them as well and it is important that we stand together to strengthen higher education in Illinois.

With the support of the Federation of Independent Illinois Colleges and Universities, we, the presidents and chancellors of the public universities in Illinois, respectfully ask that you consider making higher education a higher priority for vaccinations for COVID-19. Further, we would welcome dialogue on how we as universities can assist the state in accomplishing this request and help the state in vaccinating the populace.

Respectfully,

Larry H. Dietz, Ph.D.

President, Illinois State University

Convener of Public University Presidents and Chancellors Group

cc Jesse Ruiz, Deputy Governor  
Dr. Ngozi Ezike, Illinois Department of Public Health  
Ginger Ostro, IBHE  
John Atkinson, IBHE  
Dave Tretter, Federation of Independent Colleges and Universities

University of Illinois  
President Timothy L. Killeen

Chicago State University  
President Zaldwaynaka Scott

Eastern Illinois University  
President David M. Glassman

Governors State University  
President Cheryl F. Green

Illinois State University  
President Larry H. Dietz

Northeastern Illinois University  
President Gloria J. Gibson

Northern Illinois University  
President Lisa C. Freeman

Southern Illinois University  
President Daniel F. Mahony

Western Illinois University  
President Guiyou Huang

# HIGHER EDUCATION NEEDS TO BE A PRIORITY FOR COVID-19 VACCINATIONS

Higher Education is currently not included as a priority in the Illinois Department of Public Health's (IDPH) Vaccine Distribution Plan and needs to be included immediately. Specifically, higher education is not included in the Phase 1B Frontline essential workers/Education category which includes K-12 educational and front-line workers.

Justification for reprioritizing higher education within IDPH's Vaccine Distribution Plan includes, but is not limited, to the following:

## Return to in-person learning

- Colleges and universities are frequently asked when they are returning to in-person learning. As K-12 school districts return to blended and full-time in-person learning, students and their families are expecting institutions of higher education to follow suit. However, while faculty and staff in K-12 environments are receiving the vaccine, those employed in higher education are not afforded that same opportunity- even as they teach and interact with students face-to-face.
- Omission of the higher education workforce is difficult to justify to our faculty and staff in view of our growing appreciation for the myriad ways that the pandemic exacerbates learning, enrollment, retention, and the educational disparities experienced by all students, but in particular historically underserved and under-resourced students.
- Higher education is a unique category that deserves this consideration and, in fact, was recently afforded it by President Biden's [Executive Order on Supporting the Reopening and Continuing Operation of Schools and Early Childhood Education Providers](#). President Biden's order supports a return to in-person learning as quickly as possible for students of all ages, including higher education.
- At this time, college students are slated to be among the last to receive the vaccine and the majority of higher education workers will not qualify for the vaccine until summer at the earliest. Moreover, the [most recent estimates](#), as reported by CNN on January 21, 2021, have vaccine distribution continuing into 2022. This timeframe for vaccination suggests that universities in Illinois will remain predominantly online in the fall 2021 semester.
- States surrounding Illinois have [prioritized their higher education employees](#) and so their classes are much more likely to be held in person in Fall of 2021. Without the same consideration given by the State of Illinois to its colleges and universities, enrollment is expected to decline even further and in-state students will go out-of-state for their education contributing to the "brain drain" of Illinois. A return to a more traditional fall semester is imperative if colleges and universities hope to meet fall enrollment targets and combat outmigration.

### Risks of contracting COVID-19

- There are significant numbers of employees who are currently on campus and may be exposed to COVID-19 such as those faculty teaching face-to-face and employees working in areas where physical distancing can be very challenging or even impossible (i.e., dining, facility maintenance, housing, police, student health).
- Parents of students and prospective students and members of the communities in which our universities are located lack confidence in the ability to prevent spread of COVID-19 on campus and in the community without assurances that vaccinations will be available before the fall 2021 semester. They recall the start of the fall in 2020 when the number of COVID-19 cases rose sharply after students returned to campus.

### Economics

- The financial impact of COVID-19 on colleges and universities continues to grow and recovery will take years. In addition, the impact of COVID-19 on colleges and universities extends to the communities in which they reside.
  - The financial impact of the global pandemic on Illinois public universities is estimated to be in the hundreds of millions of dollars for Fiscal Years 2020 and 2021.
  - Revenue losses as the result of student refunds, cancelled events and contracts are significant as well as costs related to investments in training and technology to assist alternative teaching modalities, health and safety equipment, supplies and services, testing, and employee overtime.
  - Potential lower enrollments coupled with decreased funding will have significant negative impacts on students, university staffing models (i.e., necessitating layoffs and furloughs), academic program offerings, local economies, etc. Again, the impact of the pandemic on historically underserved students and fragile communities will be exacerbated.
    - As a result of COVID-19, state political leaders are forecasting the possibility of sizable Fiscal Year 2022 state budget cuts.
  - Applications for fall 2021 are down at many public institutions in the state.
    - High school and community college counselors report that students are waiting to apply to colleges and universities to see how COVID-19 will impact their experience.
    - Many families have suffered financially as a result of COVID-19, making their investment in a college education, at a time when most classes and services are offered virtually, a much harder decision.
    - Students and families are choosing whether to [postpone their college education](#). Students who choose to postpone college and temporarily enter the workforce significantly decrease their likelihood of ever earning a college degree.
    - Applications from first generation, low-income, African American, Latinx and rural applicants are markedly low at many public institutions in Illinois.

- This drop is being attributable in part to the Chicago Public Schools and remote instruction. Students do not have the opportunity to work with guidance counselors to apply to colleges in the ways they traditionally do. Delaying applications to college can have life-long impacts on these students as well as the colleges in which they might enroll.
- As a point of note, IBHE has stated that higher education is failing our African American students and has prioritized equity within its strategic planning. This conclusion is reinforced by the findings of the Equity Working Group for Black Student Access and Success in Illinois Higher Education.
- The economic impact of spending by university employees, students, families, and guests contributes significantly to local economies with estimates in the billions of dollars.
  - Decreases in enrollment create financial hardships for our universities, our faculty and staff, and the communities in which we are located. Fewer students means less classes, research, activities and events; less shopping and buying in the community; and less stays in hotels and meals in restaurants. When coupled with potential cuts in state appropriations, our universities will be forced to reduce staffing which will have significant long-term impacts on our universities and the communities in which colleges and universities are located.

#### Building confidence in the consumer

- In general, one of the most direct ways of building confidence in our consumer – prospective and current students and their families – is to ensure that we can provide a traditional, residential experience for our students. And, the pandemic has shown us that the services and spaces associated with a residential experience are essential for the success of many students served by public higher education.
  - The timing of this newfound confidence needs to be mid-spring semester at the latest, in time for students and their families to make decisions about college attendance for the fall term.
  - The only way of achieving such confidence is to provide vaccinations for the college community – so that students can be back in the classroom and employees back at work on campus, not remotely.
- Not providing students with a traditional, residential experience that includes face-to-face learning and in person co-curricular activities for the fall 2021 term and beyond has the potential to be financially devastating to institutions and the communities in which they are located. It is anticipated that students will delay their college enrollment until they can have such an experience.
- The [Illinois P-20 Council](#) has stated a goal of increasing the proportion of adults in Illinois with high-quality degrees and credentials to 60% by 2025. Delays in college attendance will most certainly impact this goal as some students will not only choose to delay, but never attend at all.

Vaccination distribution

- Including higher education in earlier phases of the vaccine distribution plan will not place a burden on local health departments as college campuses generally have an infrastructure that can support mass vaccination clinics so that community clinics are not overwhelmed. In fact, colleges and universities have already been instrumental in helping roll out vaccine distribution through the participation of their facilities, employees and students.
- With tens of thousands of students already in one location, on-campus clinics will be convenient, increasing the likelihood that students will be vaccinated on-campus rather than making an appointment and driving to the local health