



July 10, 2020

Kumble R. Subbaswamy
Office of the Chancellor
UMass Amherst
374 Whitmore Building
Amherst, Massachusetts 01003

Dear Chancellor Subbaswamy:

I have profound concerns about two major decisions made recently by the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. The first major decision was to open your dormitories to thousands of additional students who otherwise may not be traveling to Amherst to live for the Fall semester. The second was to treat University students living on-campus and off-campus differently in your campus pandemic management plans. I believe these two decisions will endanger the health and, perhaps, lives of those who live in and around the Town of Amherst.

These decisions have consequences and it is up to the University to take responsibility and manage their impact. Time is short. Students have been invited to return to the Town and surrounding areas in five short weeks.

This letter summarizes the Town's concerns and requests.

The Town's Concerns

Amherst is currently one of the safest communities in Massachusetts in terms of the percentage of COVID-19 cases. We need definitive action on your part to ensure that it remains so.

Your decision to open up thousands of dormitory rooms will bring students from around the country and the world to Amherst. It signals that the University encourages student to come to Amherst even if they have no in-person courses. We all know that the large number of students residing in dorms will inevitably interact freely with the thousands of students living off-campus. Without normal University programming, students will have to produce their own college experiences, creating conditions that will likely result in a spike in COVID-19 cases in the Town. This is not to disparage students but simply to acknowledge a well-established fact that is already evident by our shared history and at other universities.

I fear that the decision to bring additional students to Town will fuel the conditions for a massive spread of COVID-19 that could overwhelm our local public health infrastructure, create a crisis for our local hospital, strain the capacity of our EMS first responders, and force our public safety officers into difficult, untenable, and possibly dangerous situations.

Four Requests

First, I want to emphasize that this is not a “town vs. gown” question. I very much value the University and I appreciate the partnership the Town and University have built over the past few years. It’s a good partnership. I also love the vitality and cultural richness the University and its staff and students bring to the area. I appreciate the diversity, enthusiasm, and unbridled energy that students refresh the Town with every new school year. The Town would not be what it is without the University. But what the University does, and the decisions you make, have deep and direct impact on our community. What the University does matters and, in this case, it matters a lot!

I fear there will be unchecked spread of the COVID-19 virus in our community. This concern is shared by our entire municipal senior leadership team including our Public Health Director, Police Chief, Fire Chief and Emergency Management Director. I write to suggest steps you can take that may help mitigate this danger. But we have to be realistic: your decisions mean that we all face a tremendous uphill battle.

You stated that “a great many details still need to be worked out.” We hope that these requests will be incorporated into the University’s policies and messages. In all cases we believe they will improve public health and safety in both the campus and local communities.

1. **Treat all students – whether on-campus or off-campus – the same.**

As you noted in your message to the University community, “Given the prevalence of the virus in the general populations, it is expected that a number of students will test positive for COVID-19 while remaining asymptomatic.” You also acknowledged the “risk of a populous campus in the middle of a pandemic.” These statements reflect the hard facts of our situation. The virus will not respect the invisible border between campus and community. In public health terms the entire student population is a community, and must be approached as such.

The single most important step the University can take to promote the health of its students, faculty and staff — as well as the health of its surrounding communities — is to take responsibility for the health and actions of its students both on and off-campus. You have clear guidelines for those students on-campus. It must be made clear that expectations are no less exacting for students living off-campus. Failure to do so results in inconsistent action and confused messaging that inevitably magnifies the risks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

You can do this by:

- Requiring all students residing in the Amherst area to sign the “UMass Agreement.”
- Requiring students to register their place of domicile while enrolled for the fall semester.

2. **Enforce the UMass Agreement for all students.**

The University already is clear that the Code of Student Conduct extends to student behavior wherever it occurs, on-campus or off-campus. Indeed, I note that the Code states explicitly that the University “may impose sanctions up to, and including suspension and expulsion in order to preserve a safe and healthy environment for the University Community.” The direct link between safety and sanctions is the critical message. Therefore, the University should follow this same logic by enforcing the UMass Agreement.

You can do this by:

- Making a clear and definitive statement that all University students in the local community - whether living in residence halls or private housing off-campus - have the same expectations and are subject to the same enforcement and penalties under the Student Code of Conduct.
- Being explicit that not meeting COVID-19 expectations – on-campus or off-campus - jeopardizes continued enrollment at the University and that the University *will* exercise its right to take action regardless of location.
- Clarifying that violations by on-campus students do not simply result in the loss of on-campus housing, leaving them free to move into the surrounding community while continuing their studies.
- Fielding all complaints from local residents, establishing reporting and follow-up procedures, and collaborating with the Town in developing appropriate responses, including protocols related to large gatherings.

3. **Provide testing, intervention, follow-up, and support to all students.**

As written, the Plan currently describes a confusing double standard with certain students being subject to testing while others are not. Contact tracing conducted by the University Public Health Team needs to be for all students who have tested positive. Isolation and quarantine shelter must be offered to students living on-campus and students living off-campus alike. A uniform testing and follow-up protocol is essential for a coherent public health response to the needs of the University and surrounding communities.

You can do this by:

- Requiring and providing testing of all students, regardless of place of residence, both upon arrival in Amherst and as indicated by the best public health advice thereafter.
- Requiring daily screenings of all students, not just those who will be physically on campus.
- Conducting contact tracing for all students living in the Town of Amherst, and collaborating with the Town of Amherst Health Director at all stages of testing, diagnosing, reporting, and managing.
- Providing isolation and quarantine housing and support services to all students who require it, whether their local address is on-campus or off-campus.
- Reporting on all testing and follow-up on a daily basis to the Town of Amherst Health Director.

4. **Work cooperatively to inform the community and manage the crisis.**

COVID-19 presents an extraordinary challenge to all of us. We have no realistic chance of keeping either the campus or the larger community safe if we are not cooperating closely at all times and at all levels. Like you, we are struggling with difficult trade-offs. We deeply regret that we were not invited to participate in the development of your plan before it was issued. The best way to understand each other and achieve mutually beneficial outcomes is to be in dialogue: early, often, and candidly.

You can do this by:

- Joining with me to convene a regular working group to plan for and monitor activities affecting the local community for the duration of the pandemic.

As the nation's fragmented response to COVID-19 has demonstrated so clearly, confusion and ambiguity are the virus's best friends. We hope we can all avoid that here in Amherst, and convey a simple, clear and consistent message as thousands of students prepare to return to the area.

I recognize that some of these requests will require new ways of doing business and may push all of us outside the comfort zone of our ordinary roles and relationships. But that is the challenge of extraordinary times, and there is no doubt that our efforts will be repaid. A few months from now, I am sure none of us want to look back and say, "I wish I had done more."

The Town is ready, willing, and able to do its part. I ask that the University do the same.

Sincerely,



Paul Bockelman
Town Manager

Cc: Amherst Town Council
Nancy Buffone, UMass Community Relations
Tony Maroulis, UMass Community Relations
Senator Comerford
Representative Domb