

[NOTE: A version of the following recommendation was unanimously adopted by the Trustees of Deep Springs College on March 13, 2020.]

March 13, 2020

Recommendation from the Deep Springs Faculty and Staff to Postpone the Start of Term 5

Dear Board Members,

After an email discussion and two community wide phone conferences yesterday, the Deep Springs Staff and Faculty met this morning and formulated the following recommendation regarding COVID-19 and Term 5 at Deep Springs College. After a careful discussion of our resources and of the implications of our actions, the conversation was narrowed to a choice between: (1) welcoming the students back now, or (2) asking those not present in the valley now but instead travelling during the previous five days of break to stay away for two weeks while we gather more information, deepen our planning, and more completely inform students and their families about the measures required and risks we assume if we resume operations with all students present. We recognize that this second option is likely to lead to students staying away for the entire term (through April 30). The conversation was thoughtful, but the decision was not unanimous. However, the President, the Dean, and the Director of Operations all agree on the recommendation below. The recommendation is followed by a brief summary of the considerations motivating this decision.

Recommendation: Students who are not currently on campus will be asked to stay away from campus for two weeks while national trends and resource availability are clarified (we hope). Exceptions will naturally be made for students with nowhere else to go, or for whom a return home would constitute a hardship. Such students may petition to return to campus, and in these cases a staff and faculty committee will decide what students may remain on campus. Students currently on campus may choose to stay or to leave, with the understanding that those who leave may be unable to return this term. Firm restrictions will be placed on visitors from outside the valley. Arrangements will be made for students who are away from campus to collect their personal possessions. No one will be required to stay on campus if they prefer to leave. After a one-week delay, classes will resume using remote instruction, and all students will have the opportunity to complete the academic work of the term, or to have one-half credit for their current courses recorded on their transcript.

The Staff and Faculty understand that for many students, Deep Springs feels like home and like the safest place to weather the pandemic. Mandating anything else is unfair, just as the pandemic is unfair, and certainly a reversal of our normal modes of shared governance whenever possible. Recognition that the students feel this way makes this recommendation especially heart-rending for all of us.

However, the following considerations are a few of those that have convinced me that that the welfare of our entire community is best served by delaying the start of the term.

- In the event that some community members become infected, we are not equipped to handle serious illness on campus, and Inyo county has fewer hospital beds and fewer health care professionals than are found elsewhere in the country. Local health care is more likely than most to be overwhelmed if the virus spreads in the way many experts predict.
- While in the short term we have material resources for the full student body to live on campus, there is uncertainty about the reliability of our supply chains, particularly as infections spread across the country.
- Although the students would prefer to be in the company of their friends during a time of such fear, we are ethically obligated to more completely inform both students and their families of the risks assumed by those remaining. This will involve both written communication and answering ensuing questions—and we cannot do this properly on such short notice.
- Because COVID-19 is more serious (and probably more prevalent) among older people, as the pandemic develops some students may need or want to be at home to provide care for their parents. But if threatened national travel restrictions are enacted, it may become impossible for some students to return home later.
- The Staff and Faculty are ethically responsible for the well-being of the students, and yet the stringent hygiene practices recommended by the CDC will be difficult to implement and require an ongoing stream of supplies we are not sure we can obtain. Further, while we cannot forego responsibility for campus hygiene during a pandemic, we will not be able to guarantee campus-wide compliance without fundamental and draconian changes to our living arrangements—changes that would by themselves undermine the self-governance pillar of our educational program. If college employees were to fall ill, this difficulty would be magnified.
- Given our living situation, our community will not be able to quarantine more than a few sick people at a time. Others of us would then have to break quarantine and become subject to exposure if those patients required transport to medical facilities. It is too soon in the pandemic to estimate the extent of this potential danger.

There are more such considerations, but I hope that these are sufficiently illustrative.

The board will naturally want to know more details about what procedures we will establish for those remaining, for maintain our community and academic access, and what criteria are uppermost for re-opening the college. There is much more to say about each of these items, but time is short for students making plans, so I request that the board honor those difficulties by acting quickly on this matter.

Respectfully Submitted,
David Neidorf