

## **SUPPORTING EMPLOYEES RETURN TO WORKPLACE - Temporary Process for Work Adjustments**

Return to Work task force – Employee Assistance Subcommittee

June 17, 2020

### **Background**

The current conditions stemming from the global COVID-19 pandemic have created extraordinary challenges for the University, particularly as it prepares for different return-to-work scenarios. As background for the recommendations below, we make the following assumptions:

- Health and safety for employees, students and others on campus is a high priority. As the University returns to normal work functions, we must remain flexible and think creatively about on-site work adjustments while continuing to meet our educational mission and provide students with a robust educational experience.
- As the University gradually moves toward bringing students back to campus and resuming operations that have been closed, we need to seek a balance between the educational and functional needs of the University and personal and health-related employee concerns.
- The current interactive process handled by AAO when employees with disabilities request reasonable accommodations in order to perform the essential functions of their job will continue. However, this process should not be the first option for anticipated requests from employees who desire to minimize time on-site or adjust their on-site work environment during the current pandemic.
- Individual academic/budget/managerial units are best equipped to determine when and how their employees should transition from the current campus restriction to working on-site.

### **Recommendations for Managing Employee Concerns re: Return to Work**

The University is developing plans to support the health and safety of all members of the University community. These include enhanced cleaning protocols, universal masking, and alterations to classroom and office environments that help to ensure social distancing practices. Even with those measures, some individuals who are part of vulnerable populations may have concerns about returning to the workplace. The Pennsylvania Department of Education's latest [guidance for institutions of higher education](#) recommends that institutions develop policies for individuals at higher risk of COVID-19. Individuals who feel that they are part of a vulnerable population and are unable to perform their assigned duties should work with their unit executives or supervisors, as described below, to determine whether adjustments can be made to their regular duties.

To provide maximum flexibility in managing employees concerns regarding a return to work during the current pandemic conditions, we developed different planning frameworks for various employee groups. Within each group, we list a number of options that campuses, colleges, and administrative units might utilize to address employee requests for workplace adjustments and promote a supportive and inclusive work environment. This list is not exhaustive. Faculty, staff, technical-service, managers, department heads and leaders are encouraged to work creatively together to support the various work functions and one another to address specific concerns within a work area, college, campus, and/or administrative unit while also accomplishing the educational and operational mission of the University.

## 1. Faculty:

Under normal operations, the University places a high value on in-person interactions between faculty and students and among scholars on campus and expects its full-time faculty to be present on campus at least a majority of the workweek. Current health and safety concerns will temporarily alter these normal expectations. As we move from a closed campus to more residential instruction, we recommend the following:

- During the current pandemic, faculty members who are part of vulnerable populations or who have family members who are part of vulnerable populations may have concerns about returning to the workplace. Faculty requests to work remotely due to such concerns should be allowed if feasible for the unit operations.
- Faculty members should make specific requests to alter the nature of their work to the dean/chancellor or a designee.
- Unless Colleges and Campuses have an existing advisory group or committee that could provide unit executives with pedagogical options that may facilitate alternate work arrangements, units may wish to form a group which would serve in this capacity. This could entail the creation of a faculty resource committee (FRC) or consultation with an existing committee or administrative structure in the unit. Such committees would serve not as decision-makers regarding individual faculty requests, but as resources for the campus or college as they plan the most effective way to deliver educational content consistent with the unit's educational goals.
- Unit executives should develop a consistent, fair, and transparent process for screening and handling the work adjustment requests of faculty. To the extent the unit is offering in-person instruction, unit executives should consult with the designated committee to determine a fair approach to assigning in-person courses.
- Where the percentage of faculty members with concerns about in-person instruction in a particular unit is high, the unit executive may wish to consult with the designated committee for suggestions and options, such as:
  - Team teaching, including in larger units to allow some faculty to spend a greater percentage of their time working remotely in exchange for fewer or no in-person functions.
  - Alternative scheduling, including evenings and weekends to allow for fewer students in larger classroom spaces for maximum distancing.
  - Specially-equipped classroom space with plexiglass and other barriers between instructors and students.
  - Hybrid course instruction to include remote sessions and in-person sessions.
- Where the faculty member indicates that they have a disability that necessitates a reasonable accommodation or leave, they should be referred to the AAO or Absence Management, as appropriate.
- Each unit should have a designated group meet routinely (virtually if at all possible) to assess workplace safety and any needed adjustments as well as all suspected/confirmed COVID cases. This group should include the unit's Safety Officer.

## **2. Staff in units with maximum remote work options**

- During the current pandemic, staff should be allowed to work remotely if feasible for the unit operations.
- Staff should make specific requests to alter the nature of their work to their manager.
- Where some staff presence on-site is needed, managers should consider staggered and alternative schedules to minimize the number and spacing of employees in a given workspace at a given time. This includes flexibility around arrival and departure times, days on and off, as well as shift, hybrid remote and onsite work, etc.
- Each unit should have a designated group meet routinely (virtually if at all possible) to assess workplace safety and any needed adjustments as well as all suspected/confirmed COVID cases. This group should include the unit's Safety Officer and should coordinate with any advisory committee or FRC in the same unit, as appropriate.
- Employees with workplace safety concerns or requests should work directly with their supervisor to address concerns. Supervisors may also bring those issues to the unit safety group for assessment and resolution if consultation is needed.
- Where the employee indicates that they have a disability that necessitates a reasonable accommodation or leave, the employee should be referred to the AAO or Absence Management, as appropriate.

## **3. Staff in units with minimal remote work options**

- During the current pandemic, staff should be allowed to work remotely if feasible for the unit operations.
- Where some staff presence on-site is needed, managers should consider staggered and alternative schedules to minimize the number and spacing of employees in a given workspace at a given time. This includes flexibility around arrival and departure times, days on and off, as well as shift.
- Each unit should have a designated group meet routinely (virtually if at all possible) to assess workplace safety and any needed adjustments as well as all suspected/confirmed COVID cases. This group should include the unit's Safety Officer.
- Employees with workplace safety concerns or requests should work directly with their supervisor to address concerns. Supervisors may bring those issues to the unit safety group for assessment and resolution if consultation is needed.
- Where the employee indicates that they have a disability that necessitates a reasonable accommodation or leave, the employee should be referred to the AAO or Absence Management, as appropriate.

## **4. Technical Service Employees**

- During the current pandemic, technical-service employees should be allowed to work remotely if feasible for the unit operations.
- Where some technical-service presence on-site is needed, managers should consider staggered and alternative schedules to minimize the number and spacing of employees in a given workspace at a given time. This includes flexibility around work schedules and break times. Managers should work with Labor and Employee Relations on issues related to schedule changes.

- Each unit should have routine assessments of workplace safety and any needed adjustments as well as all suspected/confirmed COVID cases. This assessment should include the unit's Safety Officer. Employees who do not have work they can perform remotely and are receiving 50% of their salaries through June 30 should not participate in these meetings. Units should work with Labor and Employee Relations to address these concerns with bargaining unit representatives.
- Employees with workplace safety concerns or requests should work directly with their supervisor as stated in the collective bargaining agreement to address safety concerns. Supervisors may bring those issues to the unit safety group for assessment and resolution if consultation is needed.
- Where the employee indicates that they have a disability that necessitates a reasonable accommodation or leave, the employee should be referred to the AAO or Absence Management, as appropriate.
- All arrangements must comply with the collective bargaining agreement.

**NOTE:** These recommendations are not intended as permanent University operations.

The University reserves the right to change its approach to employee expectations or to revise these guidelines at any time during the pandemic response. The assumptions may be very different when the health and safety concerns raised by the COVID-19 pandemic have largely dissipated.