

Dear Colleagues:

I hope that you had a good and fine weekend—and that you survived yesterday’s deluge with minimal basement flooding.

The word on many streets (and certainly in my own department) is that the overwhelming number of courses at UIC will be online this coming fall. So we hope that deliberations are proceeding apace to ensure that the faculty will have the full and necessary support to do their jobs in the way that we are so deeply committed to.

One major problem. Make that major, major problem. How many of you have recently received multiple messages that “Your internet is unstable”? Or have had even worse things happened to your WiFi?

Today’s correspondent, a loyal union member and award-winning teacher, speaks eloquently about this matter—and in a manner that shows understanding of the complexity of the situation:

Current university policies seem to assume that faculty will be able to manage and run their online classes off-campus, most likely from their homes. Personal experience, and anecdotal evidence from other faculty, calls this assumption sharply into question.

My own experience, in running my online courses through Collaborate Ultra at Blackboard, was that bandwidth requirements frequently outstripped what my home internet service could provide. The result was that I was knocked offline during several class sessions our first week after Spring Break. As can easily be imagined, these interruptions were hugely disruptive, undermining the cohesion and coherence of students' classroom experience.

I was able to find a solution of sorts by using my wife's business office, which pays a stiff monthly premium for higher quality internet service. But clearly this option would not be available to most faculty, and it's clearly an economic impossibility that faculty individually seek out more expensive business-level internet plans for our home service.

So what is to be done? In the first place, the university must canvass faculty (as well as students) to gain a better understanding of the scope and seriousness of this issue. Secondly, assuming that some critical mass of faculty face problems along the lines indicated above, we clearly need some kind of collective and institutional response. At the very least, these issues suggest that many faculty may well need to use campus office facilities for conducting their courses this coming fall. Should that be the case, university parking should be made available free of charge so as to relieve us of having to commute via public transportation (as for that segment of faculty without personal access to vehicular use, some other solutions will be required). And campus measures to minimize physical crowding in office buildings (including elevator use for example) as well as diligent disinfectant protocols will also be necessary.

Beyond that, I am at a loss to propose solutions. But I hope this message suffices in impressing upon administration the need to address this issue in a comprehensive and satisfactory way.

A foundational set of words parallels and strongly reinforces this colleague's wise statement. Article XIV of the union's contracts reads:

The University shall provide the faculty, to the extent feasible and reasonable under the circumstances, with appropriate space and facilities such as office, laboratory, and classroom space for effective and safe teaching, research, advising, and other activities necessary to their academic discipline and performance of duties, including reasonable access to such space during periods when the buildings may be closed.

It strikes many of us that this shouldn't even need to be in a contract. If the university is truly committed to excellence in teaching, then surely the administration will foot the bill for this basic infrastructural necessity—perhaps by contracting with a provider to offer deeply discounted business-quality internet at regular home prices.

After all, on the 40th anniversary of the Mount St. Helens eruptions (I'm from the Pacific Northwest), we don't want to anticipate a volcanic explosion of concerns from faculty and students over their unnecessarily compromised internet.

With best wishes,

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