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Jimmy H. Baker
CHANCELLOR

MEMORANDUM 2021-EXE-004

DATE: January 29, 2021

TO: Presidents, Alabama Community College System

FROM: Jimmy H. Baker, Chancellor 

RE: Increasing Physical Presence of Employees and Students on College Campuses

Since Spring 2020, we have been navigating the unprecedented and murky waters of the coronavirus pandemic. We have collectively used our best efforts, while relying on available research and guidance from the CDC and ADPH, to maintain the Alabama Community System's ("ACCS") and our colleges' operations. The health and wellness of students and employees have been and continue to be matters of high priority. Out of an abundance of caution, I have approved multiple changes to instructional processes and procedures over the last several months due to continued concerns related to the COVID-19. Unfortunately, these changes and interruptions have in many instances come at the expense, and to the detriment, of some of the students we serve and the communities we value so greatly.

No doubt, COVID-19 associated enrollment challenges have severely impacted our colleges. As each of you should know, to a large extent our funding is substantially measured by our enrollment and the number of students we serve. I believe we can begin to address the COVID-19 related enrollment declines and corresponding revenue impacts by giving more on-campus access to our students. But, we must do so with an unfailing commitment to the safety and wellness of ACCS employees, students and families. Individual circumstances, facility challenges and published safety guidance must continue to guide our efforts as we develop our new normal.

On January 25, we spoke to you about transitioning employees and students to the campus in February and March, respectively. During our meeting, we asked you to submit comments and questions regarding this transition. Please be assured, I have carefully considered your feedback. Additionally, I have closely followed official announcements regarding the expansion of the defined groups eligible for the vaccine. I am very disappointed that ACCS personnel as a group have been excluded from the count in this week's announced expansion to educators. Both this exclusion and your feedback have led me to conclude that the approach to increasing employees' and students' physical presence at our colleges should be determined by the individual President based on several factors, including local conditions.

Beginning in February, I expect some physical presence of all employees at the institutions each week. Telework and remote arrangements may be used when appropriate under the FFCRA, or when reasonable ADA accommodations, accompanied by appropriate and proper medical documentation, are required. In all other instances, colleges should begin transitioning employees from teleworking and other remote arrangements to working at the campus. Further, I expect increased student activity on college campuses beginning in March.

Memo Directive: Presidents are directed to submit a one-page memo by Friday, February 5 stating how they will increase the physical presence of employees and students at their institutions beginning in February. The memo should also include how they will begin decreasing the scope of any teleworking arrangements that are not provided pursuant to FFCRA or the ADA. Strategies, such as staggering attendance and requiring a minimum number of hours an employee must spend on campus each week that increases over time, may be incorporated into your approach. Further, I expect each president to ensure instructors are making socially distanced personal contact with students outside of the virtual or in-person classroom or lab. It is vitally important that our students know and feel that we are there for them. Email your memo to me and copy Rachel Bunning, Rachel.Bunning@accs.edu, and Susan Price, susan.price@accs.edu.

RELATED MATTERS

FFCRA: As a reminder, Governor Ivey has extended the availability of FFCRA leave for employees through March 31, 2021. This is an extension of the deadline only, and it does not provide additional leave. Colleges should continue following FFCRA through that time. Contact ACCS HR if there are questions about its implementation.

Fear of Return: It is expected that some employees will express fear or discontentment at returning to campus. Generalized fears or anxieties about returning to the workplace are not usually sufficient to permit employees to refuse to appear for work. It is important that the College publicly commit to its safety plan and protocol to hopefully allay employee fears. Advise the employee that if he/she finds that individuals are not abiding by the plan, he/she may report offenders. Make sure that you are leading by example by practicing the safety precautions and requiring all managers of the college to do the same.

The College should make reasonable accommodations for employees who meet ADA conditions, such as more isolated workspace (if employee does not have enclosed office space), provide gloves, and plexi-glass barriers or other barriers to ensure minimum distances (if employee must work with public). ACCS HR will assist in reviewing and making determinations related to ADA accommodations if called upon by the college

On-campus Events and Activities: Finally, on a related subject, there is no need to receive approval from ACCS for on-campus events and activities any longer. However, colleges should continue to limit these events and use good judgment. Any indoor, on-campus event or activity is required to ensure 6 feet social distancing, require face masks at all times (except when actively eating or drinking or speaking as long as 6 feet away), and all parties must sign COVID waivers to participate.

During these last several months, I have watched each of you demonstrate your commitment to provide our students the very best student experience that we possibly can provide. I am proud of you. Keep up the good work, and thank you for all that you do for your college, our System and the state of Alabama.