Memorandum

To: Chancellors
From: Bill Roper
Date: March 2, 2020
Subject: COVID-19 Preparedness Efforts

I know many of you are closely following media reports and information releases from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on the expected COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. The CDC has advised that individuals and communities in the United States should prepare for COVID-19 to appear and spread in local communities with the likelihood for infection clusters.

Staff from the UNC System Office and the universities have been collaborating regularly on conference calls since the initial discovery of the virus in China on readiness and preparation activities. The purpose of this memorandum is to address some questions the system office has received, and to request your assistance in confirming the status of preparations at each institution.

Current Status/Locations of the Coronavirus

The U.S. State Department and the CDC have issued travel warnings and advisories for China, Iran, South Korea, Italy, Japan, and Hong Kong. In addition, it is clear that the virus is present across Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and that it is continuing to spread worldwide. Additional information is available at the State Department and CDC websites and through the UNC System coronavirus information page at https://www.northcarolina.edu/coronavirus.

International Travel and Study Abroad Programs

State law and our existing pandemic policy address the basic legal framework that we utilize in responding to public health events. State law authorizes the Governor to close or evacuate schools and universities in public health emergencies, including communicable disease outbreaks. In addition, the UNC System president may make emergency closing decisions while awaiting the decision of the Governor or public health director. The president may delegate closing authority to chancellors. During an outbreak, public health officials may require individuals to be isolated or quarantined, if necessary under the circumstances. It is essential that you and your leadership teams stay in communication with your local public health officials to determine the severity of the situation and to determine what actions should be taken.

Pursuant to Board of Governors policy, your institution’s pandemic and communicable disease emergency plan should include “social distancing” provisions, which would allow you to direct
employees to telework, work from alternative worksites, avoid unnecessary travel, and implement other precautions to minimize the opportunities for close contact between people. Constituent institutions should maintain a list of mandatory employees, including alternates. Employees should not be penalized for using leave. Employees subject to quarantine by public health officials may receive paid administrative leave. If an institution requires a symptomatic employee to stay home, the employee may be required to use leave. If necessary to conduct essential operations, there are also provisions in State Policy that allow institutions to make SHRA hires without satisfying regular posting requirements and to make exceptions to minimum hiring qualifications. With respect to EHRA positions, chancellors have authority to waive competitive recruitment and modify minimum hiring requirements as they deem necessary to address emergency needs. The UNC System’s Division of Human Resources will be sharing additional guidance with chief human resources officers regarding human resources-related issues related to a communicable disease emergency.

**Hardship Waivers – Fixed Tuition**

Students may experience a break in enrollment due to travel restrictions resulting from the coronavirus outbreak. For example, students who were enrolled to participate in a study abroad program may now be unable to enter the country in which that program was to occur, but may also be unable to register for and enroll in courses at their home institutions. Conversely, North Carolina students currently studying abroad may be unable to return to the United States in time to maintain their enrollment at their home institutions. The resulting break in continuous enrollment could impact the students’ ability to receive the benefit from the fixed tuition guarantee program, which ensures that the tuition rate for undergraduate students who remain continuously enrolled at UNC institutions will not increase for eight consecutive academic semesters for a four-year baccalaureate program, or for ten consecutive academic semesters for a five-year baccalaureate program.

Pursuant to UNC Policy Section 1000.1.7, Policy for the Tuition Guarantee Program, students who have had a break in enrollment may seek a waiver to allow them to retain their original fixed tuition rate if their enrollment has been substantially disrupted or interrupted by “extraordinary hardship.” Given the fact that, in light of a public health crisis, these students may suffer a break in enrollment through no fault of their own, it is appropriate that a fixed tuition waiver should be granted to any student experiencing a break in enrollment upon a showing that their inability to maintain continuous enrollment is the direct result of the travel restrictions put in place due to the public health concerns arising from the coronavirus outbreak.

**Status of Preparations at UNC System Institutions**

I am aware from our regular updates that each of your leadership teams are vigilant and working on preparations for your respective institutions. Please continue that work and remain proactive, giving attention to establishing proper and current communication protocols and contingency plans.

Please communicate regularly to your respective university communities. At the System, we are working closely with state and federal authorities to monitor ongoing developments, coordinate and share information, ensure pandemic plans are in place, and provide guidance to our institutions. Furthermore, we must calmly reassure our staff, students, and parents that we all have plans in place and that we are collaborating frequently with the appropriate authorities and each other. **Share facts, but do not contribute to fear.**
In addition, please confirm to Chris McClure via email at cmcclure@northcarolina.edu by Wednesday, March 4 that your institution has a continuity of operations plan in place for your institution that addresses planning, mitigation, operations, and recovery for an event like this. Also, please identify the primary point of contact at your institution with oversight responsibility should an event like this occur.

Finally, we have scheduled a conference call with the chancellors for tomorrow, Tuesday, March 3 at 9:00am. This will give me and the team here an opportunity to discuss these and other issues with you directly. Please feel free to include your key colleagues in tomorrow’s conference call.

Thank you very much for all you are doing.