Covid-19 Protocols and Feminist Ethics of Care

Statement about campus Covid-19 protocols
Department of Women's & Gender Studies

In light of the university's announcement that masking is now an individual decision on our campus, we, as a feminist community, want to offer a counter-practice grounded in feminist ethics of care, disability justice, accountability, and the notion of collective access. We believe that health is more than an individual choice/decision, and we understand health as part of a larger ecology of care and responsibility towards each other and to our communities.

We reject the language and ideologies behind the notion of the "vulnerable minority" as the only members of our society who must take extra precautions to stay safe. We believe that people should not be required to declare their health status in order to ensure their safety. Instead we want to prioritize the knowledge and tools that we have collectively gained throughout the (ongoing) pandemic, which  recognize the fact that we  all are connected and, therefore, share the responsibility to keep each other safe.

COVID-19 not only poses a threat to our collective well-being, but also, and consequently, directly impacts access to education. We are troubled by efforts to place the responsibility for ensuring equal educational access onto individuals with higher health risks. We are literally putting the onus for their well-being on them alone. Further, we see the implicit or explicit requirement of health and individual vulnerability disclosures as practices that perpetuate power inequities. They further privilege those who appear "fit" and "strong" while enabling them  to show or deny compassion and concern for those required to disclose sensitive information.

Individualizing issues of health during an ongoing public health crisis appears to relieve institutions of any responsibility for ensuring the health and educational access of all members of their community. Further, by encouraging faculty to welcome a laissez-faire approach to masking in educational spaces and to check on students when they are unwell, the university's current policy suggests that faculty be responsible for mental health care work. Faculty have not been provided specialized training or compensation for this additional labor and time.

We urge the university community to join us in thinking about and enacting a feminist ethic of care and disability justice by:
1. wearing masks for ourselves and others, if possible, in our classrooms/shared spaces;
2. limiting public presence upon exposure to, or diagnosis of, COVID-19;
3. continuing to advocate for access to free covid testing for students, faculty, and staff on campus, and testing as frequently as possible;
4. eating before or after, rather than during, events and classes; and
5. educating others that wearing masks during a pandemic is a matter of ensuring equity, justice, and care.

Beyond public health policy and university's official policy, we urge ourselves and each other to create and act upon principles based on communal senses of justice, equity, and care that recognize and prioritize that we all share responsibility for ensuring continued health and equal educational access in our communities.