



UNC-Chapel Hill Employee Perspectives
on the Summer 2021 Return to Campus and
Recommendations for Senior Leaders

The UNC-Chapel Hill Employee Forum

Chair: Katie Musgrove
Chair Emeritus: Shayna Hill

Report Authors: Jen DeNeal, L.E. Alexander, Phillip Edwards,
Shayla Evans-Hollingsworth, Brooke O'Neal, Laura Pratt, Kevin Robinson,
Robert Smith, Tracy Wetherby Williams

July 2021



EMPLOYEE FORUM

THE UNIVERSITY *of* NORTH CAROLINA
at CHAPEL HILL

—
Serving Since 1992



The Table of Contents

Key Findings.....	...4
Structure of the Report.....	...4
Analytical Considerations.....	...4
Survey Response Analysis.....	...5
Global Concerns and Systemic Issues.....	...9
Recommendations.....	...10

Key Findings

- Employees do not hold uniform beliefs about how the University should proceed into the “new abnormal”.
- The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and emergence of new variants are serious concerns for some employees, particularly those whose households include vulnerable individuals.
- A one-size-fits-all Return to Campus has exacerbated some employees’ anxiety and frustration.
- Campus administrators must both seek employee input in important campus decisions and be willing to change course based on employee feedback.
- The University should encourage the broad and immediate approval of flexible working arrangements for employees who have demonstrated their effectiveness working remotely.
- UNC-Chapel Hill has an unprecedented opportunity to redefine the University workplace and should step boldly into the future.

Structure of the Report

The report begins with a summary of the main themes and ideas from four survey questions sent to employees via email in June 2021. The next section of the report synthesizes responses from the survey and presents global issues and concerns for senior leaders. The final section of the report provides recommendations for leaders to consider when addressing the concerns voiced by employees.

Analytical Considerations

The report contains key ideas and themes from the Employee Forum Return to Campus survey. Employees received the survey on June 16, 2021 in an email inviting them to attend a virtual Town Hall. Employees received an email reminder to complete the survey on June 28, 2021 and the survey closed on Friday, July 2, 2021 with 587 responses from employees across campus. Identifying information has been removed from quotations used in the report to preserve anonymity. Report authors used exploratory qualitative analysis to generate themes from the survey responses. The report includes many of the most expressed ideas and themes from the data but is not inclusive of every idea, comment, or suggestion voiced in the survey.

On June 22, 2021, nearly 500 employees attended the virtual Town Hall to give voice to employee concerns about the Return to Campus. Written responses from the Zoom Q&A function were not included in this analysis to avoid double-counting the perspectives of employees who provided feedback in both the survey and Town Hall. Many of the written and verbal responses voiced in the Town Hall mirror the responses to the survey presented in this report. This report presents the most common ideas in the survey, without overweighting the smaller subset of ideas voiced and discussed more deeply during the Town Hall. In addition, given that the survey topic was the Return to Campus plan, it is possible that employees who have been working on campus throughout the pandemic chose not to respond and therefore, individuals who have been working remotely are likely disproportionately represented in the analysis. We acknowledge that our understanding of issues faced by those who have remained on campus throughout the pandemic is incomplete at this point and warrants further inquiry.

Survey Response Analysis

The following section identifies and summarizes major themes from the Return to Campus survey comprised of the following questions:

1. What are your thoughts or concerns about the University's Return to Campus plans for July and the Fall Semester?
2. What are some lessons learned from working through the pandemic?
3. How would you like to see the lessons learned applied to the future?
4. In what ways can we celebrate a healthy return to campus and rebuild our in-person community?

What are your thoughts or concerns about the University's Return to Campus plans for July and the Fall Semester?

One important finding is that employees are not monolithic in their thoughts or concerns regarding the Return to Campus. In response to this question, employees identified nearly 50 different concerns. The top 10 concerns and/or thoughts are included in the table and discussed further below.

By far the most commonly-reported concern was COVID-19 transmission and the emergence of the delta variant in the United States. Nearly 20 percent of the responses specifically mention this concern. Individuals living with children under the age of twelve and other high risk individuals who cannot receive the vaccine expressed concern over viral transmission. Many of these

respondents noted that they were not worried for their own personal safety but were very anxious about bringing the virus home to vulnerable members of their households. A related concern is the University's decision not to mandate vaccinations for students, faculty, and staff. While several employees indicated that they understood the legal and political concerns, they were worried that lower vaccinations rates would increase the likelihood of transmission. Other employees, however, were glad not to see a mandate and expressed their opposition to the University requiring vaccines for anyone.

Top 10 Thoughts and Concerns about the Return to Campus

- COVID-19 transmission and the delta variant
- Fully in-person work is unnecessary
- University should continue to offer hybrid and telework options
- Inequity
- University not requiring vaccination
- Perceived lack of flexibility
- Return to Campus is rushed or abrupt
- Return should include a transition period
- Missed opportunity to future proof the workforce

“I feel that we are rushing back to ‘normal’. As a very forward facing employee, I am very concerned...I have a 13 month old that can't be vaccinated. What will I bring home from work to her?”

A majority of respondents were clear in their communication that returning to a fully in-person environment is unnecessary. It is important to note here that employees were not advocating for shorter workdays or weeks, they simply recognized that many of the tasks that employees complete every day can be accomplished effectively from non-campus locations. Employees thought the University should continue to offer hybrid and teleworking options for employees throughout the summer and fall and expressed doubt that flexibility would come at a later date.

“I feel that it has been poorly planned and is far too rigid.”

Employees critiqued what they perceived as a lack of flexibility in the University's approach to mandating the staff return to campus. Many employees felt the return was abrupt or rushed, given that students and faculty will not return to campus for several weeks. While campus leaders did notify employees via email of the July 19 return date in late April, employees point out that they did not receive specific guidance or directions for weeks after the announcement. Employees who are parents discussed the difficulty in securing childcare considering the ongoing pandemic and noted that summer childcare arrangements including camps and other enrichment activities normally need to be planned far in advance of the spring notification provided by the University. Other employees assumed the return would involve a transition period and argued that bringing all employees back on the same day is likely to be unnecessarily logistically difficult. As an example, employees who commute to work on public transportation expressed worry about capacity on buses, reduced schedules and routes, and overall safety related to public transit. A transition allowing employees to work with hybrid schedules for the first few weeks would have eased the burden of commuting and given employees the opportunity to make safe commuting plans.

Several employees also indicated their concern that the University was returning to the past and failing to consider the priorities of the modern workforce. They provided examples of private sector businesses that have stated they will likely never go back to

“I worry that leadership will quickly revert to ‘what we did before’ and not progress to a more satisfying 21st century work culture.”

full-time in-person workforces. Closer to home, the UNC School of Medicine has launched its “Working Forward” plan in which most administrative employee functions will remain fully remote or shift to hybrid modes. In addition to the counterintuitive argument that the School of Medicine can embrace the future while the rest of the University goes back to a workweek designed in the late 19th century, these vastly different approaches to employee working arrangements are likely to create real and perceived equity issues.

Employee concerns about equity ranged from the acknowledgement that not all employees are able to work remotely and thus deserve other types of compensation to concerns about how departments were selected for pilot programs. A recurring sentiment was that the Return to Campus plan exacerbates existing inequities between faculty and staff. Faculty members have long benefitted from flexible schedules, coming to campus as needed, while frequently earning significantly higher salaries than staff. In many buildings, the privilege of an office with a door is often reserved for faculty members and higher-earning staff members, creating a scenario in which lower-paid staff will be required to mask indoors all day, a point of contention for several respondents, while faculty members and more highly paid staff enjoy the comfort of mask-less working in their private spaces.

What are some lessons learned from working through the pandemic?

In reflecting on their experiences working through the pandemic, employees identified several lessons learned. The top 10 lessons learned are presented in the table and discussed in more detail below.

Half of the respondents to this question explicitly commented that they were equally or more productive doing their jobs at home as they had in the office. Interestingly, some of these respondents noted that they were initially wary about working from home and were pleasantly surprised by their own productivity. Importantly, many employees responded to this question with their lessons learned about how to support students remotely. Student-facing employees noted that students liked virtual options and were more likely to seek certain supports virtually. Employees also know that not all services should be remote – in their responses, employees centered student needs, understanding that part of a residential experience is having staff and faculty on campus for the students. They simply recognize that many employees have job duties that do not interact with students and therefore can complete some or all their job responsibilities remotely.

Top 10 Lessons Learned Working through the Pandemic

- Employees are equally or more productive working remotely
- Hybrid and teleworking schedules are manageable and create balance
- Remote work improves employee mental health and work/life balance
- Money and time savings
- University does not care about or listen to its employees
- No one-size-fits-all solution
- Some work does not need to be in person
- UNC-Chapel Hill employees are adaptable and flexible
- Students remained a priority
- Employees need human contact

“For over a year, staff have proven that they can keep the University running, even if they are on campus less frequently. There is zero recognition of that.”

Many other employees stated that a lesson learned for them, and one they hope the University learned as well, is that hybrid and telework schedules are manageable, and that the past 16 months have proven how well employees can work in non-traditional work schedules. The Return to Campus implies that everyone has been away and is now returning, which is inaccurate. Many employees have been working hybrid schedules, alternating between campus and other locations, throughout the pandemic. They also noted that hybrid schedules provide a good balance for the University between having employees on campus and managing the shortage of campus spaces available. For student-facing employees, hybrid options offer a “best of both worlds” scenario wherein they can interact with students both face to face and virtually, empowering students to select their preferred meeting method.

Relatedly, many employees pointed to cost and time savings both for themselves and the University. Employees commonly reported spending less money on food expenses, updating professional wardrobes, gas, parking, and other automotive expenses. They noted that the University saved money on physical office supplies and utilities, and now has an opportunity to achieve significant cost savings by letting go of off-campus building leases. In addition to monetary savings, many respondents talked about their time savings by avoiding the commute to campus. Citing the high cost of living in the Chapel Hill area, many University employees live in neighboring counties and have substantial daily commutes. Individuals provided examples of the ways in which less commuting boosted their productivity: they started their work earlier, tended to work later, and were more willing to complete tasks for the University in the evenings because they avoid wasting time and energy on the roads.

Cost and time savings contributed to the finding that remote and hybrid schedules increased mental health and wellness for many employees. Individuals reported better sleep, eating, and exercise habits, and more opportunity to spend more time with family or friends in the evenings due to less time commuting. It is worth noting that working remotely led to struggles for other members of the University, particularly those for whom in-person interactions play a critical role in their emotional wellness. In fact, many employees are excited to see their colleagues and resume in-person interactions on campus. The key here, highlighted by survey respondents, is that there is not a one-size-fits-all solution for returning to campus.

Unfortunately, some employees expressed concern that the University disregarded employee experiences and feedback in its decision-making about the Return to Campus. One small example of the disconnect between University leaders and employees has to do with parking costs: employees commented that the new parking permit year begins on August 1, two weeks after the Return to Campus date, meaning that employees must purchase new permits for the 2021-2022 parking year and shell out additional fees to cover the time before the new permit year.

On March 31, the Chancellor attended the monthly meeting of the Staff Advisory Committee to the Chancellor (STACC) and asked for feedback on the Return to Campus. During the meeting, committee members advised him that a Return to Campus plan should avoid closeout activities at the end of the fiscal year. On April 9, STACC followed up with a list of ten written recommendations to the Chancellor which included a phased transition back to campus, rather than a target date, beginning no earlier than August 1, in which employees who have demonstrated their effectiveness working remotely would be allowed to continue working remotely. Two weeks later, the campus received a Formal Notice requiring all staff to return to campus for in-person work on the same day, July 19.

How would you like to see the lessons learned applied to the future?

Survey respondents identified several ways in which they hope the University will apply lessons learned from the pandemic in the future. The top five suggestions are listed in the table and discussed in more detail below.

Employees responding to this question called on senior leaders to be flexible. The majority of respondents to this question (55 percent) explicitly stated that the University can best apply lessons learned from the pandemic by continuing to allow hybrid and teleworking schedules for the long term. While many of the responding employees would like to see flexible schedules for themselves, they also called on the University to be creative and provide additional benefits like higher salaries, bonuses, or other on-campus perks for employees whose job responsibilities do not allow them to benefit from flexible working arrangements.

How to Apply the Lessons Learned

- Continue to offer hybrid and teleworking options for employees
- Give departments local authority to decide what works best for them
- Be flexible
- Listen to employees
- Grant individual autonomy

“More innovations, flexibility, and out of the box thinking. Not simply returning to pre-pandemic conditions because that is familiar...allowing for more decision-making from those departments about best practices in their operations instead of simply top down mandates.”

Many employees argued for central administration to empower departments and units with the local authority to decide what works best for their business needs. They argue that departments are far more likely to know what they need than senior leaders and that, with proper training and support from Human Resources, managers and supervisors should have more discretion to make long-term flexible working arrangements. Employees not only want local authority for their departments to make flexible working arrangement decisions, they want senior leaders to recognize employees' individual autonomy and ability to make professional decisions for themselves. Relatedly, several employees explicitly commented that they think a good way for the University to apply lessons learned from the pandemic would be for campus leaders to show, through concrete actions, that they are actively listening to employees.

In what ways can we celebrate a healthy return to campus and rebuild our in-person community?

The number one suggestion for celebrating a healthy return to campus and rebuilding community, made by 21 percent of respondents on this question, was for the University to continue to allow hybrid and teleworking options. Respondents noted that allowing for those individuals successfully working from home to continue doing contributes to the de-densification of campus and creates a safer environment for those who need to be on campus to perform their job duties. Employees also encouraged senior leaders to lead with compassion, empathy, and flexibility.

On the question of whether to host celebratory events, employees were divided. Approximately 18 percent of respondents were in favor of COVID-safe gatherings on campus (small groups, outdoor locations, etc.), but a subset of those (seven percent) thought that departments and teams should host the celebrations tailored to their individual needs rather than a large event hosted by the University. On the other hand, nearly 16 percent of respondents commented that they did not want a celebration, although their reasoning varied. Some employees think it is too early to celebrate, given the risks of COVID-19. Others consider the Return to Campus unworthy of celebration either because they do not agree with the decision or because they argue that they have continued to work closely with colleagues throughout the pandemic and see no need to celebrate a return to a physical space.

“Recognize the folks who have continued to work on-campus throughout the pandemic...more than just words.”

Many responses to this question highlighted the importance of recognizing, celebrating, and compensating the employees who have worked on campus throughout the pandemic, providing essential services, maintaining campus spaces, and ensuring the continuance of work that simply could not be completed remotely. Employees recognize that these individuals have faced different challenges than those who worked from home and are unified in their desire to see these employees compensated with more than words.



Global Concerns and Systemic Issues

Transparency

In its October 2020 report on the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on UNC-Chapel Hill employees, the Employee Forum recommended University administrators “Be Transparent” and provided several specific ideas. While administrators have made strides in implementing those ideas, concerns about transparency remain:

- The Return to Campus pilot program is shrouded in opacity. The pilot program was not even announced to most of the campus until late May. There is no public information about which units were selected, the inclusion criteria used to select those units, or what those units proposed regarding flexible work arrangements.
- University communications, particularly emails from senior leaders, are often unnecessarily lengthy, difficult to read, and frequently more concerned with “messaging” than providing information.

“Much of the messaging around the return uses phrases like ‘we hear you’ and ‘we understand your concerns’ but doesn’t offer any real answers.”

We call on senior leaders to commit publicly to a culture of transparency at UNC-Chapel Hill and hold the entire community, including themselves, accountable to that commitment. A potential first step to transparency is for senior leaders to communicate back to employees the lessons senior leaders have learned during this pandemic by listening to employees.

A Community Wrestling with Division

As a large and diverse organization, UNC-Chapel Hill will necessarily face disagreements between different members of the community. Unfortunately, employees in the survey expressed opinions that indicate these natural disagreements have devolved to various pictures of division on campus: employees vs. administrators, staff vs. faculty, tenured faculty vs. fixed-term faculty, on-site employees vs. remote employees, vaccinated vs. unvaccinated.

“We are Carolina Together in words only.”

While external pressures from politicians, media, and the public can make decision-making complex and multi-faceted, the current climate at UNC-Chapel Hill demands that leaders act with courage, prioritize solutions for the underlying issues creating these divisions in our community, and articulate a clear vision for how we move forward together, unified in the University’s mission of teaching, research, and public service.

Recommendations

Based on the emerging themes from the survey, we recommend the following actions for senior leaders to consider immediately:

Listen to and Trust Employees

- Regularly ask employees for feedback and act on the feedback.
- Believe employees when they tell you what they need to be most productive.

Embrace Flexibility

- Immediately allow for and publicly encourage all units to make the best decisions for themselves and their employees about flexible working arrangements. Support managers with guidelines and training on how to make flexible working decisions with equity in mind.
- Share information. Publish a list of the departments approved for the pilot program and their plans for their employees. Create a system where units can learn from one another instead of routing everything through central administration.
- Revise the University Flexible Working Arrangement policy and extend the period for which managers have discretion to allow flexible working arrangements to longer than 30 days.
- Conduct regular check-ins with students, faculty, and staff throughout the Fall Semester to ensure services are covered and operations are functioning. Adjust as necessary.
- Encourage flexibility in work-days for employees required to be on campus. Build in time for exercise or mental breaks while ensuring the needs of the University continue to be met.

Be Bold

“I feel good knowing that we have incredibly talented and motivated, caring people who are here at Carolina committed to moving us forward into the future, as I like to say, with boldness.”

- Chancellor Kevin Guskiewicz in an October 2020 interview with The Well

The time for boldness and innovation is now. Over the past 16 months, UNC-Chapel Hill employees have faced epic challenges and adapted admirably. UNC-Chapel Hill has an unprecedented opportunity to redesign the operations of a globally renowned flagship campus while providing an exceptional residential student experience. The world has changed, and employees are ready to embrace a more flexible, balanced approach to productivity. It is time for the University to lead, boldly, into the future.