



*Engineering Education  
Transformations Institute*  
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

Responding to the COVID-19 crisis

# Making a **Change** through your Stories

Interim brief 3: Faculty and staff perspectives (June 18-29)

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#EngineeringExperience

#UGAQuarantales

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## Executive Summary

This third interim brief focuses on how faculty and staff in the College of Engineering at UGA are perceiving the university's plans to re-open to a "traditional mix of online and in-person classes"<sup>1</sup> in the fall semester.

Data collection for this brief focused on faculty and staff and ran from June 18 to June 29, 2020. This brief reports on the **11 responses** (10 x faculty, 1 x staff) that were received during this period. The following summarizes six key findings from these data.

1. The **majority of the responses were negative** (5 x extremely negative, 4 x negative, 2 x neutral - see p. 3).
2. In the first two interim briefs, the majority of faculty indicated that "People in positions of power treated others... by praising them without end." This perception has now shifted to where **the majority of faculty feel that "people in positions of power treated others... with complete indifference or a lack of respect"** (see p. 4).
3. The majority of participants in this round of data collection indicated that their story concerned issues of Autonomy and Flexibility, as compared to Workload or Support and Acknowledgement. Given that all but two stories were negative, this finding can be interpreted as **a lack of Autonomy and Flexibility** (see p. 5).
4. When asked what "Decisions made in the story were influenced by...", **none of the eleven responses were placed near the Scientific Research/ Evidence corner of the triangle** (see p. 6).
5. Three of the 11 stories expressed **concerns about the HyFlex teaching model** (see p. 7).
6. Seven stories expressed concerns that **UGA's re-opening plans did not mandate face masks** (see p. 8).

Based on the findings contained in this brief, we recommend that administration improve the communication lines between faculty, staff, and the working groups who are putting together the plans for the fall. Specifically, we note a lack of mechanisms for faculty and staff to express their concerns about the pedagogical and health implications of the planned re-opening.



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If you have any questions about this research, please email Dr. Nicola Sochacka [sochacka@uga.edu](mailto:sochacka@uga.edu).

<sup>1</sup> University of Georgia, 2020, Plans for Phased Return to Full Operations: A Compilation of 9 Working Group Reports, p. 39.

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## Concerns about the fall

The majority of the responses were negative (5 x extremely negative, 4 x negative, 2 x neutral).

The following story hits on points that were raised in multiple stories, namely, satisfaction with the transition to online learning in the spring semester; emotional distress about the return to face-to-face instruction in the fall; lack of representation of “rank-and-file” faculty in decision-making; a preference for online learning based on health concerns and better learning outcomes for students; misplaced perceptions of what students want in the fall.

After this story, we provide an example of one of the two neutral responses.

### Example faculty experience (negative)

*Thinking about return to campus in Fall 2020*

**“I was incredibly impressed and pleased with the response of CENGR and UGA during the transition to online learning in mid-March.** On a personal level, I was proud of how I was able to deliver my course online and the comments from students regarding the seamlessness of course's transition were among the most gratifying student comments I have ever received. **However, as on-campus research begins to resume and plans are being made to conduct in-person instruction in FA20, I find myself very distressed.** It seems to me that these decisions are being made with very little regard for potential health risks. **Looking at the make-up of the committees charged with making these decisions, I see only high-level administrators and no representation from rank-and-file faculty who routinely interact with large numbers of students.** This fall I am scheduled to teach one of the highest enrollment sections in CENGR. I have taught this class several times before, and keeping it running smoothly is a daily challenge even under normal circumstances. **I can hardly begin to contemplate the logistical, technological, administrative, health, and emotional challenges that await as I attempt to deliver this course in the hyflex manner mandated by the university.** I feel overwhelmed by the prospect, and am seriously considering changing careers to one in which I do not have to take on unnecessary risks to my health. For the past three months I have made every effort to minimize the risk of SARS-COV2 transmission to my family and the community. I have not been inside a building other than my home and office in over three months. When I go out for a curbside pickup, I contentiously wear face masks and sanitize surfaces. I know not everyone is in a position to mitigate risk in such a stringent manner, but I feel that those who can, should. I feel that the risks associated with a return to campus are highly asymmetric. That is, the downside of a large number of students and faculty contracting COVID-19 is far worse than the downsides of purely online instruction. **I am confident in my ability to deliver a high-quality educational experience online, and would like the University to offer me the choice of doing so.** I feel that the decision to return to

face-to-face instruction is motivated by money and a **largely overstated perception that students and their parents are clamoring to return to campus with face-to-face instruction.**"

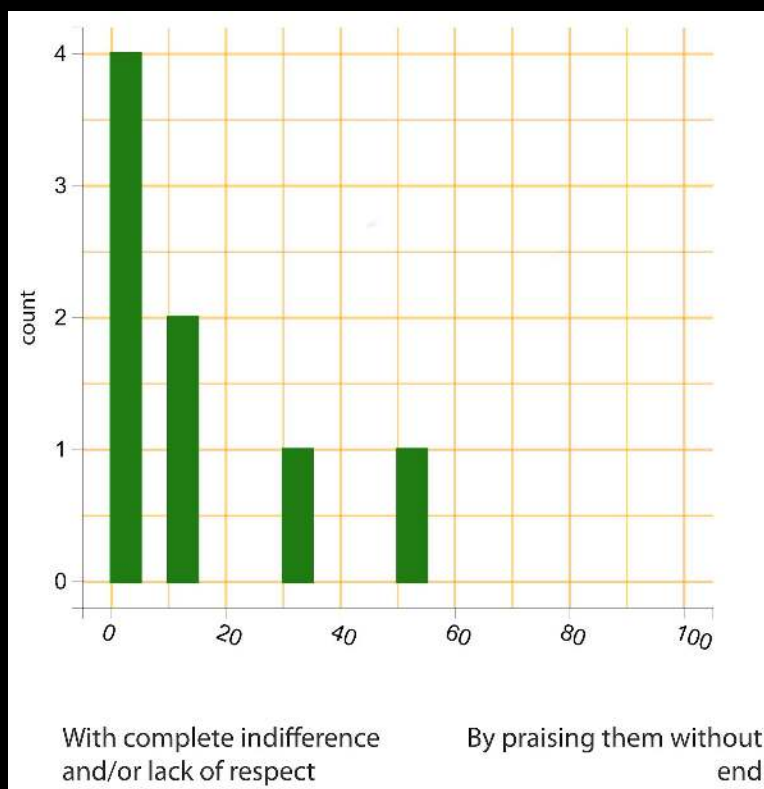
### Example staff experience (neutral)

*What is our new future?*

"In my role we have had a great year productivity wise and achieved many milestones, but I am having a hard time grasping what the next fiscal year will look like. Budget constraints have me concerned. Also, my role is very highly people facing so understanding how to do my job without face-to-face communication is something I'm struggling with not only personally but for my team. I'm optimistic it can be done, but going about my task in a way that I never have before brings its own uncertainties and anxieties."

## Treatment by people in positions of power

In the first two interim briefs, the majority of faculty indicated that "People in positions of power" were praising them. This perception has now shifted towards the other end of this scale to where the majority of faculty feel that people in positions of power are treating them with complete indifference or a lack of respect (see Figure below).



## Example faculty experience (extremely negative, value of ~1 on above graph)

### *A pedagogical disaster*

"As a faculty member in CENGR, I have been proud to be part of a College that takes teaching and learning engineering seriously. I'm part of a community that is committed to improving our teaching practices by learning from each other and reading literature from educational research. With this in mind, I'm astounded that we are transitioning to a model, the HyFlex model, that has NO grounding in the literature. To even call it a Hyflex model is misleading. I'm afraid that going down this path is going to lead to a pedagogical disaster, which students are not going to appreciate."

## Lack of autonomy and flexibility

The majority of faculty indicated that their story was about Autonomy and Flexibility, as compared to Workload or Support and Acknowledgement. Given that all but two stories were negative, this finding can be interpreted as a lack of Autonomy and Flexibility.

The prompt for this triad was, "This story was about..."



## Example faculty experience (extremely negative, closest to autonomy and flexibility corner)

*Disregarded and not consulted*

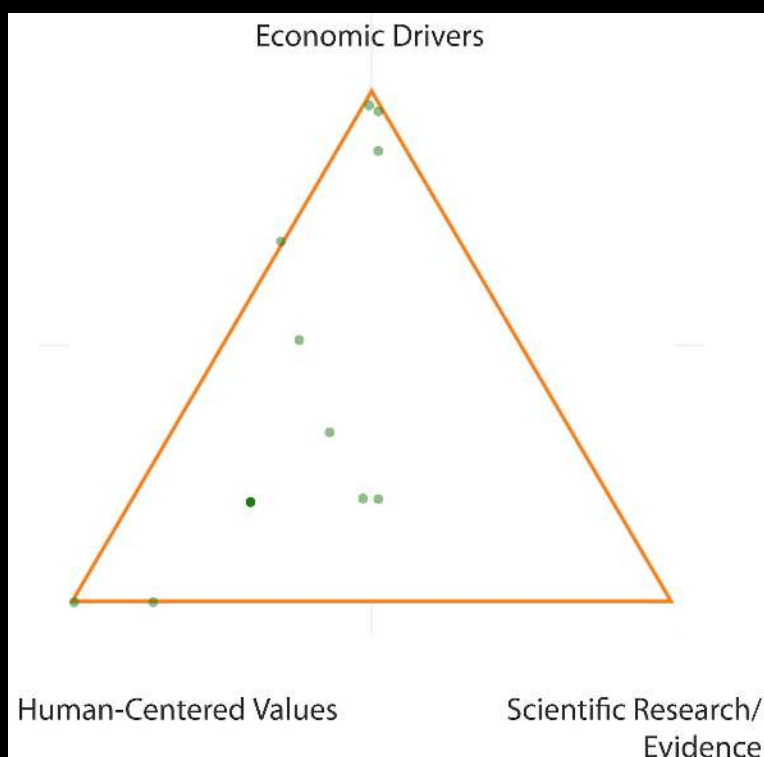
“Last week we had a faculty meeting. The dean let us know, in no uncertain terms, that we were all expected to teach in the fall, unless we had a special accommodation. I am afraid to teach in the fall with the cases of COVID-19 in Georgia still on the rise. When I go to the supermarket, I have also noticed that students, in general, don't wear masks - and we won't have the right to make them in our classes. I wanted to ask the Dean how many faculty will need to die before UGA changes its policy. But I didn't. And no-one else did either. When COVID-19 first hit, it was all about the safety of us and our families first. But now, it seems like all that matters is the economic survival of the university through the tuition that comes from face-to-face learning. Our lives are less important.”

## Lack of scientific research and evidence

When asked what “Decisions made in the story were influenced by...”, none of the eleven responses were placed near the Scientific Research/ Evidence corner of the triangle.

The two stories closest to the Human-Centered Values corner of the triad described how to most effectively teach online.

The prompt for this triad was, “Decisions made in the story were influenced by...”



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### Example faculty experience (extremely negative, closest to economic drivers corner)

#### *Selfishness*

"Everything in society is changing. A small portion to a large portion (we don't know yet) of this change will be permanent. We have ineffective leaders at all levels. Lack of empathy abounds at all levels."

### Example faculty experience (extremely negative, closest to human-centered values corner)

#### *Small groups work best on Zoom*

"I just sort of gave up on lecturing, when I realized how much my students were struggling with being at home, the technology requirements, inability to pay attention or participate. It wasn't a positive experience. So, I simply changed my strategy to small group interactions held each week, following the end-of-semester project. This was better. I got a chance to get to know the students better, and provide individual feedback. I uploaded a few videos as well to supplement their knowledge-base."

## Concerns about the HyFlex model

Three of the 11 stories expressed concerns about the HyFlex teaching model.

### Example faculty experience (extremely negative)

#### *Hy-Flex or Hy-Mandatory?*

"I do not like this hyflex model at all. Quite frankly I'm disgusted by USG's attempt to re-open in the fall. Furthermore, given the state of healthcare in this country in general, the fact that a doctor's note may be required to go along with accommodations requests is such an imposition. Or even the fact that I HAVE to request an accommodation to even have the option to teach virtually until a vaccine is available. **We can't request that students wear face masks in class.** There's still a number of people in Athens who aren't respecting social distance boundaries (namely white people) so am I supposed to put my health and life at risk for a job that could easily replace me once the budget bounces back? I'm super frustrated and scared. Hopefully my accommodations request is approved - I don't even want to think about my options if it isn't. It's no secret that this virus disproportionately impacts my community more than others. And in general it doesn't seem like the health of faculty and staff are being truly considered in these big decisions (I mean especially given most people are retirement age and are at a higher risk so.....)"



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## Mandatory masks

Seven stories expressed concerns that UGA's re-opening plans did not mandate face masks.

### Example faculty experience (extremely negative)

*Concerns about UGA plans for reopening*

"I do not think that UGA is doing all it can in the planning process for reopening for classes in the fall. This is mainly about the fact that UGA is strongly encouraging the wearing of masks when indoors but not making that mandatory..."