



## City of Charlottesville Human Rights Commission

August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020

### *Commissioners*

Dear President Ryan,

Shantell Bingham  
*Chair*

Sue W. Lewis  
*Vice Chair*

Jeanette Abi- Nader

Pheobe Brown

Ernest Chambers

Jessica Harris

Laura J.W.  
Keppley

Kathryn Laughon

Andrew Orban

Lyndele von  
Schill

Robert Woodside

Melvin Grady

Olivia Gabbay

Ann J. Smith

We write you as collective residents of the Charlottesville community representing diverse backgrounds, livelihoods, and experiences as members of the Human Rights Commission. This letter comes to you at the height of decision making during a pandemic that has spared some lives but has also cost our community many more. **Therefore, we ask in our capacity as neighbors and advocates of human rights that you do not bring the bulk of undergraduate students back to the University of Virginia for the Fall semester.**

We recognize that you are balancing many difficult and competing demands in making this decision. We applaud the efforts that you have undertaken to require testing, request that students quarantine, and create a culture that supports public health guidance. We understand that you have delayed their return until early September and have promised to make a final decision by August 28. Our mission is to protect the human rights of our community, however. The right to health is paramount, and we center the most vulnerable. We are concerned that bringing thousands of students back to our community will endanger the lives of the staff, especially low wage staff working frontline jobs, the students, the faculty, and the larger community.

We have already seen a disparate impact of COVID-19 by race. The population of the Thomas Jefferson Health District is just under 14% African American,<sup>1</sup> yet Black residents compose almost 19% of cases, over 39% of hospitalizations and over 24% of fatalities. The Latinx community is just under 5% of the TJHD population<sup>2</sup>, yet accounts for almost 27% of cases and almost 17% of hospitalizations. These numbers do not account for the loss of income due to illness or the long-term disability that many of those who recover will face.<sup>3</sup> While, we do not have access to information about other groups that fall within our purview, such as those living with disabilities, but commonsense would suggest that they are also uniquely vulnerable.

Indeed, the disproportionality of this pandemic has demonstrated to us that health is a matter of human rights, and now more than ever, we all have the moral obligation to play our parts to the fullest of our ability and in collaboration with others. Many local school system actors are stepping up to the plate, implementing innovative and forthcoming virtual learning.<sup>4</sup> They're not only following the lead of experts across the globe<sup>5</sup> that caution against in-person learning for large universities<sup>6</sup>, but they're also responding to the needs of their staff while also weighing the cost of their decisions for the community at large

**President Ryan, the steps you take send a message to us all.** Given the overwhelming disappointment of national leadership to protect us, it is up to local leaders to act quickly and strategically to protect lives. We add our voices to those requesting that the University of Virginia suspend the return of undergraduate students to Grounds and ask that they not return to their off-Grounds lodgings. *We ask that the University not stand apart from us, but with us as we manage this pandemic together.*

In pursuit of justice, we serve,



Shantell Bingham, Chair  
Human Rights Commission  
106 5th St NE, Charlottesville, VA 22902  
[shantellbingham@gmail.com](mailto:shantellbingham@gmail.com)

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/data/demographics/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/content/uploads/sites/91/2019/08/2019-MAPP2Health-Report.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/06/covid-19-coronavirus-longterm-symptoms-months/612679/>

<sup>4</sup> Charlottesville City Schools goes virtual: <http://charlottesvilleschools.org/coronavirus/> Albemarle County Public Schools goes nearly all virtual: <https://www.k12albemarle.org/our-division/return-to-school>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.who.int/westernpacific/news/speeches/detail/virtual-press-conference-on-covid-19-in-the-western-pacific>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/07/colleges-are-getting-ready-blame-their-students/614410/>