January 14, 2022

Dear Penn International Student & Scholar Services (ISSS) and the University administrators,

We recognize that this is a challenging time for all of us, and we truly appreciate Penn ISSS and the University’s efforts in supporting us and keeping us safe. However, since the beginning of the pandemic, international students have been hit the hardest. Many of us, from undergraduate to graduate and professional students, have been struggling academically, physically, mentally, and financially while navigating through the pandemic with little support. Especially, due to the recent changes in the University’s policy, many international students have been experiencing logistical, academic, and financial issues that we want to bring to your attention, along with recommendations to support us in navigating this landscape.

1. **Delayed On-campus Move-in:** The University sent out the plan for the Spring 2022 Semester on December 23, 2021, outlining the delayed in-person classes (to January 24, 2022) and student move-in to campus by one week (to January 15, 2022). By the time of this announcement, many international students had finalized their travel plans and booked international flights. This forced many students to adjust their plan; in many cases, that comes with the extra financial burden (e.g. extra expenses out of pocket due to flight changes, emergency COVID tests, accommodation, etc.). Some students, due to a myriad of financial, family, and health reasons could not stay at their parent's place, leaving them at the goodwill of their friends and fellow students willing to accommodate them. Furthermore, many students had left campus before the announcement, leaving essential study items in their rooms. Early Spring 2022 move-in petitions have been denied for many, further exacerbating the situation for international students.

2. **Delayed In-person Classes & Virtual Classes:** We support the University’s decision to delay in-person classes to decrease the risks of viral transmission. However, we want to bring to your attention the challenges faced by many international students regarding virtual learning. Some students are still stuck in other continents due to travel issues. Attending classes from all over the world creates challenges due to time zone differences, leading many international students to attend classes in the middle of the night. Some students also lack suitable spaces for studying, or may experience volatile personal situations that hinder their ability to study. Furthermore, traveling back to Penn may take some international students up to two days, leading them to involuntarily miss classes.

3. **COVID-19 Vaccine Boosters:** Per the University’s aforementioned email on December 23, students are required to take the vaccine boosters. The challenge is CVS and some other clinics are not accepting international vaccine first and second doses, thereby not allowing such cases to schedule a booster dose. Besides, the University will host vaccine booster clinics on January 14, 17, 18, and 19, but some international students will not be able to return to campus by these early dates. Some international students may also not be qualified to receive the booster by then (i.e. 5 months post the primary vaccination series for Moderna...
or Pfizer; 6 months from the final dose of non-FDA approved ones) due to circumstances that prevented them from completing the series before September 2021.

4. **Uncertainty Around Future COVID-19 Policies:** The University has twice before this informed students with a short notice about campus closure (Spring 2020 and Fall 2020). As the course of the pandemic is unpredictable, there is growing uncertainty among international students about whether similar situations will occur in the future, and how they will affect our financial and academic standing and opportunities. There are also concerns about access to masks, given the recent changes in mask requirements (i.e. double-masking or wearing a KN95/N95 mask). Many students have been paying out-of-pocket to obtain unreliable masks from online sources and are not properly trained in mask wearing and fitting.

5. **Regarding Prof. Amy Wax’s Recent Comments:** On top of all of the previously addressed issues, Professor Amy Wax’s recent hateful remarks against Asian and Asian immigrants have further aggravated the situation for international students. Many students have been negatively affected and hurt by Prof. Wax’s racist and offensive comments.

Beyond statements of acknowledgement of these issues, we urge the University to take **concrete actions.** We thus recommend the University working closely with ISSS and other partners to:

1. Provide more University funding to students in need of financial support and establish dedicated Emergency Funds to international students, to offset costs that incurred from unexpected expenses (travel-related expenses and other emergency accommodation).
   a. Some international FGLI students do not receive financial aid from Penn, but rather have obtained an outside scholarship or fellowship. These scholarships may not cover expenses arising from the recent policy changes.
   b. The process to apply for this support should be centralized and straightforward for students.

2. Request professors to offer asynchronous options during the online period and not penalize students for missing classes, as well as flexibility with deadlines and graded assignments to accommodate for time zone differences, days spent traveling back to campus, and those whose family/personal situations hinder their ability to study from home.
   a. These options should be available to all students. We are experts on our own situation, and should not be expected to share intimate details of our personal lives to receive support in these times. Especially considering that early move-in petitions were denied for many students with difficult family circumstances, we expect the University to show courtesy toward students that are some of the most vulnerable members of our community.
   b. These accommodations may include recording classes and publishing the recordings on Canvas, postponing graded assignments, not penalizing students from late submissions during the first weeks, grading assignments on completion rather than correctness, and providing extra credit opportunities.

3. Recommend professors and advisors to be mindful and accommodating of students who may experience side effects from the booster shots that potentially interfere with their academic and work commitment.
4. Extend the Course Selection Period by a week to allow students to settle down on campus and meet with their advisors before the deadline.

5. Offer Booster Clinics after in-person classes have resumed in late January and February.
   a. Especially, making a special effort to accommodate the provision of the booster shot to all international students who received the primary doses abroad, so that they can get a certificate of the booster dose from Penn, which could potentially mitigate future problems with vaccination proof.

6. Add more information about booster availability and practices to University’s COVID FAQs. Especially, there should be more clear guidelines for students who received the primary vaccine series internationally and might not receive vaccination cards that are approved in some clinics in the U.S. In addition, there should be information about whether or not such students are eligible to receive the vaccine at Penn Presbyterian Medical Center in addition to the Booster Clinic.

7. Commit to provide free masks, especially KN95/N95 masks, to the students at on-campus residence halls (both undergraduate and graduate/professional dorms), campus buildings, and other central locations throughout the semester. Provide mask fitting training & information.

8. Involve students in the future decision making process and be more proactive in tracking the progress of the pandemic and in providing resources to students accordingly, especially to FGLI and international students.

9. Establish guidelines for financial and other support students can expect if comparable emergencies such as campus closure occur in the future.
   a. The creation of these guidelines should center the needs on FGLI and international students, as well as students with volatile family situations or other extenuating circumstances.

10. Formally investigate and take serious disciplinary actions against Professor Wax. The University should officially condemn Prof. Wax’s offensive remarks as well as reaffirming the University’s values and commitment to its diverse community members, especially to the Asian, Asian American, and international student population.

We recognize that many of these recommendations align with the needs of other demographic groups. We recommend that the University works with a diverse set of student groups moving forward to ensure that all students receive adequate support to navigate these challenging times.

Thank you for your understanding and consideration. We are looking forward to hearing back from you soon.

Sincerely,

Graduate & Professional Student Assembly (GAPSA)
Undergraduate Assembly (UA)
International Student Advisory Board (ISAB)
Assembly of International Students (AIS)
Link for other Organizations to endorse our letter: https://forms.gle/uukefgzGHd49otBr5

Additional Endorsements from other Organizations (Updated on 01/19/2022):

1. UPenn FGLIQ
2. International FGLI (iFGLI)
3. Underrepresented Student Advisory Board in Engineering
4. Graduate Student Engineering Government (GSEG)
5. College Dean's Advisory Board