
Subject: your numbers

Date: Thursday, August 20, 2020 at 3:48:56 PM Central Daylight Time

From: Lora Burnett

To: Neil Matkin

Dear Dr. Matkin,

In your email about our COVID preparations and current enrollments, you asked us to send you better numbers if we had them. I have no expertise in either statistics or epidemiology, so I reached out to others for some help understanding what metrics are and are not reliable or useful in drawing conclusions about COVID. Some people responded with reliable sources and helpful explanations outlining how your particular analytic approach was either incorrect or irrelevant to the problem we're facing.

That was helpful for me in terms of getting a better grasp of the issues at stake, but I don't think it would be particularly helpful to you for me to send along statistical and scientific information from sources that are readily available to all of us. As I said, I am not a subject-matter expert in statistics or epidemiology.

Of course, you are not an expert in those fields either, as far as I know. That lack of expertise makes your diagnosis of the actual risks people face during this pandemic a guess at best.

So instead of sending you "better numbers," I'd like to ask you: why did you include that assessment in your email touting our enrollment numbers? Your attempt to reassure the email recipients that COVID is "overblown" came across instead as dismissive of people who at the advice of their physicians sought accommodations or who out of concern requested an all-online fall semester. I am sure you did not mean to be unkind, but the repeated assertions that this disease poses a miniscule risk came across as an implicit condemnation of those who have altered their routines out of concern for it.

Inserting your own armchair analysis of an epidemiological phenomenon into an email about enrollments introduced a divisive note into an otherwise celebratory team-wide email. I think that was unwise, and I very much wish you would send out an email walking back the idea that it is even appropriate for you as the head of the college to opine in an email to all employees about the epidemiological characteristics and risks of this illness. It came across as dismissive and unkind. I am sure that was not your intent, so I hope you will issue some kind of retraction.

Dr. Lora Burnett
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