Appendix 15: COVID-19 Behavioral Influence Strategies

Skorton Center for Health Initiatives

As Cornell prepares for reactivation in Fall 2020, the university’s public health approach to preventing COVID-19 will require a comprehensive, integrated plan for influencing student behavior (particularly in relation to students’ social lives). The goal of these efforts will be to optimize adherence to protective behaviors and reduce opportunities for viral transmission.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS:

● **Underlying needs and desires.** Social connection is necessary for mental health and most people are naturally drawn to physical proximity. College-age students may be seeking friendship, affiliation with identity groups, a romantic relationship and/or sexual connection, participation in team sports or other opportunities to connect and de-stress with friends. Whether simply hanging out, partying, or engaging in intimacy, desire for connection is strong and activities like these are the norm for young adults.

● **Propensity for risk-taking.** Risk-taking is a common feature of adolescence and young adulthood. Moreover, questioning and sometimes challenging authority is a common developmental aspect of this age group. While some students may underestimate the risk COVID-19 poses, others may decide that the potential benefits of various behaviors outweigh the risk of harm to themselves or others. These risks include both the potential health risk of spreading the virus, and the likelihood of “getting in trouble” for violating community guidelines.

● **Influence of peers and culture.** Adherence to COVID-19 health guidelines is influenced by cultural factors, including the perceived norms of the groups with which students identify, the student body as a whole, and society. Consistent with social norms theory, an April 2020 survey of over 9,000 Cornell students identified a) high levels of protective COVID-related attitudes and behavior, and b) an underestimation of the extent to which their peers shared their concerns and commitments.

● **Moral reasoning.** When making decisions involving morals/ethics, students vary in the extent to which they consider the potential harm to others. As reflected in Moral Foundations Theory, considerations of harm (e.g., potential harm from COVID-19) are central for some, while alternate values (e.g., fairness, group loyalty) have similar or greater importance for others.

PREVENTION PHILOSOPHIES:

● **Deterrence:** a system of accountability for violations of an explicit behavioral contract may motivate some students to refrain from risky behaviors. Deterrence strategies can focus on influencing the behavior of individuals and groups.

● **Harm reduction:** a harm reduction approach recognizes that at some point students may choose to act in ways that are not entirely consistent with health guidelines and/or a behavioral contract. It is therefore important to provide them with information to help reduce the risk of harm (i.e., of contracting the virus themselves or spreading it to others). Harm reduction can apply to the behavior of individuals and groups.

STRATEGIES:

● **Policy enforcement**
  ○ Establishing clear expectations and consequences will be necessary to achieve deterrence.
  ○ Although students may agree to a behavioral contract reluctantly, requiring them to do so would nevertheless establish a shared understanding of community expectations.
While mechanisms for individual accountability will be needed, enforcement may inadvertently complicate contact tracing since students may be reluctant to identify those with whom they have been in contact if those individuals have been in violation of the university’s behavioral contract (or Code of Conduct).

Rather than focusing on the behavior of individuals, a more effective strategy might be to prioritize requirements for groups, teams, and organizations that ban large and unregulated social gatherings. Imposing firm sanctions for group-level violations may serve to deter high-risk behaviors without raising the specter of ostracizing an individual or “sending students home” for violations.

Policy enforcement must be done in a non-biased manner that is sensitive to the current national crisis and longstanding concerns among communities of color regarding discriminatory and abusive police practices.

- **Communications (to students, parents, staff, and faculty who work with students)**
  - **Leadership statements:** strong leadership statements from President Pollack and others about the moral/ethical standards for our community during the pandemic (i.e., How ought we to act?) and the values we hold (e.g., Cornell as a caring community) can foster a culture of shared responsibility (i.e., a “fair” approach) with a common goal of getting back to normal as much and as soon as possible.
  - **Policy statements:** communications to students (and parents) set behavioral expectations and relay potential consequences in order to deter risk-taking.
  - **Social norms messages:** campaigns to promote a positive culture by identifying positive norms within the student body and communicating them through media messages. Use tailored approaches within subpopulations (e.g., Greek life) and individual groups (e.g., student organizations, identity groups, athletic teams, and fraternity and sorority chapters).
  - **Risk-reduction information:** messaging should include universal precautions pertaining to the whole campus (e.g., how to socialize safely), and selective messages for students to reduce the harms within high-risk situations (e.g., parties with alcohol).
  - **Bystander education:** guidance about how to engage someone whose behavior poses a significant risk of spreading COVID-19 can increase the likelihood of interventions.

- **Peer influence initiatives**
  - **Peer ambassadors:** an SCL organization of trained peer health “ambassadors” who could engage in in-person interventions/education with other students on and off campus to promote adherence to health guidelines and/or behavior contracts. A peer-based educational approach can reduce the need for interventions by law enforcement officials.
  - **Training for organization leaders:** education about how to hold lower-risk social events and challenge those who attempt to hold high-risk events (e.g., large, unregulated gatherings).