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## COVID-19\_Maine Campus\_Letter to the Editor

Sean McGuire

*University of Maine*

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### Letter to the Editor by Sean McGuire

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It is cruel and unethical for the University of Maine to pay \$12.65 an hour to students who are putting themselves at risk to conduct COVID-19 testing. Maine's flagship university has always prided itself on liberal values and community-oriented ideals; however, when it finally comes to putting their wallet behind their beliefs, the best interests for their students seem to all too predictably disappear. It is disturbing, especially at a time when many students are struggling financially and feel they have to take any work they can find.

The entire student body received an email mid-January offering paid positions at the testing sites on campus. I was particularly interested because I used my winter break to relocate to a hard-hit part of the country to work as an EMT and swabber at a testing clinic. I am very grateful for this opportunity to help, but I will also say that it was the only job I could find.

When I read the position is titled "COVID Testing Ambassador," I immediately imagined the Maine Hello team cheering people on to muster enough spit to fill a cup. The reality is that the university is hiring desperate students at essentially minimum wage for a position which will regularly expose them to a deadly disease which, at the very least, could negatively impact their studies and mental health through quarantining. The title is just an excuse not to call these students what they really are: healthcare workers. If testing was hired out to anyone other than cheap student labor, the risks dictate an industry standard of \$15-\$30 an hour. Even the absurdity of this wage is overshadowed by last semester's frantic email sent out by student recreation and Greek Life asking students to come help with testing to meet their volunteer hours.

I still took the job as a COVID-19 tester on campus as it is important work that must be done, but I accepted it knowing that I am already vaccinated. This brings about the other major problem with these positions. Per the university administration this job is "non-contact," so employees are not considered healthcare workers and therefore will receive the vaccine at the same time as the general student population.

This assessment by the university is simply wrong. The job posting states that some of the roles of a "Testing Ambassador" are cleaning, distributing tests and checking patients in and out. Even if we were to ignore the fact that this job will require close proximity to potentially contagious patients, mistakes do happen. Sometimes your N95 does not seal correctly, someone touches a paper clip they shouldn't have, people take their masks off to sneeze and so on. The "administrative/greeter" at my testing clinic just contracted the virus, despite working in a so-called "non-contact" position. Especially with the new, more contagious strains of the virus expected to ravage the country in the next few months, any contact is enough contact. If this position is so safe and zero risk, I ask the university board and administrators to lead from the front by joining the testing effort for a day or two to get a better understanding of the job.


These general and legitimate grievances about the university's student employment system are not what I am trying to address in this article. However, the reckless employment of students, without proper compensation, is totally unethical and contradicts the university's mission. I propose that the university create a separate tier of their pay scale for student employees, called "Hazard Pay," that has a substantial percentage-based increase for higher-risk work. The application of hazard pay is most apparent with these testing positions, but could be beneficial if expanded to other inherently dangerous jobs.

UMaine is understandably under strict financial limitations; it is not running a charity. A lack of funding was a defense used as to why the university can't pay testers more. There is never enough money for everything, so the University of Maine System must decide what to prioritize. To me, near the top of that list is compensating students for serving their community in a hazardous role. Student workers and other staff feed us, tutor us, and ultimately make this campus run. Now we are expected to keep everyone safe. What is a fair price to pay to the young people who are risking their health for our collective wellbeing? Surely we can do better than \$12.65.

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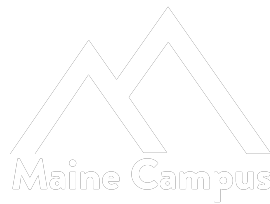
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Biggest mistake I ever made was going there...

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