

Colleagues,

I hope this summer has brought you some rest and relaxation. As we prepare to welcome our students back to campus for a full return to in person learning, I want to share a few updates related to COVID-19.

The Delta variant is present and active across the state, evidenced by a large outbreak in Provincetown. Just last week we learned of an outbreak of more than 30 vaccinated people contracting COVID-19 at the North Adams Commons Nursing and Rehabilitation Center and there has been an uptick across the County in positive COVID-19 cases. However, research-based data shows that vaccine efficacy remains strong, and vaccinations are our strongest defense against the surge of the Delta variant and preventing further mutations. Even though there have been breakthrough cases, the vaccine helps to protect against severe illness and hospitalization.

We are well-positioned for our planned full return to the residence halls and classrooms this fall. As always, we remain nimble and will continue to monitor key health and safety metrics to guide our decision making.

During the 2020-2021 academic year we were successful as a campus community in combatting the spread of COVID-19. I know we will persevere through the next semester to keep each other safe, while delivering our hallmark in-person liberal arts education.

Updated MA DPH Mask Guidance

On Friday, July 30, Governor Baker and the MA DPH issued a [new mask advisory](#), in accordance with updated CDC guidelines. Fully vaccinated individuals are advised to wear a mask or face covering when indoors (and not in their own home) if they have a weakened immune system, or if they are at increased risk for severe disease due to their age or an underlying medical condition, or if someone in their household has a weakened immune system, is at increased risk for severe disease, or is an unvaccinated adult. Masks are still mandatory for all individuals on public and private transportation systems (including rideshares, livery, taxi, ferries, MBTA, Commuter Rail and transportation stations), in healthcare facilities and in other settings hosting vulnerable populations, such as congregate care settings.

We anticipate that most employees with compromising circumstances will choose to wear a mask when they are indoors on-campus and not alone in an office. Other employees may also choose to do so when they are not alone in an office, particularly in crowded social situations. Please respect colleagues' individual choices to wear a mask, regardless of locations or circumstances.

Vaccination Expectations

All students are required to be vaccinated against COVID-19, unless they have an approved exemption for medical reasons or religious beliefs. Exempted students will be required to wear a mask at all times when they are outside their own bedrooms and will have to participate in regular surveillance testing (including at move-in).

Currently 82% of students have fulfilled the vaccination requirement. We continue to communicate with students to attest to this State University requirement and work with individual students on their vaccination plans as the opening of the semester approaches.

As well, a recent survey of faculty and staff indicates 94% confidence of vaccination. Eligible employees are encouraged to be vaccinated against COVID-19 and it is expected that all unvaccinated employees will be masked at all times on campus.

COVID-19 Related Supplies

Similar to last fall, Carrie Schadler in the President's Office is coordinating the purchase and distribution of any COVID-19 related supplies or additional accommodations such as signage and masks. Please contact her with any of your department's needs at x5201 or carrie.schadler@mcla.edu.

Travel Guidelines

While Massachusetts has lifted travel advisories/restrictions for fully vaccinated citizens, we continue to practice the policies set forth by the CDC:

- [Domestic Travel During COVID-19 | CDC](#)
- [International Travel During COVID-19 | CDC](#)
- [When NOT to Travel: Avoid Spreading COVID-19 | CDC](#)

If you are traveling domestically or internationally, please review the information and contact Barbara Chaput in Human Resources to confirm the information that you need to communicate to the College related to your travel.

MA Higher Education Control Plan

The MA DPH and the Governor's Office have not issued an updated Higher Education Control Plan. This was our guidepost last year that framed our COVID-19 mitigation strategies, including surveillance testing and contact tracing best practices. We will continue to closely monitor guidance from the state.

Testing and Contact Tracing

We are in the final stages of renewing our contract with the Broad Institute for COVID-19 testing. We will primarily use Broad for surveillance testing of students who have medical or religious exemptions to the COVID-19 vaccine requirement, and for symptomatic student testing. We will also reserve rooms in student residence halls for isolation and quarantine out of an abundance of caution.

Decision Making Metrics

We will continue to follow the science and work closely with our local and state partners to monitor future upticks in positive cases nationally, state-wide, and locally. Last Fall, we shared a number of key indicators from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health that drove our decision-making. These indicators will continue to be important guideposts as we consider updates to campus policy and procedure.

These metrics include, but are not limited to:

1. External/Community Metrics
 - a. Relevant MA directives for higher education
 - b. Daily and 7-day average of cases in Berkshire County and Massachusetts, as applicable
 - c. Daily and 7-day average of positive test rates in Berkshire County and Massachusetts, as applicable
 - d. Bed and ICU capacity for local hospitals

2. Campus Metrics- In addition to regularly monitoring external/community metrics, the College will also carefully monitor on campus metrics, including:
 - a. Daily and 7-day average of COVID-19 cases by date reported
 - b. Daily and 7-day average of positive test rates. If the College's infection rates begin to exceed the infection rate in Berkshire County generally, we will consult with appropriate officials and potentially move to more assertive campus restrictions to mitigate infection spread.
 - c. Daily count of students in isolation and available spaces for student isolation. If the College reaches 50% capacity in isolation beds, the College will consult with public health officials about potential measures that need to be taken.
 - d. Daily count of individuals in quarantine

Please continue to practice good hand washing hygiene, self-monitor for any COVID-19 related symptoms and stay home if you feel ill. The Berkshire Health Systems COVID hotline continues to remain an additional valuable resource. Please call for vaccine and testing appointments: Nurses are available to take your calls from 8am to 4:30pm seven days a week- call 855-BMC-LINK, or 855-262-5465.

MCLA's COVID-19 hotline and our COVID-19 landing page remain operational and we will continue to archive all campus communications there. Please reach out to me directly with any questions and thank you for your collective efforts to keep each other and our campus community as safe as possible. We are in this together!

Sincerely,
Gina

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