

Week of July 26

Trustees -

I will focus this morning on the most pressing issue of the day and week: the fast-moving Delta variant of COVID-19 and how we are responsibly adjusting to it.

While we have learned how to safely operate through the pandemic, and had hoped the wide availability and proven safety and efficacy of the vaccines would finally end it, that outcome remains elusive. Seemingly within reach even just a few weeks ago, the hope that the pandemic was ending has instead been upended by not just continuing vaccine hesitancy, but more importantly the sobering scientific realities of the Delta variant, a highly transmissible COVID strain now widespread through the country and around the world.

From the beginning of the pandemic, every UMS COVID message I've sent has included a statement that our protocols are subject to change as we adjust to the scientific realities and evolution of the virus. This is necessarily so because we have prioritized public health with everything we've done so far, and that's not changing. Policies just released are subject to change, and may be updated or wholly revised in only days or weeks. As an example, while we followed State of Maine guidance and policy from just earlier this month when we [announced](#) that we would be relaxing our face covering requirements, Delta's fast and easy transmissibility, possibly even among those fully vaccinated, is likely to require reinstating face covering protocols.

So it is too with our thinking about requiring COVID vaccines.

Starting in April with the launch of our ["This is Our Shot, Maine"](#) vaccination drive, I have been saying that UMS would be likely to require a COVID vaccine for those living, working, learning, and researching on our campuses and in our facilities when a vaccine received full FDA approval. Here I want to thank the nearly 9,700 members of the UMS community -- more than 3,400 faculty and staff and nearly 5,500 students -- who voluntarily submitted a verified proof of COVID vaccination in response to our call to do so.

But the current reality of the Delta variant demands that we speed up our [consideration](#) of vaccine requirements. While my preference would still be to wait for full FDA approval before requiring a COVID vaccine, it is increasingly clear that opening safely this fall does not give us the luxury to wait.

To be clear, absent any state law to the contrary (and there is none in Maine), and subject to discussions with our labor partners about how to implement such requirements, [it is legally permissible](#) for UMS to require the COVID vaccine even now with FDA "emergency use authorization" approval. Indeed, as of this week, [more than 620 institutions of higher education](#) around the country have announced some form of COVID vaccine mandate, including the

[University of Illinois System](#) (the partner for Shield T3, [our COVID testing lab partner](#)), [every college and university in Rhode Island](#), and the entire [Vermont State Colleges system](#).

Public and private employers are following suit. In keeping pace with the Delta variant, this week saw a [cascade of employers](#) announce vaccine requirements for employees returning to work, among them Walmart, Disney, Google, Facebook, Morgan Stanley, the Washington Post, New York City, the State of California, and the entire federal government.

Finally, it's also important to put a COVID vaccine requirement into a critical context: pursuant to Maine law, UMS already requires vaccines as a condition of enrollment. [requiring](#) all degree-seeking students and full-time, non-degree students born after December 31, 1956 to provide proof of immunization for tetanus, diphtheria, measles, mumps and rubella. We do this to maintain campus and community health. We accept this important requirement for the communal good of our university communities. Delta demands that we take this step now with COVID too, and I ask you to watch for our formal announcement later this coming week as we work to confirm new protocols with our labor partners and finalize our COVID vaccine requirements.

You may have already seen the message I sent to the [UMS community](#) on Friday on these matters. I wanted our faculty and staff to know that we are closely watching Delta, and more importantly, that we are prepared to move as fast to adjust our COVID protocols to prioritize and maintain the health and safety of our campuses and their surrounding communities as we prepare to safely welcome our students back for a more normal fall semester. Accepting and acting on this responsibility has been the hallmark of my approach to COVID thus far, and it continues by moving ahead with a COVID vaccine requirement.

Thank you for your support in these efforts. I hope you have a good week ahead.

Regards,
Dan