

Week of October 11

Trustees,

We have now passed a significant point in our Fall 2021 semester.

Not only was this past Friday, October 15, the official census date for the fall semester -- the date we count official enrollment and credit hour registration for the semester, on which we'll report in more detail at your regular November Board meeting -- it was also the deadline by which students were to register either a COVID vaccine card or a recognized exemption from vaccination with our secure online registration system. Students who are in the process of becoming fully vaccinated by that date will remain enrolled provided they confirm they're working to complete the vaccine regimen; students who have not taken action to confirm their vaccination or request an exemption will be unenrolled as of October 31.

Before I turn to the low number of students who have not taken any action, I want to summarize our achievement in public health discipline.

Our COVID protocols are working. By this past week's end, continuing a several-week downward trend, our overall positivity rate in our own COVID testing is well less than one percent, with just 17 positives from nearly 3,300 test results in the last 14 days. We were managing just 39 active COVID cases as of Friday. Ninety-two percent of our total fall in-person population (faculty, staff, and students) had confirmed that they are fully vaccinated. Many of the remaining 8 percent had properly requested an exemption by October 15 and committed to weekly COVID testing to keep our campus communities safe.

In all, we've logged nearly 25,000 vaccine confirmations. Nearly 93 percent of off-campus students and 98 percent of residential students have confirmed their vaccinations, and only just over *one-tenth of one percent* of our residential student body has failed to log either an exemption request or vaccine confirmation. At Fort Kent, Presque Isle, and Maine Law, we've reached 100 percent student compliance with these protocols.

As proud as we can all be of these numbers, given the consequences of non-compliance, we've been conscientious about reaching out to students who have not engaged with these protocols yet. With nearly 1,100 students not having taken any vaccine compliance action [by the end of September](#), the two-and-a-half weeks since then has seen a flurry of communication and outreach to these students through multiple channels, including [my last-push message](#) to the UMS community on Thursday. The efforts have paid off, as the non-compliance list was whittled down to just 313 students by late Friday.

We can reasonably expect that any student who is ultimately negatively impacted by their choice to not comply with our COVID vaccine protocols will complain, and probably publicly. Understanding that, it's important to consider the relevant context for our present course and situation.

We first alerted our students to our decision to require registration of either vaccination or an exemption request with a [public statement](#) and [online student guidance posted](#) in August. Our vaccine protocol, requiring either proof of full vaccination or a specific request for one of three available exemptions -- medical, religious, or fully remote -- has been deemed legally appropriate in the courts and matches the requirements in the President's recent executive orders for vaccination requirements for federal contractors and large employers. Our messaging and outreach since then has been steady and consistent: we are not *forcing* anyone to get vaccinated, but we are requiring our students *to act*: either confirm that you are vaccinated, or register an exemption request showing that you can't be (for medical reasons), have a sincerely-held religious belief against vaccination, or are not participating in any fall in-person activities on campus (e.g., a fully-remote student).

Losing even a single student for non-compliance with these necessary public health protocols will be unfortunate. And yet, we simply cannot compromise public health or waive accountability and responsibility.

We've looked back several years to get a sense of how many students we lose over the course of a typical fall semester, no matter the reason. Looking back to the three falls before the onset of the pandemic, on average nearly 600 students who started a fall semester had withdrawn before its conclusion. Again, that was before the pandemic struck. Many factors having nothing to do with the protocols necessitated by a pandemic -- personal finances, family emergencies, struggles with the transition to college-level work -- contributed to the nearly 600 fall withdrawals we saw in the years before the pandemic. The number was appreciably higher in fall 2020, the first fall semester in the pandemic, with reduced class sizes and limitations on activities and social gatherings.

Significantly, as of last week, so far this semester just under 200 students had withdrawn (regardless of reason). With due acknowledgment that we will always work to reduce that number as much as possible, and look for a downward trend in future semesters, we would nevertheless expect to see as many as 400 more students withdraw before the end of the semester. The number of students who are currently at risk of October 31 withdrawal for their non-compliance with our COVID vaccine requirements to date stands at just 313. Of those, 142 have not logged any educational activity with Brightspace (our online learning management system used by all students and faculty) for the entire semester thus far, which suggests complete disengagement already and likely means those students will be among the number we expect to withdraw and not complete the semester. We cannot tell yet who among the 171 students who are engaged with Brightspace will accept their responsibility to register a vaccine card or exemption request to avoid being withdrawn October 31, and we will continue active outreach efforts to reach all 313. We all feel a solemn responsibility to make every reasonable effort to keep our students enrolled and on track to finish the semester successfully and return in the spring -- safely.

My leadership team and I will be starting our fall campus visits this coming week; we're heading to the County tomorrow morning to visit Fort Kent Monday and Presque Isle Tuesday. I'll return to a more academic focus with my message next weekend.

Best wishes for a good and productive week ahead.

Regards,
Dan