Memo

To: All Faculty, Staff, Researchers

From: John Kolligian, Executive Director, UHS; Irini Daskalaki, Medical Lead, COVID-19 Response, UHS; and Melissa Marks, Medical Director, UHS

Subject: Public Health Update from UHS

Date: August 5, 2021

As we prepare for the full resumption of residential teaching, research, and a fully operational campus, there is considerable anticipation at the prospect of a more traditional in-person fall semester. But at a time when so many colleagues and students are planning for their return, we also recognize that there is some apprehension – and even anxiety – about the evolving public health situation given reports of breakthrough cases and virus variants both nationally and locally. Such reactions are to be expected.

We are taking science-based measures, including extensive modeling of potential outcomes by an interdisciplinary team of experts, to help provide a healthy, safe work and learning environment. Our vaccination and asymptomatic testing requirements are essential measures. To date, the staff vaccination rate is 90%.

We also continue to monitor changes in public health recommendations and determine how they may impact our unique environment here at Princeton. As we prepare to return to campus, the University is requiring face coverings for unvaccinated faculty, staff, and students indoors and is encouraging vaccinated individuals to also wear face coverings indoors. Knowledge about COVID-19 has evolved rapidly over the past year and we anticipate that further modifications might be needed. Our public health team is actively evaluating new and emerging information regarding the pandemic, and the campus community should expect an update on any additional policy changes before the beginning of the upcoming semester.

As we continue to navigate the pandemic and our policies change, reflecting new developments, we will keep you informed and to do so proactively, without delay. We write to highlight some areas of import and concern.

Vigilance

We recognize that we must depend on each other to protect our well-being. The decision to return to campus this fall has been made possible in part by your vigilance in complying with public health policies. Such vigilance, supported by a strong infrastructure (e.g., required vaccinations for students, faculty, and staff; on-campus testing lab and continued asymptomatic testing for all; careful contact tracing, etc.), has contributed to lower on-campus infection rates than rates in the surrounding region, and lower than we had expected.

Your efforts have been critical in promoting the health and safety of ourselves and fellow community members. We find so many reasons for optimism and we are confident that with your support, these and other efforts will safeguard our community’s well-being and secure our capacity to thrive this fall.
As we expand in-person activities on campus ahead of our fall return, it is important to maintain our vigilance with appropriate health and safety measures.

Vaccination Status and Efficacy

Vaccination is the leading prevention strategy to protect individuals from COVID-19 and end the pandemic. In the United States, the benefits of widespread vaccination have been readily apparent. Vaccination has provided a path to restoration of many cherished components of our lives. And as pointed out by Provost Prentice and EVP Williams in a recent memo, a critical aspect of the University’s move towards full resumption of activities is a high vaccination rate among our employees.

For this reason, we have required all University staff, faculty, researchers, and students to be fully vaccinated prior to the start of the fall semester.

We are happy to report that as of August 2, 90% of employees are already fully vaccinated and verified. It is phenomenal to have so many University employees vaccinated. Such conscientiousness is heartening, needs to continue, and is one of the many reasons we are optimistic about the fall semester.

Vaccinations protect not only your health but the health of others. Evidence continues to show that the vaccines are safe, reduce risk of infection, and are highly effective in preventing serious illness. Vaccines are the surest way we can end the pandemic.

Those who, after extensive review, were granted an accommodation or exemption to the vaccine requirement are required to take additional steps to protect themselves and our campus community, including wearing masks indoors, testing twice weekly and continuing use of the Daily Symptom Check.

Delta and Other Variants

Variants of the virus, such as the Delta variant, are spreading in the United States. In fact, the Delta variant is now causing most of the COVID-19 cases in NJ. Current data suggest that the COVID-19 vaccines authorized for use in the US are effective at providing protection against known variants, including the Delta variant.

In other words, people who are fully vaccinated against COVID-19 appear to have protection against Delta, either by preventing the virus completely or by protecting against severe disease. However, anyone who is unvaccinated and not practicing preventive strategies is at risk for infection by the new variant, and the higher transmission rate observed with the Delta variant means that unvaccinated individuals are even more likely to become infected. As concerning as the Delta variant is, we can help keep it at bay with the tools and strategies we’ve been practicing for the past year and a half.

Moreover, vaccination is likely to slow the spread of all the variants and thus reduce the likelihood that new variants will emerge.

Vaccinated and Non-Vaccinated Individuals

We have received inquiries about the risk that unvaccinated individuals might pose to those employees who are fully vaccinated. Due to the effectiveness of vaccines, the science indicates that while it is...
possible to spread COVID-19 from an unvaccinated person to a vaccinated person, the long-term risks to the vaccinated person are minimal.

The CDC recently has reported that some vaccinated people can be contagious with coronavirus. That’s a shift in messaging from May. Yet the vaccines are still doing an excellent job raising immune barriers, keeping the virus’ levels low, and driving it out of the body faster. Vaccinated people are still less likely to get infected and sick. That means they still pose far less of a transmission risk than those who are unvaccinated.

In other words, it is still unlikely for a vaccinated person to spread the virus to others, whether those others are vaccinated or unvaccinated. And we are taking other precautions, in addition to vaccination, as well. As we head into the fall semester, our asymptomatic testing program will continue to be in place and face coverings are now encouraged. Additionally, ventilation systems throughout campus have been optimized in University-owned and operated buildings.

Importantly, those few employees who have received an accommodation and have not been vaccinated will complete the Daily Symptom Check, and are required wear a face covering and to be tested twice weekly. These and other requirements for both vaccinated and unvaccinated employees may be modified if increasing risk of virus spread is identified on campus or in our community; specifically, additional public health measures for unvaccinated employees may be required.

Despite this strong protection, no vaccine is 100% effective. There will continue to be some “breakthrough” infections in people who are vaccinated (regardless of the type of vaccine) and that has been the case over the past weeks locally and nationally. In vaccinated individuals who have breakthrough infections, the symptoms tend to be mild or the individuals have no symptoms (and detected by asymptomatic screenings).

Face coverings, which remain a particularly important tool for those who are unvaccinated, reduce spread, especially indoors.

Closing Thoughts

This summer into fall is an important recovery phase. We are confident that our community’s fortitude and resilience will allow us to meet any new challenges. Many look forward to joining colleagues on site, and are excited about the full return. Still, we have all gone through an extended, life-altering experience.

While the pandemic created its own difficulties, for many people, it also worsened previously existing stresses. Worry about returning to the old traditions of schools and offices, handshakes, and social gatherings, large and small, is understandable. Many of us may need help dealing with the stress of reentry or of welcoming more colleagues back after working on a dedensified campus for so long, while some may cope more readily.

Though there is limited research on the psychological effects of pandemic outbreaks, depending on people’s lived experiences, some of us will emerge from the pandemic with more health-related fears. These and other considerations suggest that we need to continue to look out for each other. Caring for each other is essential: offering kindness and compassion towards our colleagues and ourselves,
reaching out to colleagues about whom you are concerned, or letting others help you with any struggles you are having with post-pandemic reentry.

Officials from many University offices and departments continue to work closely to assess how best to support faculty and staff well-being, monitor pandemic conditions (including the status of regional K-12 schools), and, with local and state health agencies, determine when we can phase out other campus health measures instituted in the wake of the pandemic. Our community rises to the occasion in moments such as this and this moment will likely not be an exception.

**There is much to be proud of.** We are encouraged and energized by the strength, resiliency, and dedication demonstrated by so many members of the University community. These efforts are inspiring, helping us persevere and succeed under trying circumstances. A strong foundation has now been set--and we are primed to meet whatever comes our way this fall.

All of us have played a part in allowing our community to return to a more traditional campus experience. Many of you worked from home, sometimes under challenging conditions. Having fewer people on campus allowed our faculty, staff, researchers, and students who needed to be on campus to work safely. Those who came to work on campus every day helped our campus thrive.

We look forward to be able to celebrate our successes together and to a rich and exciting fall semester.