

January 27, 2021

Dear Colleagues,

Planning

Classes start next Monday, Feb. 1, so we are just putting the finishing touches on planning. The tents are up and technology is being added, additional large indoor spaces have been outfitted to allow hyflex teaching, and the SPO is ready for the coming wave of packages. The space got a facelift during the break, and now has a lot more room for packages and two windows. It looks good and they are pleased. Check it out!

Students are arriving in larger numbers beginning today. We expect to have about the same number on campus as we had last semester. Student Life and Health and Safety have signed up 1,539 students to test for the beginning of the semester. In addition, a total of 1,673 students have registered for at least one course, and 1,652 have at least 12 hours (three courses), a full course load. This means we're likely to have fewer than 10% of our students studying from off-campus. That is good for our budget, and just as importantly it indicates that students and their families have confidence in our strategy.

We are communicating the seriousness of the current situation to our students. We are limiting their gatherings to 10 after they arrive, at least through Feb. 7. This will give us an opportunity to consider the positivity rate of our onboard testing as we begin to reestablish the bubble. So gatherings will be limited to 10 to start, and we will consider increasing that number as a decision informed by our surveillance testing.

Testing

As you know, employee pre-semester testing was last week. It was an opportunity to stress-test the new Sewanee Molecular Diagnostics Laboratory with some at-scale testing. They are pooling samples, which is a little more complicated logistically, but saves time in the long run and reduces our cost. In pooling samples, they combine up to four samples into one test. If that combined sample is negative, all four people are negative for COVID-19. If the combined sample is positive for COVID-19, the four individual samples are retested to identify the positive person or persons.

We tested 600 employees and 72 students last week with two positive results. That is a 0.3% positivity rate. As students arrive in the next several days from all over the country, we'll be keeping a close eye on that positivity rate. As we did in the fall, we will isolate those with the virus, or recently exposed to it, from our population. We'll assess the positivity rate during onboarding. If necessary, we are prepared to increase student surveillance testing during the first two weeks of the semester to help ensure that we start off the spring as virus-free as possible. You can keep track of the University's testing results on our [Daily COVID-19 dashboard](#), which is updated each morning.

Don't forget the 3W's remain our most powerful tool to combat the spread of this disease. As the number of cases continues to rise in our region, please remember to practice the 3W's: [Wear](#)

[your mask](#). Wash your hands. Watch your distance. It's important to follow good [COVID-19 protocols](#) both on campus *and off campus*, and [to continue to limit your social interactions](#).

Remember that employees who are experiencing COVID-19 symptoms and who are working on campus may request to be tested by our team by calling 931.598.1010 (please do not show up at the Fowler test site unannounced). Employees who receive positive test results must work with their primary care providers to determine how to proceed and must follow University policies related to COVID-19 and sick leave.

From My Perspective

The tents really do make me happy. They are a sign that the students are returning and physical evidence of our resilience as an institution. There is no doubt that the pandemic situation is much worse than it was in August, but our strategy was sound and we've made some changes and improvements. I am cautiously optimistic that we will once again make it through the semester... one week at a time.

Sincerely,

Nancy Berner

Provost