

December 15, 2021

Dear Colleagues,

The thing that is top of mind for many of us right now is the upcoming leadership transition. As I believe Board of Regents Chair Reid Funston and Chancellor Rob Skirving made clear [in their email last week](#), my appointment as vice-chancellor pro tempore was made in accordance with the University's ordinances and is just what it sounds like—temporary. The Board of Regents is still in the process of outlining the next steps in the transition. In the meantime, I will assume the role of vice-chancellor pro tempore next week. You may submit questions about the transition to the Regents [using this form](#).

The Board of Regents also confirmed its commitment to the University's priorities. They are:

- **Student Success:** Help more students flourish and improve student retention.
- **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion:** Make Sewanee a more vibrant, equitable community where all people feel that they belong.
- **Economic Development and Domain Stewardship:** Enhance the livelihood of the community, steward the natural resources of the Domain, and develop new revenue streams for the University.
- **Curricular Renewal and Innovation:** Reform the curriculum in order to enhance high-impact practices, appeal to the changing student population, and efficiently use resources.

Thus, the Strategic Planning Committee is continuing its work on these priorities. We knew that completing the strategic planning process in a single year was going to be ambitious, and this year has been anything but normal. We have decided to extend the time period for the strategic planning process through October 2022. This extension will allow everyone to take a much-needed breather during the holiday break. It also affords the subcommittees an additional three months to gather and analyze data, and offers opportunity for the additional consultation with all stakeholders that is crucial to crafting an excellent strategic plan.

COVID-19 Updates

Omicron variant: The [Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#) continues to recommend vaccination, including boosters for those eligible, to protect against severe COVID-19 disease. Research on the Omicron variant is in the very early stages, but [some studies show](#) that receiving a booster provides significant protection against Omicron. [Dr. Anthony Fauci has said](#), "... if you want to be optimally protected, you really should get a booster. It's the optimal care." You can find local vaccination sites at the [vaccine.gov website](#).

The University strongly encourages all eligible students, faculty, and staff to receive a COVID-19 vaccination booster shot as soon as possible. You are encouraged to voluntarily report your booster record in [our database](#). This is a HIPAA-compliant survey that requires the date you

completed your vaccination series, Banner ID, and a photo of your CDC-issued vaccination record card. If you have trouble completing the survey or submitting your documentation, please contact philip.loyd@sewanee.edu. Knowing the number of our campus community members who have received their booster shots will help us to understand the risk level within our campus community and inform our decisions moving forward.

Just as with the Delta variant, the Sewanee Molecular Diagnostics Laboratory would be able to determine if a positive COVID-19 case *might* be caused by the Omicron variant by sequencing certain viral genes. Because the lab doesn't have the ability to sequence the entire viral genome, it cannot say with 100% certainty that a variant is either the Delta or Omicron variant. As a laboratory that uses a COVID-19 test that would show a specific indicator of the Omicron variant, the lab has been asked by the CDC to inform state or local public health laboratories of any such test results, potentially for follow-up sequencing of the specimen.

Spring semester: Over the break, we will continue to monitor developments with the pandemic and pay careful attention to any new information regarding the Omicron variant. I plan for us to have a consultation in early January with both [Dr. Paul Erwin, C'79](#), and [Dr. Walter Merrill, C'70](#), to benefit from their insights. At present, we do not plan to change any of our COVID-19 protocols for the spring semester—but we should remain flexible, given the evolution of this disease. We will continue to rely on masking and vaccination, and we strongly encourage all students, faculty, and staff to get their boosters as soon as they are able.

The [University's masking policy](#) will stay in effect as we come back together in January. Masking indoors will continue to be required because the [CDC continues to recommend](#) that both [fully vaccinated](#) and [unvaccinated](#) people wear masks indoors when in areas of the country with “substantial” or “high” transmission of COVID-19. Three counties constitute our area of concern and, according to the CDC, [Franklin, Marion, and Grundy counties continue to meet those conditions](#). For the most up-to-date information, check the [University's COVID-19 website](#) and look for email announcements.

We'll be asking the students to be tested for COVID-19 one to three days before they return to campus, and to delay their return to campus if they have a positive test result. It is possible we will see a temporary spike in breakthrough cases on campus as we come back together, similar to the spike we saw early in the fall semester. As in the fall, students who test positive will be advised to isolate in place and work with their faculty to arrange to keep up with their classes. Students will continue to be able to make an appointment for testing with University Health Service, which will have increased capacity in the spring. In addition, UHS received 500 home test kits from the Tennessee Department of Health; they are partnering with Residential Life and Sewanee Dining so students may access the tests outside of normal business hours. The state will continue to restock our supply as needed.

Other University News

New cell tower: Most of you will recall that after much discussion and a review of our options, the University decided in 2020 to locate a new cell tower behind the home stands in the tailgate area of Harris Stadium (the football stadium). The new cell tower now has been going up, and construction on it is estimated to be complete in mid-January. Verizon will be the tower's initial

cell provider; other providers are expected to install later. We do not have a timeline yet from Verizon for the placement of its equipment and its cell service going live. Verizon representatives will look at the site after construction is complete; the next update will likely come after that, in late January/early February. In addition to opening up other service options for students and residents, the new tower also will improve emergency communications on the Domain and off the bluff, as Vogue Towers (the tower's owner) will provide free space on the tower to Franklin County EMS.

Sincerely,

Nancy