

COVID ADVISORY #3
RETURN TO CAMPUS FALL 2021
May 13, 2021

Colleagues:

Last week I wrote to you about the Association's perspective on the University's return to campus plans. As I noted then, the Association has not been invited to comment on the return to campus since the University prefers to work with Deans and Chairs as managers. However, over the past week, we have heard directly about your concerns related to the University's plans. We will voice those to senior administrators to advocate for faculty as opportunities arise and this advisory provides an update on where matters sit today.

Faculty deeply concerned about Return to Work Plans

Let me thank nearly 140 members who have written to me or used the MRFA comment card to express their concerns about the University's plans to return to in-person teaching in Fall 2021. Despite a strong desire to return to classroom teaching, many members continue to express reservations about the University's stated intention to deliver between 70 to 80 percent of Fall classes in person.

These reservations tend to concentrate in six broad areas including:

- The extent to which vaccinations will be widely taken up by all Albertans, and especially among students, and the health implications for all faculty and particularly for those who have underlying medical conditions or live with people who have medical conditions susceptible to the COVID-19. Some faculty think vaccine passports should be required.
- Concerns around virus transmission in the classroom, in campus hallways and in public spaces. Many expressed additional concern about viral transmission (to faculty and students) on public transit.
- Classroom safety issues related to non-compliance around room ventilation systems, mask wearing protocols, social distancing requirements and cleaning protocols.
- The kinds of safety measures the University plans to implement in terms of screens around lectures, provision of cleaning supplies, PPE and traffic flow in and out of classrooms and public areas.
- The level of support the university plans to offer all faculty who have to engage in both remote delivery and in-person delivery on the same day. This concern is especially pertinent to contract academic faculty who often share both space and computers.
- There is much confusion about how the decisions regarding the ratio of remote to in-person delivery and about how decisions will be made about specific courses. There are many concerns about faculty workload in the Fall 2021 related to these decisions.

So far, the University has stated that AHS regulations will govern many decisions about the return to campus. And to sure, some recent presentations indicate that the University plans to address some of the issues identified above. For example, the University does plan to ensure that traffic is managed in public areas, and it will address contract faculty's need for safe spaces to do their work. Preparations are also being made to ensure that cleaning/disinfectants are available in classrooms. There have been some assurances that faculty can rely on campus security to deal with disruptive students who refuse to wear masks. Given the level of anxiety in the comments, however, the Association has suggested that

the University must do a better job in messaging these concerns. To be clear, like other Associations across the country, the MRFA would prefer to capture these commitments in writing.

Safe Workplace Concerns

We have consulted with the Association's legal counsel with respect to the plans to return to campus. Since the Collective Agreement is silent on mode of delivery, the percentage of classes that offered via remote delivery is one where Deans have considerable decision making power. That said, those who have the need for accommodations for medical or family status reasons should follow the processes for applying for such accommodations. Although Administration identified May 10 as deadline to apply for accommodation, the Association clarified that this deadline was for planning and that any new applications will be processed as quickly possible. Contact the Association if you experience any resistance in your requested accommodation.

In terms of safe workplace legislation, arbitrators have not yet upheld claims that a workplace is unsafe due to the presence of COVID-19, even in the case of meat packing plants. However, our legal counsel advises that cases are handled on a case-by-case basis and individual faculty may find a specific classroom/situation to be unsafe. If/when this occurs, there is a specific process workers must follow to ensure they are not open for disciplinary measures.

In response to this information, the Association will ensure that all faculty are fully informed about how to respond to an unsafe work site. More information regarding this will be forthcoming. We will also be monitoring safety protocols to ensure they accord with Article 22.2 and the institution's requirement to provide a safe and healthy workplace. Meanwhile, I encourage all members to get vaccinated as one way to stay safe when we return to campus.

What is the Association Doing Now?

Currently, the Association is pressing the administration for more open lines of communication to allow for more consultation and faculty input. Specifically, the MRFA has

- Requested the Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee (JOHSC) to meet so that the JOSCH can consider the University's return to work plans and offer advice.
- Asked the University for another meeting of the Academic Working Group prior to its planned meeting May 28.
- Requested a full discussion of matters related academic issues in Return to Work Plan at the GFC Meeting.
- Requested a meeting with senior administration to discuss the return to campus plans and to share faculty concerns directly with them.
- Support efforts to have vaccination clinics on campus
- Encourage all members to get vaccinated.

Finally, we have set aside time at the Annual General Meeting to discuss the return to campus plans. We welcome your views there and look forward to taking directions on next steps. Do stay safe and again, I encourage you to get vaccinated when you can.