

Colleagues

Many more of us resume in-person teaching today. It's a day with mixed emotions and thoughts. I have heard from members of the Students Association and from colleagues how happy and excited students are to be on campus. I know many faculty have also been waiting for this moment. However, I am also aware that the return to campus also provokes a sense of trepidation, some anxiety and deep concern, especially as the cases of COVID-19 continue to increase and the province continues to resist taking any leadership role in managing the pandemic. There are continuing questions and concerns about the extent to which the campus offers a safe and healthy workplace. I address these below.

Where are we today?

We recognize that the University continues to navigate the challenges of the pandemic and that we all share the goal of ensuring that we have a safe and healthy campus. We acknowledge the work that has gone into the Instructor Toolkit, the implementation of mandatory masking and the creation of a rapid testing program.

However, as of today, the Executive Board believes that the University is still some distance from that shared goal, especially as the details of the rapid testing program have become available. We are concerned that the rapid testing program currently requires no proof to accompany vaccine declarations. We are particularly concerned that rapid testing will not begin today but rather on Monday September 13, two days *after* classes start. The Association has also stressed the importance of a robust audit process to start immediately when rapid testing begins. Yet, the University confirm yesterday that audits will not commence until after the rapid testing program is fully underway. Relying on attestations without a rigorous audit in place makes the declarations even less useful and does not create a safer workplace.

The Association's Stance

Since August 16, the Association has held the best approach to ensuring a safe and healthy campus is through a vaccine mandate that makes accommodations where appropriate under human rights and medical exemptions. We have also stated that those unable or unwilling to be vaccinated should be allowed to work remotely or to submit negative tests results. The University chose instead to follow other universities and create a rapid testing program with opt outs for those who are fully vaccinated.

We believe that the current rapid testing plan has significant flaws that can be addressed should the University adopt the approach taken at the University of Lethbridge. In that approach, there is a downloadable mobile app, which display a green or red QR code to indicate whether an individual is compliant or not. Professors can request that students show their QR codes to ensure they are safe to be on campus. At a minimum, the Association is pressing for a rapid testing program with these features. We are also demanding that the University provide more information including real-time information about vaccination rates, test results and outcomes should there be outbreaks so that we can assess our workplace safety.

Given the current situation, the Association has written to the President outlining a set of stronger measures we believe are required to ensure a safe and healthy workplace. The MRU Coalition has also spoken about the need to take further actions. The Association is also prepared to insist that the University consider following the Alberta University of the Arts and take a two-week pause in the return

to campus plans to implement these stronger measures. We will ask that in-person courses be delivered remotely during this period.

What else is the Association Doing?

Following the recommendation of the provincial government to continue to work from home where possible, some MRFA staff are working remotely. We also continue measures to reduce our footprint on campus including holding all MRFA meetings on-line until January. The Faculty Centre operations remain suspended.

Other ways we continue to work to support you during this return to campus over the Fall semester include:

- Creation of a web-page with a range of resources for you to access in place, including links to the Instructor Toolkit, links to research about the pandemic and tips about teaching
- Compilation of information related to refusing unsafe work
- Creation of FAQ page to answers questions you have asked. This page is frequently updated.

The MRU Coalition has added its voice to the call for more real time information about vaccinations, test results and outcomes, to make rapid testing easily available to employees on campus and to address gaps in communication. While the Associations do diverge on some return to campus questions, on these points, we agree. I thank the Students Association and the Staff Association for finding common ground.

We have also written a letter to the Minister of Advanced Education protesting the Alberta government's handling of the return to campus issues. By recommending that all other workers remain working from home while insisting that campuses return to normal, the provincial government has abdicated its responsibility to the post secondary sector by demonstrating a confusing approach to the most severe wave of this pandemic. We have demanded that the Minister show leadership and provide a vaccine mandate or passport.

Finally, I want to reassure you that the Board continues to work to ensure that we have a safe and healthy workplace so that we can safely be on campus and do the work we want to do.