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DATE: September 13, 2021

TO: Ed Seidel
President, University of Wyoming

FROM: Presidential COVID Advisory Group

RE: Final Recommendations for addressing COVID-19

The Presidential COVID Advisory Group has communicated on a regular basis since late August, and provided you with preliminary recommendations as well as weekly reports containing COVID data from the campus, county, state, and national levels. The COVID Advisory Group is submitting the following final recommendations for your consideration.

Regarding Charge #1: *Develop mandatory education program content regarding the COVID-19 virus and vaccine information. This education program will be required for all employees and students early in the semester and will be strictly enforced.*

RECOMMENDATION

Whereas the UW had previously required a review of COVID-19 content that was presented in a PowerPoint format, the Advisory Group recommends that members of its group and other experts in the UW community produce an **educational video**, using input from international experts on COVID-19 along with UW team members, making the video personalized to UW. The video should be made with the intent of positioning UW to become a trusted source of COVID-19 information to campus. It will present science-based information regarding the SARS-CoV-2, vaccines, as well as masking and other mitigation strategies. The educational video should be mandated for all employees and students, regardless of vaccination status.

To date, 5 experts have recorded video segments regarding COVID safety and COVID vaccines with Institutional Marketing; editing will begin shortly. The video will be available by the last week of September.

Regarding Charge #2:

Building on the existing contingency plan in the Fall 2021 COVID Plan, develop mitigation and intervention strategies, including possible continued masking requirements considering data including case numbers, testing prevalence and vaccine uptake. The Board of Trustees will be reconsidering the indoor face covering requirement at the September Board of Trustees meeting.

Current COVID Data

UW COVID HUB Data

	Sept 3 thru 6	Sept 7 thru 9
New Cases	6 (3 students)	25 (24 students)
Active Cases	31	50
Hospitalizations	0	0

ANALYSIS: There is a significant increase in reported New Cases over the last 3 days compared to the previous 4 days.

Campus COVID Testing Protocol - 3% Random Testing									
	Campus Population	Invited to Test	Total Tested	% of Population Tested	Total Opt-Out of Testing	Response Rate (tested and opt-out)	COVID Positives Detected	Population Sample Prevalence	Adjusted Sample Prevalence*
July 4-10, 2021	5462	164	47	0.86%	84	2.40%	0	0.00%	0.00%
July 11-17, 2021	5500	164	62	1.13%	72	2.44%	0	0.00%	0.00%
July 18-24, 2021	5512	165	62	1.12%	72	2.43%	0	0.00%	0.00%
July 25-31, 2021	5485	164	74	1.35%	75	2.72%	2	1.34%	2.70%
August 1-7, 2021	5554	166	137	2.47%	79	3.89%	3	1.39%	2.19%
August 8-14, 2021	5572	223	296	5.31%	54	6.28%	2	0.57%	0.68%

Fall 2021 Pre-Return Testing 8/15 - 8/28							
	Campus Population	Invited to Test	Total Tested through Surv & Confirm	% of Population Tested		Number of positives	Estimated Population Sample Prevalence
Surveillance	12,125	12,125	9296	76.67%	Presumed Positives:	111	1.19%
Confirmatory			940		Actual Positives:	70	1.21%
TOTAL	12,125	12,125	10,236	84.42%			

Campus COVID Testing Protocol - 3% Random Testing									
Week	Campus Population	Invited to Test	Total Tested	% of Population Tested	Total Opt-Out of Testing	Response Rate (tested and opt-out)	COVID Positives Detected	Population Sample Prevalence	Adjusted Sample Prevalence*
August 29 - Sept 4	12,423	496	435	3.50%	49	3.90%	14	2.89%	3.22%
Sept 5 - Sept 11	12,380	491	340	2.75%	46	3.12%	5	1.30%	1.47%

*During most of the summer, individuals who had received a COVID vaccination could opt out of COVID testing, with the assumption being that these individuals would test negative. The “opt-out” group was added into the total sample being tested to calculate the Population Sample Prevalence. However, with growing evidence that “breakthrough cases” are more prevalent than originally suspected, the **Adjusted Sample Prevalence** has been added. This percentage does NOT include the number of individuals who opted out of testing.

ANALYSIS: There is a significant increase in the Sample Prevalence percentage during the week of August 29th compared to the most recent week in which random testing was conducted. The Sample Prevalence percentage decreased last week, but it is too early to identify a trend in these data alone.

Student Health Services reports seeing a dramatic increase in students who are reporting symptoms consistent with COVID-19 during the week of September 6.

State of Wyoming

New COVID Cases, (9/8):	348 Confirmed, 185 probable
Active Cases (as of 9/8):	2,669 confirmed, 1,365 probable
Total Hospitalizations (as of 9/8):	233 (most since 12/2/20)

County-by-County Data provided at the end of this document – Albany County currently showing HIGH transmission levels

Laramie County School District: Adopted a mask requirement policy this week. Currently 1,000 students in quarantine

Albany County School District: School Board voted to extent universal mask requirement for K-12 through 10/15/21

10 hospitals in Wyoming are at maximum capacity and having difficulties making transfers to hospitals out of state

RECOMMENDATION

1. **It is recommended that the current masking requirement be extended through the end of Fall semester 2021.** This recommendation is based on the following:
 - a. the significant increase in confirmed COVID cases and prevalence percentage within the UW community since the beginning of the semester
 - b. the continued increase in COVID prevalence state-wide
 - c. Albany County currently shows HIGH transmission levels of COVID
 - d. the low vaccination rate within Albany County and the state of Wyoming

Faculty and students desire to have a safe teaching environment. The UW should strive to do everything possible to continue in-person instruction for this academic year. Discontinuing a mask requirement increases the potential for the UW to be faced with a surge in COVID cases—and shutting down prior to the end of the Fall semester.

This recommendation could be revisited by UW Administration and/or the UW Board of Trustees later in the Fall semester if a) the Albany County transmission rate falls into the Low Transmission level category (light green) and b) 70% of the eligible Albany county residents and 75% of the UW-Laramie community are vaccinated. However, data including COVID cases, hospitalizations, and healthcare infrastructure should also be considered before discontinuing the current mask requirement policy.

2. If consideration is being given to returning to more robust COVID testing on campus for Spring semester 2022, that decision should be made before October 1 in consultation with the COVID Testing Group.

It is understandable that due to supply issues, it has been necessary to scale back on-campus testing. However, if the current trend in case prevalence continues, it may be advisable to offer more extensive testing during the Spring semester, if it is feasible to do so.

Regarding Charge #3: *Enhance communications that will lead to increased compliance with/participation in COVID-19 mitigation strategies.*

Wyoming is one of the most vaccine hesitant states in the country, with a particularly high skepticism towards government authorities. Further, in general, those most enthusiastic about the vaccine have already been vaccinated. In Wyoming, it is therefore particularly difficult to achieve a meaningful increase in the willingness to vaccinate with more generic scientific information about the virus or benefits from protective behavior (vaccines, mask wearing, physical/social distancing). However, communication with more potent messaging is more likely to have an effect, such as information about vaccination incentives, and communication that activates peer pressure and informs about behavior amongst role models. To reach as many as possible, it is important to communicate such messages via multiple channels, on and off campus.

The needs for communication about vaccines and mask wearing differ. Vaccination is voluntary and the most effective protective behavior, while mask wearing is mandatory and less effective in preventing sickness from the coronavirus. Communication about vaccines therefore needs to focus on messaging that encourages people to *choose* to get vaccinated, while the UW community primarily needs to be made aware, and continuously reminded, of the mask mandate and its enforcement. It is also important that policies on mask wearing do not reduce the perceived urgency to get vaccinated. Here, communication plays an important role – we need to keep vigorously encouraging vaccinations.

Inventory of current and planned communication at UW

Communication about vaccines:

- High volume of messages and communication, primarily about vaccinations and vaccine incentives programs.
- The communication uses a variety of channels – e.g., UW’s homepage, social media (Instagram/Facebook), emails to students, text messages to students, flyers, digital board slides at sporting events.
- The communication uses multiple types of messages and mediums – peer pressure from fellow students (“I got vaccinated...”) and making salient the incentives programs, via written messages and videos.
- Forthcoming vaccine communication initiative: disseminating the material from the Albany County Vaccine Project to the UW community. These materials include incentives programs, flyers, and promo videos with primary care providers (the most trusted source for covid vaccine information).

- Forthcoming vaccine communication initiative: engage the football team in stories and other social media efforts.

Communication about mandated mask wearing:

- The mask wearing mandate is communicated through multiple channels, including in physical spaces and on social media.
- Guidelines on how faculty may enforce the mask mandate in a non-confrontational way have been sent to faculty.

RECOMMENDATION

1. Increase compliance with/participation in COVID-19 mitigation strategies using the following strategies:

a. *Information sheet to faculty*

A main concern with communication in general is that it might not reach its target. Oftentimes those who are most unwilling to change their behavior are also those most likely to avoid communication that encourages behavioral change. It is therefore important to find ways to communicate that minimizes the opportunity for information avoidance. Further, students are both the largest group on campus and the group with the lowest vaccination rate, such that UW likely wants to prioritize initiatives that reach students. Classrooms offer an ideal context to gently inform students about protective behavior and nudge them towards increased compliance.

We propose a **1-page information sheet** (see example below) that faculty are encouraged to communicate in class. It contains:

- brief statement that classes might be disrupted if we do not undertake protective behavior
- brief facts about the benefits from mask wearing, hand hygiene and vaccines
- information about vaccine clinics
- nudge to report vaccination status
- information about incentives programs at UW and in Albany County
- a nudge to discuss the vaccination decision with health care provider (primary care providers are the most trusted source, and they are likely to be pro vaccines. Also, there has been a large push in our community for providers to help people overcome misinformation about vaccines).

The information sheet is helpful since it builds on numerous messages and briefly summarizes multiple initiatives aimed to encourage protective behavior. It might therefore also be beneficial to disseminate its content through channels other than the classroom.

When drafting the information sheet, we have taken care to provide as much of practical information as possible, while minimizing information that might be perceived as “lecturing on vaccines.” In the event that a faculty member has very vaccine skeptical students in the classroom, we aim to minimize the risk that any

vaccine skepticism spills over to skepticism of the messenger, and therefore undermines the authority of the faculty in the classroom.

Draft information sheet to be communicated in classrooms:

- We are all excited to be back in the classroom. For all of us to stay safe, and to minimize disruptions to our classes from people getting sick (instructors or students), it is **important to take precautions against COVID-19**.
- It helps that we are all **wearing masks**. Another way to reduce the spread of the virus is **good hand hygiene**. It really makes a difference. If you forget your mask or to wash your hands, there are **stations all over campus with masks and hand sanitizers**.
- The most effective way to stay safe is to **get vaccinated**. **You can get vaccinated for free** at Walmart, Walgreens, Pole Mountain Pharmacy, Ridley's, Safeway, Stitches Acute Care, Laramie Pediatrics, Albany Community Health Clinic, Ivinson Medical Group, the Downtown Clinic and Family Physicians of Laramie. The vaccine will soon be available at UW Student Health, and the UW will also be offering large-scale vaccine clinics periodically. **If in doubt whether getting vaccinated is the right choice for you, talk to your health care provider or Student Health at UW.**
- If you are a resident of Albany County, you get **\$25-\$50 gift cards for getting vaccinated**, as long as supply lasts! These gift cards (one \$25 gift card for each dose of Pfizer and Moderna, and two \$25 gift cards for J&J) are available at any off campus COVID-19 vaccine provider in Albany County, e.g., see list above.
- Don't forget to **report if you are vaccinated**. Everyone who reports their vaccination (whether you got vaccinated in the spring or more recently) are eligible to enter into both the UW and Albany County **lotteries (for free!), with fantastic prizes** (up to \$4,500 in tuition and fees, \$1,000-2,500 in cash, electronic devices, etc). Reporting your vaccine status is easy -- go to <http://patientportal.uwyo.edu> (UW register), and <https://cityoflaramie.org/1185/Vaccine-Project> (Albany County register).

2. Information changes and people are forgetful. We therefore also propose that:

- Faculty repeatedly **remind students of where to get vaccinated and inform students about incentives programs** from UW and Albany County Vaccine throughout the semester. To facilitate this task for faculty, they should be provided updated information similar to the one found in the above example information sheet.
- UW communication (faculty) **remind the UW community (students) of the mask mandate** and the reasons why it is in place.

- Faculty are **reminded of how to encourage/enforce mask wearing in their classrooms in a non-confrontational way** (i.e., are re-sent the message they already received in this regard, in 2-3 weeks time, and perhaps another few times during the semester).