

Wabash.

January 25, 2021

To: Wabash Community
From: President Scott Feller and Dr. Ann Taylor
Re: Community Update – Week 1

Welcome back! While in many ways day one of spring semester classes resembles the fall semester – masks, physical distance, and lots of signs – there are substantial differences. We have a greater understanding of the ways we must adapt our teaching, learning, and living to the realities of the pandemic. Of course, we are also fatigued by this routine. We began the fall semester anxious to be back together; we begin the spring anxious to be back to normal.

Vaccination will help us get to normal, but we anticipate most people on campus will not be eligible to receive it before the end of the semester. While predicting the course of the pandemic has been notoriously difficult, we are encouraged by several observations and predictions in a [mid-January report](#) from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), an independent global health research center at the University of Washington, and data from [the Indiana State Department of Health](#):

- Mobility trends, measured by cellular phone and credit card transaction data, have been steadily declining in Indiana since mid- to late-October and are lower than most states.
- The proportion of Hoosiers wearing masks has increased from about 40% in the summer to 70-75% now, though Indiana is still below the national average and three of four bordering states.
- The effective reproduction number, R_t , has gone below one for Indiana, suggesting each case is generating less than one additional case. While estimates of R_t vary (and its interpretation is not straightforward), it is clear that Indiana is lower than most states and that the reproduction number has been in decline for weeks. It is worth noting that a driver of the R_t reduction is the estimate that a significant number of Indiana residents have already been infected.
- Indiana's COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and death rates are declining and are at lower levels than when we completed the fall semester.

To be clear, the possibility of the pandemic worsening before the effects of vaccination take hold remains very real, especially given the uncertainty around new variants and individual behaviors. This is especially true on college campuses, where the combination of very few vaccinated individuals and congregate living conditions makes for a worst-case scenario if masking and distancing are not practiced faithfully. We must all be vigilant about wearing masks, washing hands, and watching distance. Even if you have previously had COVID-19 or have been vaccinated, these guidelines still apply.

But positive trends and information from fall debriefing sessions have motivated us to develop tentative plans for less restrictive operations should conditions continue to improve. We plan to implement a color code system from red (most restrictive) through orange and yellow to blue (least restrictive) that will guide the level of activity on campus on a weekly basis.

The status will determine our approach to things such as fans at athletic contests, guests on campus, event procedures, and official travel. We began discussions of the guidelines with several offices and student leaders last week, and will solicit feedback from the APC and Student Senate this week with hopes of finalizing guidelines next week.

Our surveillance testing so far has been a combination of CVS Return Ready results and on-campus testing of student-athletes last week with positivity rates of 2.9% and 1.5%, respectively. We made a major advance in our test, trace, and isolate program last week with the delivery of more than 10,000 rapid, antigen-based test kits to supplement our supply of PCR-based tests. We have moved our testing site indoors, and are learning how to use the antigen tests and developing the systems to meet reporting requirements. This week we will carry out our largest surveillance test sample of the year, with hopes of expanding the program in the coming weeks to 100% weekly coverage of the student body.

We are glad to be #WabashTogether again. As we gather to start the spring semester, we ask you to extend grace to one another and #BuildTheBrotherhood. As we were reminded in the [interview with Dr. Chris Bojrab](#), mental health is challenging in normal years, let alone in a pandemic. Please care for your physical and mental health (which are linked), reach out if you need help, take care of each other, and offer understanding in difficult conversations. By working together, supporting each other, and doing our individual best, we can make it through this challenging semester.

With gratitude for you and all you bring to campus,

President Scott Feller

Ann Taylor, Special Assistant to the President for COVID Response and Planning