

Wabash.

October 26, 2020

To: Wabash Community
From: President Scott Feller and Dr. Ann Taylor
Re: Community Update: Week 12

We are all feeling pandemic fatigue – it seems to be gripping our entire nation. Combining the intensity of a rigorous academic semester, anxiety around a divisive election, and the work to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 makes us feel like we are hitting the wall at mile 18 in a marathon. Wabash’s strong alumni network is built on the relationships students forged on campus with other students, faculty, coaches, and staff. All of us on campus right now need to realize that strong relationships are built by both reaching out to others and being vulnerable. So, ask yourself, “Who can I check on today?”

We are also acutely aware of the mental health challenges of our situation and place high priority on it in our planning and execution. We recognize that the burdens are heavy this semester, and remind students they are welcome at the Counseling Center and the many programs it sponsors.

We suspect the entire campus approached last week’s surveillance testing with trepidation. The very large random sample resulted in a 2.7% positivity rate, a substantial improvement from the prior week. Less encouraging was the identification of four additional positive cases from students who exhibited symptoms. Last week we gained the ability to do rapid testing of students who have symptoms suggestive of COVID-19. Rapid testing will help with earlier diagnosis and allow us to initiate contact tracing faster; previously we would have had to wait 36-48 hours for test results to come back. The cluster of symptomatic cases last week is one more example of why monitoring your health daily through the COVID Pass app is critically important.

While we remain very concerned about COVID-19 transmission on campus, we are fortunate that all but one case (both symptomatic and asymptomatic) can be connected. As always, positive cases have been isolated and their close contacts quarantined. Additional students who were associated by living unit with these cases have been scheduled for testing today and their COVID Pass status has been turned red until their results are back.

This is a good illustration of the “order of operations” for our test, trace, isolate program. When a positive test is obtained, the first priority is to isolate the student. This happens in a matter of hours, seven days a week. Next, we identify his close contacts and quarantine them. That typically involves multiple communications with multiple students, more logistical arrangements, and takes a day or so (less if working a single case, more if dealing with several simultaneous results). Finally, we look for patterns that might call for customized, targeted mitigation strategies. This involves examining the looser connections among living units, clubs and activities, trends over time, and other data streams

such as the COVID Pass app. Sometimes this leads to watchful waiting and at other times to a round of targeted surveillance testing. It always involves conversation with our local health department, ambiguous timelines, and tough decisions. We have reported to you several instances when this process led to a housing unit entering quarantine or being locked down while additional data is obtained, but there have been a number of times when additional testing or tracing turned up nothing.

We have heard a lot of different people say, “This isn’t what the college experience is supposed to be.” It is true that this semester looks very different. We acknowledge your disappointment and we feel it, too. We all had goals and desires for this year and the future. COVID-19 has thrown a wrench in those plans. We can’t wish away COVID-19, and we can’t ignore it either. Learning to cope with disappointment and mourn our losses are important life skills.

Now is a good time for everyone to re-evaluate their goals and desires, and to find ways to either modify them or achieve them in different ways. Every generation has had its challenges, and developing resilience, tenacity, patience, and hope are an important part of the college experience. Just like we become physically stronger by lifting heavy weights, difficult times can help us become emotionally and spiritually stronger. Weightlifters spot each other, and we ask the same of you this week: bear one another’s burdens and focus on strengthening our community.

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