

Wabash.

August 31, 2020

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

THANK YOU! We appreciate the encouraging words that we have received over the past week from students, parents, faculty, and staff. But even more, thanks for your investment of challenging work to make this semester of residential education possible. We know that students are working hard to adapt to very different operations, faculty are shifting teaching modes and content to meet student needs, and staff are using their talents and abilities to do their work differently, and in some cases, to do very different work.

We both were moved deeply this week by conversations with students about their learning experience on campus and we hope that you are hearing about special moments that can sustain us during difficult times. On Tuesday, Ann had a student who had an “aha” moment as he worked through his data analysis on Excel saying, “Why has no one showed me this before?” His excitement made all of the rest of this week worth it.

We continue random surveillance testing of on-campus students. The test result return time is roughly 48 hours, and we have received a positivity rate of 2.5% for our random surveillance testing. The cases identified through this screening were quickly isolated and their close contacts traced and quarantined. It is important to note that the only positive results from the random testing were individuals from two living units, which also had cases discovered in the earlier random surveillance testing. As we wrote on Wednesday, we responded by initiating a round of targeted surveillance testing of all occupants in those living units on Thursday. Unfortunately, there were multiple cases in both living units and a positivity rate of 13.5%. Nearly every student who tested positive was asymptomatic, which is consistent with observations on COVID in this age group. Feeling fine is not an excuse for disregarding health practices!

Students with a positive test result and their close contacts have been isolated and quarantined, respectively. Additionally, because of the high positivity rate, the remaining occupants are quarantining in their living unit and will be retested at least once. (Some students who previously tested positive and have been released by doctors are expected to be in class.) While this means that over 10% of our students will be doing coursework virtually or remotely, at this point we must act decisively. We are focusing on our community’s health and we believe this will be an effective move to arrest the spread of the virus. We must be vigilant because our isolation and quarantine facilities are both reaching capacity, which will hinder our ability to continue housing students on campus.

We are not alone in dealing with the challenge of communal living during the COVID pandemic. News reports from both IU and Purdue indicate similar situations. Our hope is that the rapid mass testing last week at the first detection of the disease, and the aggressive isolation and quarantine of residents, will pay off, though nothing is guaranteed. We are testing a larger percentage of our student body than most colleges and universities in Indiana (perhaps all) to increase the odds that we detect asymptomatic cases before they spread to multiple individuals. We also believe that our highly residential nature is helping us move faster since larger institutions have had challenges responding to poor public health practices by students living off campus.

People are asking what metric will be used to determine a change in operations at Wabash, e.g., moving to all virtual courses or an end to residential education. The positivity rate of surveillance testing is certainly a key metric. But not all cases are equally concerning. For example, cases localized in a particular student group or living unit leave more opportunities for mitigation than dispersed cases. Relatedly, the ability to contact trace a case back to a known positive individual is an important factor. Finally, availability of resources, both personnel and space to isolate and quarantine students, will have a huge impact on any decision.

Unlike the spring, we have systems in place to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 on campus. Our systems have proven to work, but our capacity is limited. Consequently, we anticipate that if a change in operations is necessary, there will be intermediate steps between full operation and sending all students home. The action of quarantining two living units is an example of this.

So, what can YOU as an individual do? First, find opportunities to see the good. Catch someone wearing their mask correctly and thank them. Thank someone who has stepped into a new or different role. Now is a great time for random acts of kindness. Second, we ask that everyone examine their daily routine and ask if it involves exceeding the guidelines for physical distancing. If you are too close for too long you must find ways to change your habits. By the time that positive cases are detected in your area, it will be too late.

With gratitude for you and all you bring to campus,

President Scott Feller

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