



February 17, 2022

To: The Wabash Community
From: President Feller
Re: Moving to Instructor Choice Masking

I suspect many of you are closely following the trajectory of the Omicron surge. Some are watching for hopeful signs that the effect of this massive wave of infections will strengthen the immunity wall to such an extent that we may enter a new phase in the pandemic. Some are looking for worrisome signs of new variants (or sub-variants) that might reverse the dramatic decline in infections over the past month. And still others have chosen not to monitor every twist and turn in the COVID saga, and are more than ready to move to a point where we don't have to organize our lives around the virus.

All three of those approaches are reasonable, and I find myself experiencing each at some point just about every day. While significant uncertainty remains, we will continue to move forward following the data-driven approach that has served us so well. In the 10 days since I last emailed the campus, the data has been encouraging. The seven-day average for cases in Indiana is now down 85% from its peak and is lower than the average during the fall semester. Locally, we have had only one case among Wabash students over the past two weeks.

On Monday, we will take another step away from the restrictions brought on by Omicron by returning to an instructor choice model for masking in classrooms, labs, and related activities. As was true in the fall semester, the decisions of individual faculty must be respected. And we should all work to be sure that the people around us are comfortable in **any** situation that brings two or more people together indoors. While it may feel a bit awkward to ask, I find that the brief chat on masking sets a strong basis for trust and respect that benefits the conversation or activity that follows.

We are continuing down a path that emphasizes personal responsibility over institutional direction. Each of us needs to focus more on "*what should I do?*" instead of "*what am I required I do?*" as COVID-19 mitigation tactics are relaxed. To use myself as an example, I have been wearing my KN95 mask at Lilly Library and Sparks this week – even though it is not required – because last week I traveled off-campus and was in some crowded indoor spaces. But later this week, I plan to relax my personal mitigation practice as the likelihood of having a breakthrough infection drops. And I will always keep my mask with me so that I can put it on if I sense it is appreciated by others.

I will end this message with thanks (again!) to the Healthy Campus Task Force for the recommendations that continue to drive our campus response, which has served us so well for nearly two years. In a sense, each of us has been enrolled in a master class on public health and living humanely. Now, we need to concentrate on taking what we have learned from that course – and the tests we faced individually and communally – and apply our understanding as we navigate the new normal.

