

# Wabash.

August 17, 2021

Dear Wabash,

The football team has been hard at practice for about a week and we are just a few days away from ringing in the Class of 2025. I can sense the excitement that comes with the start of a new year – a familiar feeling I look forward to at the end of each summer. That excitement is typically paired with some level of nervousness. As we enter this year with high expectations for a return to traditional form, both emotions are running a little higher than average.

Just prior to the start of the last academic year, I gave an hour-long video and PowerPoint presentation on what to expect for Fall 2020. Perhaps one sign of progress is that this year I just need to send you an email, though an admittedly long one. Please read this in its entirety.

Last month, I announced that Wabash would operate as a universally vaccinated campus in the coming year. While that choice generated a great deal of work documenting vaccination and communicating with members of our community, it had the advantage – at least at that moment in time – of simplifying operational plans for the semester because the CDC had provided detailed guidance for fully vaccinated campuses.

I am grateful for the gains we have made toward universal vaccination and to everyone who has had a role in this important work. We have vaccination documentation for 98% of staff and faculty, which I believe is the highest by far in the GLCA, and are rapidly shrinking the list of students to process (each of the past two weeks we have halved the list compared to the previous week).

Our evolving understanding of the Delta variant calls for prudence, not panic, in our response and it is critical that we remain focused on effective mitigation tactics. Public health authorities agree that vaccination remains the most important tool in our toolkit, though they emphasize that the greater infectivity of Delta raises the coverage necessary to protect a community. Thankfully, we had already planned for extremely high coverage and we are benefiting from the experience of other institutions in implementing our plan.

I ask that everyone keep health at the top of the list of things that you are thinking about as we begin the year. There are many small choices that each of us can make each day, familiar things like wearing a mask, monitoring our health, and maintaining our distance. But there are also new choices that are only emerging as we transition to a more traditional form. For example, think seriously about the need for face-to-face meetings and prioritize those that have a significant benefit over an email or Zoom. I have moved our Senior Staff meetings back to Zoom and intend to hold the first Faculty Meeting and Staff Community Meeting of the year over Zoom.

We know from the past year of uninterrupted residential education that we have additional mitigation tools that are effective and will play a role in maintaining a healthy campus this year. I hope by now, hand hygiene is second nature to all of us. Our test, trace, isolate work will continue, though surveillance testing will most likely be used strategically rather than universally.

For example, the entire football team (125 student-athletes) was tested upon arrival to campus last week (in addition to pre-return testing of individuals not yet two weeks past vaccination). I am pleased to report that both sets of tests were 100% negative.

There may well be occasions this year when the entire campus will need to use particular tools, but we should also all think individually about what we can do every day to contribute to our individual health and our level of comfort. I suspect that many of you are taking your temperature and doing a daily health check despite not needing to record it on the COVID Pass app every day. I encourage that, though I doubt it will be a mandatory activity this year, even though its value is clear.

Currently, the most difficult issue in sorting through which tools should be required (e.g., vaccination) versus which should be encouraged (e.g., hand hygiene) is mask wearing in indoor spaces by fully vaccinated individuals. Some CDC guidance is clear – if you are going out in public indoor spaces such as a grocery store, theater, or restaurant, mask up regardless of your vaccination status. It is critically important for every member of the Wabash community to remember this when off-campus, especially given the relatively low vaccination rates in our state and local community. And I fear this will become even more important in the coming weeks. While Indiana is presently below the national averages for per-capita cases, hospitalizations, and deaths, all are trending in the wrong direction.

We must also take into consideration that many members of our Wabash community live in households with family members who are unable to be vaccinated because of their age or they have medical conditions that put them at greater risk of vaccine failure. And some people are simply more comfortable wearing masks given the unpredictability of the pandemic. It is important that we support these individuals by wearing a mask in their presence if requested. We all need to be patient and assume the best intention of others as we navigate these complicated times.

While the reasons for vaccinated individuals to mask when indoors with persons of unknown vaccination status are clear, it becomes less so in the case of a universally vaccinated community. Guidance from authorities is mixed – as is feedback I have received from the Wabash community. Not surprisingly, campuses among our peer colleges in the GLCA and across the nation are taking a range of approaches, from mask-optional to mask-required (with various permutations based on type of building, activity, or group size).

At a recent meeting where I was able to ask Indiana State Health Commissioner Dr. Kris Box about this issue, she confirmed that indoor masking could be optional with universal vaccination on campus. But she also suggested – out of an abundance of caution – that it would be wise to implement a two-week acclimatization period during which masks would be worn in classrooms while we monitor case numbers. This approach appeals to me because it matches two of the foundational principles of Wabash's strategy during the pandemic: err on the side of caution and collect as much data as possible to inform our decisions.

For Wabash, there is an additional advantage to such an acclimatization process. Because of the relatively late announcement of our vaccination requirement, we will begin the academic year with a number of partially vaccinated students and employees (recall that fully vaccinated status comes two

weeks after the final shot). Thus, **we will adopt the practice of mask wearing by all students, faculty, and staff in classes, laboratories, and other instructor-led indoor activities for the first two weeks of the semester and then reassess our plan based on conditions on and off campus.**

Additionally, we will require **everyone to mask indoors during the move in process**, and until further notice, everyone will mask up for any indoor gathering expected to have 50 or more attendees.

We will update our COVID FAQ document to reflect these changes, as well as updated guidance on expectations for quarantine, but a brief summary is at the end of this email. If you have questions after reading the summary, please send an email to [covid@wabash.edu](mailto:covid@wabash.edu). I hardly need to remind people at this point, but keep in mind that all of these practices are subject to continued monitoring and adjustment based on changes in health conditions and guidance. I know that some of you will be disappointed in one or more components of this message and I suspect that everyone is frustrated that we remain in such a fluid situation.

I am grateful to the many colleagues – especially the Healthy Campus Task Force and the Academic Policy Committee – and our public health agency partners, who continue to put time and energy into the work of maintaining residential education at Wabash during challenging times. I am also thankful to the students, staff, and faculty at the College for your resilience and understanding. It is particularly important as we come together to set as our top priority empathy and understanding the needs and concerns of others. I encourage everyone to mask indoors during this important transition and always when in class or requested by others to do so.

Scott Feller  
President

**Move In:** Returning and new students and their families arriving on campus will wear face masks while indoors during the move-in process. Students already on campus should wear face masks when their fellow students and their families are moving in.

**Classes and Labs:** Students, faculty, and staff will wear face masks when in classrooms, laboratories, and during other instructor-led indoor activities – regardless of their vaccination status.

**Large Indoor Gatherings:** Face masks are required for all indoor gatherings of 50 or more people.