

December 3, 2020

Dear Students,

As we wrap up the loose ends of our fall semester and complete final exams, I want to thank you. This semester was full of new and unforeseen challenges, not just in our academic lives but across the nation, and you have demonstrated a commitment to the health and safety of our community and a remarkable resilience as you forged ahead on your academic journey. I especially want to thank the students who served their peers and assisted UMass Amherst with its COVID-19 interventions. I have been coached through a swab test by a student, walked with student leaders through the streets of Amherst to share information with students and community members, and had my flu shot administered by a student. Our students are fully engaged in our university's response to this pandemic and this selfless service and commitment has been invaluable. I am proud to be associated with such an incredible student body and am excited as we prepare to welcome more of you back to campus for spring semester.

Everyone has made a difference. From our students living on campus or in the Amherst area to those logging in remotely from across the country and around the globe, each of you has contributed in some way to the success of our efforts in mitigating the spread of COVID-19 and keeping our communities safe. The small things you do every day—increased hand washing, wearing a mask, keeping your distance from those you love most—are what allow us to plan for expanded on-campus offerings in the spring. Your individual actions build to a sustained movement toward wellness that will help keep us safer, now and in the future.

To that end, I want to share some of the planning in progress for the spring semester. As stated by the chancellor, a number of working groups continue to prepare for expanded on-campus operations in the spring. While the work of those groups is ongoing, examples of in-person engagement include:

- **Expanded Spring Orientation Programming:** New Student Orientation (NSO) will host programs for first year and transfer students to help them connect with one another, navigate the physical campus, and understand university systems.
- **Campus Recreation:** Recreation offerings will be available through Campus Recreation; the in-person classes will have limited spots to ensure social distancing, so registration will be required.
- **Student Engagement Events:** A coordinated calendar is being developed; expect a mix of in-person, hybrid, grab-and-go, and virtual events, including regularly scheduled in-person events from schools and colleges, with virtual engagement options.
- **Small Social Groups:** Students who choose to form and sustain with a “pod” will have the ability to socialize with relaxed restriction in some locations; students will have an opportunity to select pod partners when we return in the spring.
- **UMass Dining:** The new Worcester Commons will be open for students. The state-of-the-art facility combines a food hall dining experience with student engagement; students can also participate in virtual cooking options and place mobile orders with Grub Hub.

While we cannot predict the future, our experiences over the past nine months have taught us that a dynamic, responsive approach to planning is critical. All of the activities above will require students to adhere to strict testing protocols, among other COVID-19 precautions. We know that the virus can be unpredictable and this requires us to be nimble; if conditions change we will all adapt our behavior per state or local mandates. Nonetheless, I am excited to see many of you return to campus this spring and know we will navigate the future together. Additionally, we understand the concerns of those of you who may decide not to return to campus for spring semester. Whether you are living in residence halls or accessing the university from afar, you are part of this vibrant UMass community, and we will continue our efforts to provide dynamic, creative programming across physical and virtual modalities.

As you complete your coursework and finish final exams, I hope that you will take a much needed, much deserved break. The fatigue that comes from carrying personal responsibility amidst a global crisis with its own demands is real, but remember that what you’ve done—what you’re doing—matters. **It is your continued efforts in support of public health that will help us have a safe, successful spring semester.**

It is with deep gratitude for your efforts and heartfelt admiration of your commitments to the community that I wish the best of luck on your finals and a relaxing and rejuvenating break.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'bhl', located below the main text.

Brandi Hephner LaBanc, Ed.D.  
Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and Campus Life

Copyright 2020. [University of Massachusetts Amherst](#)