January 18, 2022

Dear UMass Amherst Community,

In advance of the upcoming spring semester and the return of our students from winter break, campus staff and administrators have been engaged in extensive planning and preparation to manage the impact of COVID-19 and allow us to move ahead with in-person teaching, learning and research activities.

Having implemented a universal vaccination requirement, a comprehensive COVID-19 testing regime, and extensive public health protocols, we are looking forward to an in-person spring semester. In making the commitment to an in-person return, I want to assure you that we are vigilantly monitoring the current surge in COVID-19 cases. We do anticipate there will be a significant number of cases among our campus community in the early weeks of the semester, and we all share the concern related to the spread of the Omicron variant. However, we must keep in mind that the current scientific data show that those who are vaccinated and boosted and become infected are generally asymptomatic or experience mild symptoms. Our campus’s 97% vaccination rate and booster requirement, coupled with the reduced severity of infection for vaccinated and boosted individuals, significantly diminish the health risks associated with the resumption of on-campus activities.

Assessing How We Function Over the Long Term

The generally mild symptoms of vaccinated and boosted individuals infected with COVID-19 also suggest that the number of positive cases may not be the most meaningful metric to evaluate the status of campus public health. With the
prevalence of COVID-19, whether it be Omicron or some future variant, so pervasive, it is time to start considering how, over the long-term, we function as an institution in the context of this new reality. In light of the reduced health risks of COVID-19 among our vaccinated UMass population, tracking case numbers becomes less important as we redouble our focus on the prevention of severe illness and hospitalization.

This shift in focus, however, does not mean that we will let up on our efforts to keep everyone safe, including the most vulnerable members of our community. We will continue to serve the town of Amherst and the surrounding area by providing access to vaccinations and testing, and the extensive public health protocols that have served our campus so well in previous semesters will continue, including masking, vaccination and COVID-19 testing. Our approach to testing, for example, has been one of the most rigorous and effective aspects in our COVID-mitigation efforts. The combination of wastewater testing, adaptive testing and unobserved voluntary testing enables us to continuously analyze the state of the virus on our campus and enact real-time COVID-mitigation measures to keep our campus and the surrounding communities safe. These measures have made the spread of COVID-19 in our classrooms, research labs and workplaces virtually non-existent and have contained the positivity rate on our campus at a level significantly below the rest of the state.

In these last few days of winter break, I urge those of you who are eligible to get your booster shot before returning to campus. As I am sure you know by now, this is a requirement for faculty, staff and students. Also, for students who haven’t mailed in your advance test kit, you can email the results of a test obtained elsewhere to testing@umass.edu. Although current modeling suggests that Massachusetts may be at or near the peak of the current surge, we still have a ways to go and vaccines, boosters and testing are the vehicles that will return us to the campus life that we all cherish so much.

Key aspects of campus COVID-19 protocols, which can be found in detail on the UMass Spring 2022 website, include:
Vaccines and Boosters

- **All eligible UMass Amherst students are required to receive a COVID-19 vaccine booster shot.** You can make an appointment by identifying a location through the Massachusetts COVID-19 vaccine finder or Vaccines.gov. The Public Health Promotion Center (PHPC) vaccine clinic on the lower level of the Campus Center will also be open. Please visit the clinic’s website to book an appointment. If you contracted COVID-19 during winter break, per CDC guidance you can receive a booster shot once your symptoms are resolved and your isolation period is complete.

- **All eligible faculty and staff are required to get a vaccine booster.**

Testing

- **All UMass Amherst students are expected to undergo an advance COVID-19 test** prior to the start of spring classes on Jan. 25, 2022. Students who fail to undergo advance testing should, upon their return from winter break, promptly pick up an unobserved test kit at the PHPC in the Campus Center.

- Students who did not pick up PCR test kits on campus before leaving for break and live in the Greater Boston area have access to self-administered, unobserved COVID-19 testing on the Mount Ida Campus (100 Carlson Avenue, Newton). You can pick up a test kit at Campus Security (Building 17) on the Mount Ida Campus. There is a drop box there as well for you to return your test. We recommend you drop off your test on Wednesday or Thursday before noon because test kits are picked up every Thursday afternoon for processing.

- As a final reminder, all faculty and staff should take a COVID-19 PCR test by today, Jan. 18. Unobserved test kits are available at the PHPC in the Campus Center and can be dropped off at a designated test collection site.

- Wastewater testing and adaptive testing will continue to be employed as key components of our full population screening approach. The
combination of wastewater, adaptive and voluntary testing using sensitive PCR-based tests far exceeds what can be accomplished performing only individual surveillance testing because of its frequency and comprehensive nature.

**Face Coverings**

*Face coverings are required in all campus buildings* regardless of vaccination status. We strongly urge you to use a high-grade mask, such as KN95, KF94, or N95, or double-mask. Cloth masks should be used only when double masking with a close-fitting surgical mask underneath. While UMass Amherst community members are expected to supply their own masks, the university recently placed a large order for KN95 masks, which will be available to faculty, staff and students who are not able to obtain their own.

**Events**

Campus events will continue as planned. Organizers are asked to ensure compliance with current campus masking and vaccination requirements. Consideration should be given to reduce consumption of food and beverage to limit periods where participants may be unmasked.

**Self-Monitoring**

Everyone must continue to monitor themselves for *COVID-19 symptoms* every day before coming to campus. If you feel unwell, stay home. *Testing is free* and available at the PHPC. All students, faculty and staff should seek COVID-19 tests when exhibiting *COVID symptoms*.

**Isolation**

On-campus isolation space is extremely limited and will be made available to residential students only in extenuating circumstances. In most cases students should be prepared to return home for isolation. In the event that positive cases quickly escalate and exhaust our supply of isolation rooms, alternative isolation guidance may be issued.

I am grateful for your patience, perseverance and commitment to UMass. I look forward to a safe, healthy and productive spring semester.
Sincerely,
Chancellor Kumble R. Subbaswamy

University of Massachusetts Amherst