August 31, 2021

Dear Campus Community,

I want to extend a warm welcome to everyone as we embark upon the academic year. It has been far too long since we have all been together and I know we are excited for an enriching and healthy campus experience this fall.

With our campus operating at full capacity for the first time in a year-and-a-half, it is reassuring to take note of the exhaustive planning and preparation that have gone into ensuring the health and safety of every member of our campus community. Building on the amazing work of our Public Health Promotion Center (PHPC), which established one of the state's largest COVID testing and vaccination centers last year, we have instituted comprehensive COVID vaccination requirements and public health protocols for our campus.

Vaccinations, which are required for faculty, staff and students, provide the most effective protection against COVID-19. That's why I am so pleased to report that virtually every one of our students who will access campus, either in residence halls, classrooms, laboratories or studios, is vaccinated, with the exception of only the few who have received medical or religious exemptions. Also, in collaboration with our union partners, we were one of the first campuses in the country to institute a COVID-19 vaccine requirement for our faculty and staff. Our vaccination rates (96.7% among students, 94.5% among faculty and staff so far), which are the envy of our peers, are critical components in protecting our campus and the surrounding communities from the threat of COVID-19 and the increasingly prevalent Delta variant.

Vaccines have proven to be overwhelmingly effective in preventing serious illness, hospitalization and death from COVID-19, including the Delta variant. Massachusetts "breakthrough" cases have occurred in only 0.35% of the nearly 4.4 million vaccinated individuals, resulting in generally mild or moderate symptoms and only a tiny percentage of hospitalizations (0.01%) since January 2021. Unvaccinated individuals account for almost all the recent COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations. The extreme high rate of vaccination among the UMass community, coupled with the vaccination rate in Massachusetts, which is the second highest in the nation, provides a significant degree of protection for our campus.

Individuals who have received medical or religious exemptions will be required to follow strict testing protocols. To bolster the protections afforded by our vaccination requirement, twice weekly COVID-19 testing will be required for students who have received vaccination exemptions and weekly testing will be required for employees who have received vaccination exemptions. Symptomatic testing will be offered at University Health Services
and asymptomatic testing will be available on demand for anyone who chooses. These testing protocols, as well as our other COVID-mitigation measures, including indoor masking, are fully aligned with the CDC guidelines. The university’s coronavirus website provides detailed information on these public health measures.

As the fall semester unfolds, our COVID-19 Implementation Group, PHPC, the Emergency Operations Team and other campus partners will continuously monitor public health conditions and will modify our COVID-19 mitigation measures accordingly. A variety of considerations will be factored into our decision making, including current positive case numbers, outcomes and severity of cases and trends, state and federal guidance, and the campus’ continuing ability to manage contact tracing, quarantine and isolation through the pandemic. As always, the public health measures we implement will meet or exceed state and federal COVID-19 guidelines.

Being back together is a welcome boost to the well-being of our students and our entire community. I am grateful to each and every one of you for the part you play in helping to keep our campus safe and healthy. By taking individual actions such as getting vaccinated, wearing a face mask and complying with public health protocols, you are contributing to the collective good, making it possible for our gradual return to the rich and rewarding campus experience that we all treasure so much.

Welcome to the fall 2021 semester and GO UMass!

Sincerely,
Chancellor Kumble R. Subbaswamy