



FROM THE PROVOST

August 25, 2021

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for your continuing work to effectively serve and compassionately assist our students as the semester gets underway. I have had a number of conversations with faculty and campus leaders this week about what we can do and are doing to address concerns and facilitate the best classroom environment possible. Foremost in our minds is how we can best provide guidance that will empower deans, members of their academic leadership teams, department/school heads, and faculty to evaluate options for temporary course delivery in a way that will best meet the instructional needs of our students.

Please find below new guidance as well as some updated information about processes that will help address some of the concerns being voiced by members of the Cowboy family.

Contact Tracing:

University Health Services continues to conduct contact tracing, currently prioritizing COVID-19 cases in communal living areas, such as residence halls and Greek life. In order to make it easier for UHS to perform contact tracing in classrooms, we will be introducing a streamlined reporting system later this week. When a student in your class tests positive for COVID-19 at UHS or makes a self-report to UHS, that will initiate the following process:

- You will receive an e-mail with the name of the student who has tested positive. **Please do not divulge this information to anyone;** you are being provided the name only to make the contact tracing process more efficient.
- You will be asked to check your seating chart and to identify the students who were close contacts during class. This should include the students who sat for at least 15 minutes directly in front, behind, to the left, and to the right of the student in a traditional classroom and any other students you feel were likely within six feet of the student who tested positive. This categorization is consistent with current CDC guidance.
- When you have determined this information, you will be asked to use the new Academic Alert system in Slate to report the names of the students who are close contacts. **The health portion of this system is not yet live** but will be soon. You should select only “Classroom Exposure” for any students you identify as close contacts and none of the traditional academic alert options. The health information will be shielded from the rest of the system for privacy reasons.
- The students you identify as close contacts will receive an automated e-mail from UHS with instructions about their next steps. **Do not contact the affected students yourself.**

Additionally, many students who test positive for COVID-19 are notifying their instructors of the positive test, and there are different processes across the colleges for getting that information to the Care team when the student tested off campus. In the new system, faculty members will be able to report the student's positive test directly through the Academic Alert system, selecting "Student-reported Positive Covid Test." That will generate an e-mail from UHS to the student about what they should do next. It is important that the student still fill out the UHS self-report form at <https://uhs.okstate.edu/covid-report-forms.html>.

Temporary Adjustment to Course Delivery:

In my Week 1 Update sent last Friday afternoon, it was announced the Instructor of Record has the opportunity to shift their class temporarily to a modality that best suits the class for up to two (2) class periods to allow time for contact tracing to take place. We are adjusting last week's guidance to allow an Instructor of Record to temporarily shift the delivery mode of classes for up to two (2) weeks should there be a positive case reported in a class. Specifically, after thoughtfully considering the modality that best suits the needs of the class, an Instructor of Record has the following three (3) choices to consider and implement for up to two (2) weeks following a positive test in the class:

1. Move the course online
2. Teach in a hybrid format (part online/part in class) to ensure social distancing and reduce further exposure. For students attending a face-to-face class, masks will be required.
3. Continue the course as face-to-face with masks required of all students attending.

Pandemic Response Team members, the deans, and I will continue to evaluate these options and other approaches, as well as provide additional guidance once it becomes available. The deans and I will also continue our discussion on how best to monitor these temporary course modality changes.

Guidance for Office Hours and Advising Appointments:

Guidance provided last week remains unchanged but is again included in this message as a reference for faculty and advisors who have continual interactions with students. As previously shared, Academic Affairs supports the personal preference of faculty and advisors to shift office and advising appointments to a virtual format through Friday, October 1. (Instructors and advisors may continue to hold these appointments in-person if they wish.) Be assured the Pandemic Response Team remains in frequent communication with the OSU administrative team, and we continue to monitor CDC guidance to make a determination for office and advising appointments after October 1.

- With this shift to virtual appointments, it is very important for faculty and advisors to remain cognizant of the academic and mental health needs of their students as there will be instances when an in-person meeting is essential.
- The previously shared statement quoted immediately below has been modified to reflect current guidance on mask wearing in the event a student requests an in-person appointment. Additionally, faculty and advisors might consider relocating to a larger office or meeting space.

"Office hours and/or advising appointments through Friday, October 1 will be virtual; however, in-person appointments may be scheduled if essential. For in-person appointments, it is expected you will wear a mask, as social-distancing is not possible in my office. I also will be wearing a mask."

- Please remember the opportunity to shift office and advising appointments online, if preferred, should not be interpreted as permission to return to remote work locations, unless an approved EO accommodation is in place.

Compliance with Mask Guidance in Classroom and Laboratory Settings:

Science continues to prove mask wearing will help prevent the spread of COVID-19. As such, the campus community must remain vigilant and comply with enhanced guidance stating **it is expected masks will be worn indoors, in public on campus including classrooms, laboratories and all indoor meetings and gatherings.**

- For reference and use as needed, below is a modified statement vetted again by OSU Legal Counsel and for use on course materials, in Canvas, and for class discussion.

“OSU expects faculty, staff and students to wear a mask indoors in public settings regardless of whether you are fully vaccinated, consistent with the current CDC recommendations. This is especially important in classrooms and laboratories because people are together for long periods of time. Wearing a mask during class not only protects you but also helps protect those around you who may be more vulnerable. This is a simple way we can look out for all members of the Cowboy family. If you feel sick, do not attend class. Contact University Health Services at 405-744-7665 immediately and communicate with me as soon as possible about any work you miss.”

- Should there be cases where a faculty member receives notification of a positive student case and UHS has advised the student to quarantine, yet they do not comply, this incident should be reported to the Office of Student Support and Conduct (student.support@okstate.edu, 405-744-5470) and will be addressed through the failure to comply policy in the [Student Code of Conduct](#).
- If confirmation has not been received that a student is positive but others suspect it, it would be helpful for a faculty or staff member to contact the student to make them aware of services available on campus, encourage seeking medical advice, and ask them to follow the guidance provided. Sometimes just being contacted and expressing concern will change behavior.
- In addition to “masks expected” [signage available](#) for posting, faculty and staff may also use this [mask expectation slide](#) in classrooms, laboratories, and other gatherings.

Maintaining an Awareness of the Wellbeing of Those Around You:

The ongoing pandemic has impacted the mental health and physical wellbeing of each of us and those close to us. Consequently, more of our colleagues and students are experiencing feelings of helplessness, isolation, grief, anxiety and depression. It is imperative each of us pay attention to our own needs and remain connected to and supportive of those around us. The University has a wide range of resources available to students and employees, and I strongly encourage you to keep the following information available to share when needed.

- **Student Resources** – Regardless of classification, more and more of our students are experiencing a range of issues that can cause barriers to learning. Mental health concerns, such as strained relationships, increased anxiety, alcohol/drug problems, difficulty concentrating,

and/or a lack of motivation, can lead to diminished academic performance and/or feelings of distress. A lack of access to basic needs including food, housing, or hygiene products, may also negatively affect their ability to do well in your courses. The OSU community wants to provide resources to best support student needs so please direct students who may be in need of assistance to access [mental health resources](#), [health and wellness resources](#), and the [Basic Needs Resource Center](#) to help navigate college life (https://ssc.okstate.edu/student_support_resources.html). If assistance is needed to guide a student to resources or you need to share specific concerns about a student, please access the Student Support and Conduct portal at <https://ssc.okstate.edu/report.html>.

- **Employee Resources** – Many in the Cowboy family are feeling overwhelmed with the challenges of their daily routine, and just trying to keep up can increase their level of anxiety. Whether you, a family member, or a colleague are dealing with stress, depression or just need support to navigate these troubling times, assistance is available at one of the many resources listed on OSU’s [Employee Mental Health Resource](#) page. Please remember you are not alone; someone is always available to listen.

Student, Departmental and College Meetings and Events:

As a reminder, if you and/or your colleagues are uncomfortable holding student, department and/or college events under current OSU guidelines, feel free to cancel or postpone the events or move them outside.

- Below is modified wording to be included when sending out invitations to your meetings and events:

“OSU expects faculty, staff, students and visitors to wear a mask indoors in public settings regardless of vaccination status, which is consistent with the current CDC recommendations. Wearing a mask protects you, and helps protect those around you who may be more vulnerable. This is a simple way we can look out for all members of the Cowboy family.”
- To the extent possible, please provide an option to allow virtual attendance at essential activities, meetings and events.

These initial eight days of the semester have been particularly challenging for all members of the Cowboy family as we each continually assess the impact of the pandemic on our professional and personal life. Please continue to extend kindness and understanding to those around you, and know that President Shrum, the Deans, and I recognize and appreciate the extraordinary efforts being made to maintain your own health and emotional wellbeing, as well as the welfare of your colleagues and students.

Best,

Jeanette

Jeanette M. Mendez
Interim Provost and Senior Vice President