

From: Dean Barbara K. Rimer
To: New and returning Gillings School Students
Subj: Welcome to Fall Semester 2020



August 10, 2020

Dear Gillings Students,

Welcome new and continuing Gillings students. We are so glad you chose and are part of the Gillings community. As dean, I want us to meet and exceed your expectations. If at any time we fail to do that, please tell us so that we can address your concerns.

This semester will be unlike anything we have faced before. Since the [UNC System Board of Governors](#) decided to bring students back to campus, we have been preparing for the unique challenges of starting the fall semester during the height of a global pandemic, with all the uncertainty that entails. Our aim is to make the campus safe for all. We have been doing that the *Gillings Way*—with choices for students, faculty and staff about how to manage the semester—on campus, remote or a combination.

Safety is dependent on us all practicing evidence-based behaviors—wearing masks (an [order](#) from the governor and UNC-Chapel Hill [community standard](#)), staying six feet apart and washing hands often, every day. As public health students, you will be role models for others.





UNC GILLINGS SCHOOL OF GLOBAL PUBLIC HEALTH

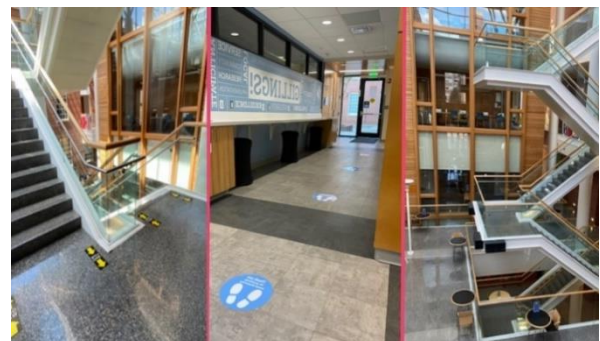
Our time to make a difference. This is a public health moment. It is a frightening time, one in which no place is risk-free, but a time in which public health has critical skills to combat the pandemic in ways that are evidence-based, ethical and equitable. You will get the tools you need to make a difference to address the pandemic and whatever issues you choose as your career focus. You may make a discovery here or afterwards that saves millions of lives. Others have.

Much is at stake: health and illness, life and death, U.S. and global economies, our relationships with other countries, higher education, and growing inequities and disproportionate burden of the pandemic on people of color. We, in public health and Gillings, are at an intersection of the world’s needs and our skills. It is a time to serve and to lead. We must protect our and everyone’s safety, but also be brave and bold about doing everything we can to end this pandemic. That is aligned with the Gillings School’s [mission](#) to improve public health, promote individual well-being and eliminate health inequities across North Carolina and around the world.

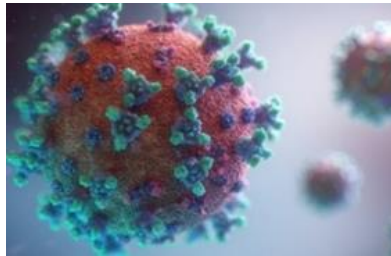
Education and community this fall. Gillings faculty and staff members worked all summer, revising and fine-tuning courses to be excellent learning experiences, irrespective of format. Education research shows that well-designed, online courses and well-designed in-person courses can be equally effective. Our Gillings quality education will be first-rate, with the same awesome faculty, whether [remote, hyflex or in-person](#), and students will continue to have choices available to them. About 80% of Gillings courses will be [remote](#) fall term, and we will be ready to pivot, if needed.

Each [department](#) and our [Office of Student Affairs](#) are focused on building community so you will develop and strengthen connections that are meaningful and helpful to you and your goals. (The Gillings Virtual Student Engagement website is [here](#).)

Safety measures at Gillings. We have taken many actions to reduce risks in the school and on campus. For those taking classes on campus, in person, Brent Wishart, facilities manager, and his team have reconfigured classrooms for physical distancing and posted signs everywhere, including lots of footprints on



floors to show people where to walk and reminders about the three W's: wash hands, wait (six feet away from others) and wear a face covering or mask. There are [hand-sanitizing and mask stations](#) in all buildings, and [Care packs](#) should be available later this week through your department. This [video](#) shows how classrooms have been adapted for the COVID-19 era.



Finding usable answers to SARS-CoV-2. Faculty and staff members across the school, often with student team members, have been working non-stop to develop effective vaccines and treatments and to conduct other kinds of [research](#) aimed at ending the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. They also have been helping campus leaders prepare for a safe return to campus.

Lack of control in a challenging time. We are living with uncertainty, because the virus is in control, other people's behaviors affect the spread of virus, and the U.S. has no national health system, with rational planning. We are buffeted from one policy to the next. We must continue to live with uncertainty about the unknowable future. In spite of this uncertainty, we still can live with intention, purpose and a plan for the future, while recognizing that adjustment and adaptation are critical tools.

Some of you have lost family and friends to COVID-19. I feel for your losses. The pandemic has taken a terrible toll and laid bare the inequities that have led to disproportionate illness and death among people of color.

Combating racism. We have continued our efforts to achieve racial and social equity and justice, and we share your commitment to sustained focus and action at every level, from within our academic departments to the school, university, community, and beyond.

Inclusive excellence. We are committed to be inclusive, diverse and to seek equity in our community, countries and world. See our [Inclusive Excellence Action Plan](#).

Routing out racism. After years of advocacy and protests by many, the names on four more campus buildings were removed. (Saunders was renamed previously.)



We are committed to make our school and university a place where all can thrive, no matter their race, ethnicity, ableness, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, or other characteristics. Public health must be diverse and inclusive to serve all people and to understand and address the impact of social determinants on health, disease, and mortality.



Student engagement to increase equity and justice is critical in this time. The Minority Student Caucus in the Gillings School, Black Student Movement, UNC Black Congress, Chapel Hill-Carrboro NAACP and many organizations at all levels (community, university, school and department) provide leadership and opportunities for activism focused on anti-racism, equity and justice in academics, research, government, community and other spaces.



Model best practices. As public health people, we must model best practices, taking all possible precautions for ourselves and those around us, wherever we are, whether on campus or off. This is our commitment to – our contract with – one another. We are doing everything in our power to make our buildings safe, provide flexibility for those who need to be remote, share latest news and guidance, be transparent, and advocate for our students, faculty and staff.

We will do our part. As community members, we commit to doing our part to keep each other safe through monitoring our health and staying home if needed, mask wearing, physical distancing, hygiene practices, checking in on each other, and following latest national, local and University news and evidence about the virus. We do this for our families, friends, members of the Gillings community, and for ourselves. We are dependent on one another for safety. Mask wearing is a big part of that. As William Fischer, MD, said in his keynote address for the University’s 2020 [Convocation](#), “It is only by considering others that everyone will be safe.”



Even with these efforts, we cannot eliminate all risks. While no one can guarantee complete safety anywhere, and there is no completely risk-free zone, evidence indicates that actions such as mask wearing, physical distancing and handwashing are powerful preventives. As Fischer also said, “There is no playbook for this virus.”

Information and resources. Please stay on top of information posted on the [Gillings Return to Campus Roadmap](#) and the [Carolina Together](#) websites. There will be many opportunities for discussion, input, feedback and questions over the next several weeks, starting with a COVID-19 Conversation (more details to come). For recordings of previous Conversations, select “COVID-19 Conversations” from the blue menu on the [Gillings Roadmap](#).

Vote. With the presidential election in three months, now is the time for all who are [eligible to vote](#) to confirm their registration and plans for voting by absentee/mail-in ballot, through early voting or in person. See [resources](#) with details about voting state-by-state. A [guide](#) for college students addresses concerns about changes of address, deadlines for absentee/mail-in ballot requests and more.

A public health moment. This is the worst pandemic in [100 years](#), and it has hit hardest the people who already bear unfair burdens of disease and death. The human toll is horrific, and good leadership and policies could have prevented many of the deaths. Still, in the confluence of the pandemic and growing recognition that structural racism is a global crisis, changes are happening in the U.S. and around the world. In this time, we, in public health and Gillings, are called upon to make a difference. We *can* make a difference.

Never has there been a more important time to study and work in public health. Every department has a role to play in solving the challenges we face. You are the next generation of public health professionals, and the world needs you; we are committed to ensuring that you receive the finest training possible.

The semester will not be perfect, but we will do our best, from wherever we are, because we are Gillings Public Health. If you have concerns, please speak up. Check in with your instructors, professors, academic coordinators, advisers, chairs, Associate Dean for Student Affairs Charletta Sims Evans, MEd, or members of the [OSA team](#); other school leaders, including Laura Linnan, ScD, senior associate dean for academic and student affairs; Kauline Cipriani, PhD, assistant dean for inclusive excellence, and me.

We are on this journey together with you, and we are committed to your success. Together, we will thrive if we bring to each day flexibility, adaptability, innovation, and kindness. I look forward to meeting you and helping you achieve your goals and dreams in the weeks and months to come.



If you did not get to watch the virtual Convocation last night, here is a [link](#). I especially encourage you to watch Dr. William Fischer's keynote (beginning at 8:02) about the global pandemic. It is all about public health. Then, at 34:55, hear and see the most amazing rendition of "Hark the Sound" that I have ever seen and heard, performed by the students, faculty and staff of the UNC Music Department. Made me proud to be a Tar Heel.

Wishing you good health and a successful semester. Don't forget to wear your masks, keep six feet apart and wash your hands often.



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