

From: Dean Barbara K. Rimer

Date: Wednesday, August 5, 2020

To: Gillings School Faculty and Staff Members

Subject: REVISED Update for Gillings Faculty and Staff: Fall Semester and COVID-19



Note: This is a revised version of a letter sent Wednesday, July 29. This version reflects questions asked during a July 30 faculty, staff and student COVID-19 Conversation.

August 5, 2020

Dear Gillings Faculty and Staff Members,

My purpose in writing is to mark where we are in the pandemic and its implications for us at Gillings and Carolina. I will focus more on the context of the pandemic, and what it has meant for our people, than on specific information about what is coming next, but I will cover a little of that, too.



Welcome to new faculty and staff members, some of whom started with Gillings July 1st. You are part of our community although we may not yet have met in person.

Fall semester is almost upon us. Depending on when one started counting, it has been 135 days since we began working remotely. The first day of fall classes is less than a week away, and Orientation begins tomorrow. Thanks to our Office of Student Affairs and all of you for your prodigious efforts. This year, all incoming students have the opportunity to participate in a three-hour anti-racism program offered by the [Racial Equity Institute](#) (REI), with added discussion sessions. Faculty members have fine-tuned courses (many having prepared for both online and hybrid versions of their courses). We are grateful for high-quality instructional design help in the school. Our Gillings quality education will be first-rate, with the same awesome faculty, whether remote, hybrid or in-person. Our students will have choices, thanks to the work of faculty and staff.

We are open. We may be working remotely, but we are not closed, and you have been carrying on regardless of location. Many of our labs are operating. Kudos to the Baric Lab for working around the clock in search of effective vaccines and drugs to treat COVID-19. I also am grateful to university and Gillings leaders, our housekeeping crew members, whom we care about as important members of our community, and our faculty, staff and students. I have asked UNC-Chapel Hill leaders repeatedly about protection for our housekeeping staff and have been assured that they have the PPE they need. Brent Wishart, facilities manager, will monitor it. If we learn otherwise, we will act.



We should be in a better place today as a country and state (state leadership is strong), with the pandemic under control. It is not under control, and that means, as we anticipate fall, we must expect the unexpected. We are trying to do the right things for faculty, staff and students. Because there is a large element of unpredictability, we are not going to get it all perfect, no matter how much planning we do. What is right is not a binary calculation. It is many-layered, filled with equity and ethical considerations, and, yes, because we cannot operate a university without resources, economics matter also—but not more than people. There also are growing concerns from the town of Chapel Hill, and they, too, should be considered. State numbers are not going in the right direction. I would not be surprised if there is a pivot to remote at some point, but that is my opinion, not a fact. We should be prepared.

Potential off-ramp considerations. What might trigger a pivot or move to an off ramp? Check out the UNC-Chapel Hill COVID-19 [Dashboard](#) associated with the [Carolina Together](#) roadmap for data related to our campus, local and state communities. Here are some of the triggers that I believe might be important: If it becomes clear that there is high non-compliance with community standards (e.g., mask wearing and physical distancing); if the governor issues a stay-at-home order (not likely); if Orange County requires closure; if hospital beds and ICU beds are in short supply, if cases, hospitalizations and deaths increase faster than they are increasing now and faster than health care systems can handle (I don't know what the magic numbers would be); if it is more difficult to test people and get results within a reasonable period of time; if there is a substantial outbreak on campus; and if the UNC System concludes that it cannot keep campuses safe. My inferences about potential off-ramp metrics are based on the literature and discussions with infectious disease experts and UNC leadership. It is not an algorithm. I recognize that people want numerical thresholds, but multiple measures are being tracked, and my takeaway is that an off-ramp decision would be a judgment based on more than one of these measures, except for decisions made by authorities, such as the health department or governor, that would order universities to close.

We are part of a larger system, and even the chancellor does not call all the shots. Today, it is in the UNC System's president and [Board of Governors'](#) wheelhouse to decide whether and when there will be an off-ramp, if needed. With a new system president, there are many unknowns. Again, these are my ideas, based on my understanding.

Preparing buildings for your safe return when ready to come back. Thanks to Brent Wishart, facilities manager, and his team, there are signs everywhere, including lots of footprints on floors to show people where to walk, and reminders about the three W's: wash, wait (six feet away from others) and wear a mask. Work is ongoing to make our buildings as safe as possible,

and I am reminded every day that never have we been more dependent on one another than we are right now. Our safety is intertwined. I would not think of going into our buildings without a mask. I want YOU to be safe.

As people in public health, we should model what we ask of others, taking all possible precautions for ourselves and those around us. This is our commitment to – our contract with – one another. We will do everything in our power as an organization to make our buildings safe, provide flexibility for those who need to work offsite, share latest news and guidance, be transparent and advocate for our people. As community members, we commit to doing our part to keep each other safe through 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, colleagues, students and for ourselves. 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 these steps are powerful preventives.



Lack of control makes many of us uncomfortable. There is 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. Many in the school (special thanks to Peggy Bentley, PhD, and Naya Villareal, MPH) helped us navigate the shortsighted and mean-spirited recent attempt to put the U.S. off limits for international students. Many of us, our amazing Vice Provost for Global Affairs and Chief Global Officer Barbara Stephenson, PhD; our Association for Schools and Programs of Public Health (ASPPH), and other leaders and organizations spoke against the policy. It was rescinded after causing untold hours of work, confusion about the meaning of different elements and incredible stress, especially for international students.

We must live with uncertainty about the unknowable future. Strong, effective leadership is needed at the top of our country, and the lack of it is prolonging the agony. Anthony Fauci, MD, is the bright light in leadership.

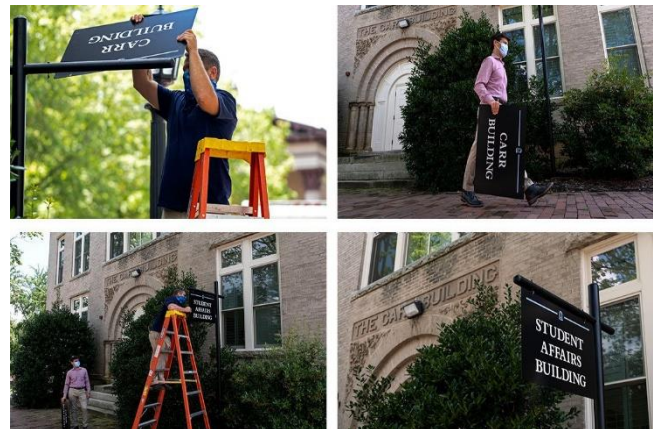
A challenging time. Many of you have lost family members and friends to COVID-19. I feel for your losses, and the periods of intense illness that preceded them. The pandemic has laid bare the inequities that have led to disproportionate illness and death among people of color. Some of you have family members who have lost jobs, and many of you have struggled to work and home school your children, take care of older family members and deal with the uncertainty of whether college-age kids will be going to school away from or at home this fall. It looks as though fall will be more of the same. We will work with you to adapt schedules to meet your needs as much as possible. Talk with chairs, supervisors and HR staff if you need accommodations or other considerations. Check out UNC's [Carolina Together](#) website for more specifics, and our [UNC Gillings Return to Campus Roadmap](#) for information about our School. At Gillings, we are not taking a one-size-fits-all approach to the pandemic and its impact on people.

A public health moment. This is the worst pandemic in 100 years, and it has hit hardest the people who always have had unfair burdens of disease and death. It is tempting to focus only

on what we have lost, and I will not minimize the huge human toll of this pandemic. It is horrific, and we could have prevented many of the deaths with good leadership and policies. But there also is another side to it. 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.

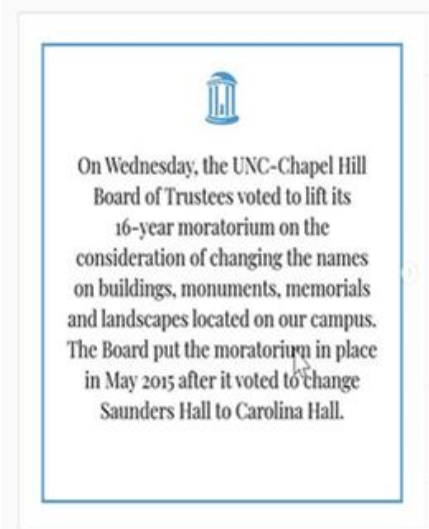
In this time, we are called upon to make a difference. There are signs that large parts of the U.S. population are moving determinedly to root out racism from our laws, policies and institutions, although we have far to go. About four hundred people associated with the Gillings School participated in Racial Equity Institute training last month. Under the leadership of Chancellor Guskiewicz and Provost Blouin, senior university leaders, including me, spent 1.5 days in REI anti-racism training.

Speaking of signs, finally, after years of advocacy and protests by many, the names associated with four more campus buildings were removed. (Saunders was renamed previously.) I was grateful to be on a [committee](#) that made the recommendation to the chancellor and Board of Trustees.



And yet another encouraging sign: Gillings no longer will require the GRE for application to eight of our degree programs. The [news](#) has motivated significant website traffic and is really important because the requirement has been a barrier for many applicants, including under-represented students.

Public health is on the minds of many people. Epidemiology is a household word, and epidemiologists and other public health professionals are in the news constantly. Epidemiologic models are being debated by laypeople. Behavioral scientists and communication experts are helping to craft messages for our campus, including videos showing measures to keep people safe in [campus buildings](#) and describing why we should all wear masks (one video, developed by an interdisciplinary team including Kurt Ribisl, PhD, chair and Jo Anne Earp Distinguished Professor of Health Behavior, features [students](#); and one from the Employee Forum features [faculty and staff members](#)). Finding solutions to this pandemic and preventing the next one must be round-the-clock pursuits, and many thousands of public health and other health professionals have stepped up, often putting their lives at risk.



In addition to our laboratory scientists, many Gillings people have risen to the challenges of this time. You have pivoted in your research to answer urgent questions about the pandemic, and you have been available to university leaders and leaders in N.C government, NC DHHS, NIH, CDC, WHO and many other organizations. You have given freely and generously of your time and expertise. You also have risen to the challenge of creating high-quality, meaningful

educational opportunities for our students – both mask-to-mask and online. Our world needs this next generation of public health professionals, and you are ensuring that they receive the finest training possible. Thank you.

As awful and as stressful and frightening the present is, we may never again be called upon in a way that is so urgent and consequential. Much is at stake: health and illness, life and death, U.S. 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 at Gillings, are at an intersection of the world's needs and our skills. The world needs Gillings. This is a public health moment, and wherever you are working from-- whether on or around campus, at your home, in another country, wherever you are--the work of public health must go on. This is our time to serve and to lead. Our students and colleagues need us, and the world needs us. It is a time in which to protect our and everyone's safety, but also to be brave and bold about doing everything we can to end this pandemic.

There will be a fall semester, and I encourage you to stay on top of information posted on the [Gillings Return to Campus Roadmap](#) and the [Carolina Together](#) websites. There will be multiple opportunities for discussion, input and questions over the next several weeks, starting with another COVID-19 Conversation (more details to come). For recordings of previous Conversations, select "COVID-19 Conversations" from the blue menu on the Gillings Return to Campus Roadmap page.

I look forward to welcoming new and returning students and new faculty and staff to Gillings. Fall semester will not be perfect, but we will do the best we can, from wherever we are, because we are Gillings Public Health. If you have concerns, please speak up.

Check in with your supervisor, chair, Human Resources contact, Senior Associate Dean for Academic and Student Affairs Laura Linnan, ScD, other school leaders, and me.

Wishing you good health. Thank you for all you do. Don't forget your masks.



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