



October 21, 2020

Dear Gillings School Community:

Still living through a pandemic. We are 27 days from the end of fall semester classes and 13 stressful days from the presidential election. The pandemic continues with great intensity – and is rising again in the U.S. and many other countries – with differences by location. North Carolina is in the red zone – not a good place to be. More than 220,000 people have died in the U.S. That is close to the [2019 population size](#) of Baton Rouge, LA, Des Moines, IA, or Fayetteville, NC. Imagine those entire cities being obliterated with all the people gone, an awful thought. Alternatively, it is like two September 11th catastrophes every week. Yet, as a country, there is an appalling lack of outrage by the president and his team. Maybe it is because the deaths tend to be invisible, in many cases. Unlike many other countries, the U.S. has been unwilling nationally to make the hard choices necessary to control the pandemic, so we continue to be pummeled by it.

Thank you and please vote. We are continuing to live with significant turmoil and ambiguity. Racial and other inequities have been exacerbated by the pandemic, and the pain of unemployment has not been addressed. Executive orders potentially restrict access to U.S. higher education for international students and bar words like anti-racism, along with anti-racism training. Enough is enough! Fortunately, there is some hopeful news. Trials are underway to test different vaccines and therapeutics, and although there have been a couple of pauses in the vaccine trials, they are moving along. In spite of an active misinformation campaign, trials conducted in conjunction with ACTIV and Operation Warp Speed have been well-designed and executed. Several Gillings faculty members have played leadership roles in developing and testing vaccines and drugs to treat COVID-19. People in our school continue to be central for campus decision making. Thank you.



*A painting of the belltower emblazoned with “VOTE” stickers is one of many large canvases on display through Election Day in the [Meet the Moment Artwalk](#) on Franklin St., from Peace and Justice Plaza (Henderson St.) to Midway Business Center (N. Graham St.).
@MeetTheMoment2020*

If you have not yet voted, please take time to get it done. You may use work time to vote. Here is a link to [voting in NC](#). [Vote.org](#) has state-by-state information. North Carolina in-person early voting started October 15. I love early voting. It is like an insurance policy for voting, and this year, it feels especially good to have voted. Many barriers have been erected to make it more difficult to vote, so have your strategy in place. ([Beatrice Lumpkin](#), 102, mother of John Lumpkin, who is a member of our Practice Advisory Committee and president of BCBS NC Foundation, votes by mail.) For tips on voting safely during the pandemic, see this brief [video](#) from the Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America, shared by David Weber, MD, MPH, Sanders Distinguished Professor of Medicine, Pediatrics and Epidemiology, and associate chief medical officer for UNC.

Threat to health care for up to 20 million. A week after the election, on November 10th, the ACA will be on the Supreme Court docket again – but with different court make-up. The California v. Texas case could have many different impacts, depending on how the Court votes, and that will be affected by whether

Amy Coney Barrett gets confirmed. The worst-case [scenario](#) is that 20 million Americans could lose their health insurance immediately. That would be tragic, and, in my view un-American. In the middle of a pandemic, leaving people without health coverage would be heartbreaking and cruel.

Fall semester. Faculty, staff and students rallied for the fall semester and are making it work, even though teaching and learning remotely under pandemic conditions are not ideal. We have taken the policy perspective of being flexible and student-centered, with pass/fail grading and a lot of leniency in responding to requests for extensions and exceptions. We continue to follow public health evidence-based advice to protect our people. We all have a stake in good outcomes.

A big thank you to our school’s leaders and all the faculty and staff who stepped up to participate in the new weekend COVID-19 course SPH 690-001, Public Health Implications of Research Related to COVID-19: A Framework for Action. It was designed especially for international students who were required to take at least one in-person class. On the first day of the class, I gave a talk on the 1918 influenza pandemic, listened to all the other lectures and was so impressed by their quality. Students’ questions were awesome and reflected an amazingly high level of thought and analysis. Kudos to all the students and to the faculty and staff who made the course possible. We hope to make many of the lectures available for later viewing.

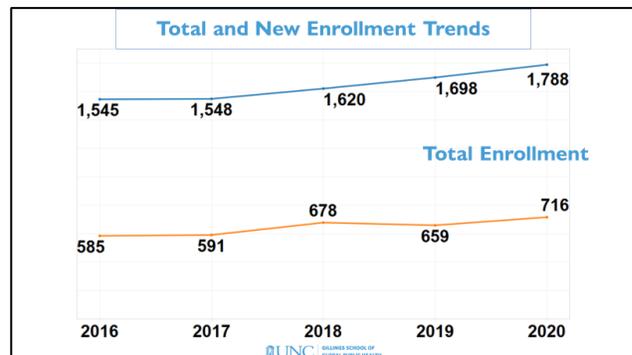
Spring Semester. Now, we are planning spring semester. About a week ago, Chancellor Guskiewicz and Provost Blouin [announced](#) the start and end dates and commencement for spring semester. Course format decisions will be shared soon. Many decisions are still to be made, including how many students and classes, if any, will return to campus in spring.

Innovation and action. I hope that many of you watched the [installation of Chancellor Guskiewicz](#) on Sunday, Oct. 11. His [remarks](#) reflected the university's great purpose, but he was focused clearly on the future when he said, "Our power as an institution does not come from stale tradition; it comes from the vision and renewable energy of our community. Our power does not come from old ideas. It comes from innovation, fresh ideas, and action. It comes from consulting the rising generation." Those are important words. We, at Gillings, must continue to consult our rising generation, and having students on many of our school committees, including the Dean's Council, is one example of how we do that. Each department also engages with students, but we must be sure what we are doing is uncovering their issues, needs and dreams.

The Chancellor also said: "We have a rising generation restless for change and a storied university committed to solving the grand challenges. The question is whether we truly can be 'student-focused' and give them the tools, support and knowledge they need to change the status quo. Having been here for 25 years, *I know we can.*"

If there is any school at UNC that can achieve this vision, it is the Gillings School.

To do that and manage our budget challenges, we must respect the past but move toward the future. We made very difficult decisions to change our MPH program several years ago. It took a lot of work from many people. Not everyone was happy, and we did not get everything right initially, but we created new concentrations that reflect the needs of now and the future and have grown our enrollment, including in the [MPH@UNC program](#), at a time when enrollment at many schools of public health is shrinking. We are listening to faculty, staff and students and refining our programs.



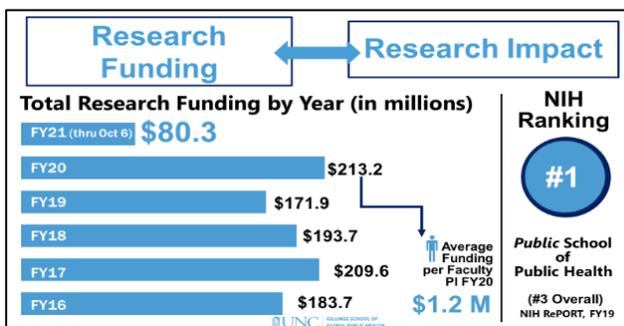
We have worked hard to increase our diversity and are implementing our [Inclusive Excellence Action Plan](#) across all five of the plan's goals. (A sixth will be added for research.) We have more students who come from underrepresented minority populations (now about 17.4% of all students and 20.5% of new students). In the past year, we recruited five new faculty members from underrepresented groups. Faculty and staff are on their way to fulfilling new inclusive excellence training requirements (at least 8 hours each year). And we are developing a robust evaluation plan to track our efforts for continuous improvement. We were recognized by Insight into Diversity with [a Health Professions Higher Education Excellence in Diversity \(HEED\) Award](#) for the second year in a row, thanks to our Inclusive Excellence team. When I cite

progress in this area, it is not a statement that we are where we should be. We are not, but we should celebrate progress and keep our eyes on the future.

Budget challenges. Taya Jackson Scott, Katie Thornsvar and I recently had our budget hearing with UNC-Chapel Hill leaders, and they noticed and were positive about changes in the School, especially increased enrollment. Rather than focusing on cutting budgets, we have been encouraged to emphasize growing revenue, particularly enrollment. We must continue to grow the MPH@UNC program, and as enrollment grows, we will invest in that program and others in the school. Please read this statement as setting the intention for controlled growth, and not growth for the sake of growth. We must grow with excellence, and yes, we must add appropriate teaching and support resources as we do this.

The University has a substantial deficit, and there are a lot of unknowns about the university budget and our school's budget this year and next. We still have not received a budget or any information about cuts. I tend to view this as "no news is good news." UNC-Chapel Hill leadership has enacted many financial controls to limit spending, including a very high bar for hiring. The restrictions are necessary to keep the financial health of the institution strong. Constraining spending is part of a strategy to protect faculty and staff jobs. The next few years will be challenging, but we are doing a lot of the right things, and we will recover.

We also must continue to take acceptable risks and make investments in the future. That is one of the reasons why, as difficult as it was, we chose to invest in [Gillings Innovation Labs focused on COVID-19](#) rather than funding applications that had been approved but not yet funded.



Grants. In another dimension of revenue production, our research grants are up, thanks to our amazing faculty members who bring in an average of \$1.2 M per faculty member and who generated ~\$213M in external funding in FY20; ~80M already this year, and over \$40M in COVID-19 funding. It is not just the money faculty members bring in that matters; it is their impact, and we are seeing a lot of positive impact.

Advancement. Our advancement team also is doing well and has raised more funds than last year. We are building up our [student relief fund](#), which, so far, has received \$36,000 from 85 donors and has provided [support](#) to 11 Gillings School students.

Mental health and the big unknowns. Everyone is stressed, and our students, especially, are stressed. Our faculty and staff also are stressed. The convergence of the election, the fissures caused by the pandemic, environmental catastrophes in California and other places, and centuries of racial inequity and injustice, and the economic cataclysm caused by the pandemic are creating devastating pain and high levels of stress. We are not asking our faculty members to be therapists, but we ask you to acknowledge what is happening in the world – to

take a few minutes of class time to check in with students and see how they are doing, and to give them a couple of minutes to reflect on an event that occurred and feelings they have. Supervisors should do the same with employees. Please plan to do that every day of election week. Recognizing our collective and individual pain is being aware of our shared humanity.

Gillings and the election. We have been asked many questions about the election, including whether we are going to do something the day of the election, the day after or sometime around that. Charletta Sims Evans, our associate dean for student affairs, gets this question a lot, and I believe she gives some of the best advice when she encourages people not to wait for the election to attend to their mental health. Take care of yourself now. If the election does not turn out the way we want (and different people want different outcomes), no one event is not going to heal our pain. There are many resources at Gillings, UNC-Chapel Hill and in the community to help. We have added links to some pre- and post-election events and resources to our "[Ready, Set, VOTE!](#)" [web page](#). I encourage you to create plans for different election scenarios and build on the strengths you have as individuals and the resources and strategies that have helped in past crises.



Matthew Chamberlin, Director of Gillings Communications and Marketing, voted with his son, Truman, a UNC-Chapel Hill first-year student and first-time voter. Yeah, Truman and Matthew!

For some people, the sense of unease is an acute, traumatic experience that requires professional help. Here are some resources: [CAPS](#) (students) and [Employee Assistance Program](#) (faculty and staff).

Prevention. For right now, when the outcome of the election is still to be written by the voters of this country, the best strategy is prevention: Vote. Vote today if you can. If not, have a plan. Do not let it get away from you. This is not an election to watch from the sidelines. The outcome will affect how we live for decades to come, who matters, whether we become more equitable, and whether we begin to address with urgency the huge environmental issues before us.

Stay well, wear masks, follow other rules and vote.

Gratefully,

Barbara K. Rimer