

From: Barbara K. Rimer, DrPH, Dean and Alumni Distinguished Professor
Laura Linnan, ScD, Senior Associate Dean for Academic and Student Affairs;
Professor, Health Behavior

Re: Important Decision about Spring 2022 Semester at Gillings

Date: Friday, January 7, 2022

Purpose of this message. The purpose of this message is to explain how we will navigate the start of spring semester at Gillings and to share information that will help you plan accordingly. In short, due to expected high rates of infection from the Omicron variant of COVID-19, and to minimize disruption with a mixed set of demands on students and faculty, **we believe it is prudent to adopt remote instruction for the next three weeks.** We are very sorry for the disruption this will undoubtedly cause. Below we share the process and reasons for coming to this conclusion. As always, our touchstones of flexibility, adaptability and kindness are the foundation of our planning efforts.

Recent communications. We previously wrote to students on Dec 23 and faculty and staff on Dec 22 (and again on Jan 4) with updates about spring semester. There have been [several communications](#) from Provost Blouin and Chancellor Guskiewicz about spring semester, most recently, yesterday. Their messages affirm that Carolina is committed to a residential program with in-person classes for the full spring semester. We are part of a campus, and our policies must be aligned.

At the same time, individual UNC-Chapel Hill **schools have flexibility to support changes in mode-of-instruction that best meet pedagogical and health needs of students and faculty.** At Gillings, our leadership team has actively monitored this situation. We have sought and received input from faculty, staff, students, and colleagues across campus. We have been in regular contact with our infectious disease experts here at Gillings and on campus and know from them that we can expect high rates of infection this month. The safety and health of students, staff and faculty remain paramount. For this reason, **we believe the best public health decision for our staff, students and faculty is to adopt remote instruction for the first couple of weeks this semester with the full intention of returning to in-person instruction, unless public health and safety dictate otherwise, the week that begins with Monday, January 31.** This decision is consistent with a consensus vote of our school leadership team. We know it will disappoint some that we will start entirely in remote status, but the intent remains to be in-person by the end of January.

Classes Offered at Gillings: As context, the majority (though not all) instructors had already received approval to move their classes to remote status for the beginning of the semester. We remain committed to in-person instruction and, once the peak transmissibility period is past, we expect to return to this modality, also providing faculty with the flexibility to adjust for student/faculty illnesses, and other reasons for absences, as they do now. **Instructors** should **record all class sessions** so students who are absent for any reason can access the information

they missed. **Students should communicate with instructors if they are sick or have other reasons to be absent, as they normally would. Faculty members should have back-up plans** in the event they are sick and must miss class.

Rationale for Remote Start. As alluded to above, several forces over the last few days led to our decision to start the semester remotely: an [analysis of projected cases on campus](#); when the Omicron variant is expected to peak; and an increasing number of requests by faculty members to hold their classes remotely for the next two to three weeks. We also considered a letter signed by over 100 Gillings master's students urging us to either go remote completely for the entire semester OR offer all hybrid courses. And, we considered the impact of our decision on our international students who hold F-1 visas and are only allowed limited remote instruction. The temporary change to start in remote mode does not get changed in Connect Carolina and will NOT negatively impact our international students.

Focus on Flexibility: Going forward in February, we remain committed to supporting flexibility for faculty members and their students to adapt to the pandemic in ways that facilitate health, well-being and learning. Students, faculty members and staff are not homogenous groups. They have individual complexities and preferences that we have respected throughout the pandemic, trying to provide avenues for those who need the support systems that come from being in person while also accommodating students who are more comfortable working remotely. Our faculty and staff have done an amazing and creative job in meeting these widely varying needs, and we ask for that ongoing commitment. We also expect students to adapt to faculty members' changing needs – they too experience illness, family hardships, caregiving responsibilities and more. Transparent communication is critically important as we navigate these next few weeks. We will not get our first choices in every decision, but compromises should be made on the foundation of the best science and needs of our people. We will get through this together.

The Challenge Ahead: We recognize that, no matter what we do, it will be a challenging semester. Many people will get COVID-19. The majority will be asymptomatic or have mild symptoms. We have demonstrated that we can teach safely, and that when students and faculty get sick, it is not because of transmission in the classroom. Nevertheless, there will be a lot of people experiencing COVID-19 positivity due to the Omicron variant. That is a given no matter what we do. It will be upsetting and potentially disruptive.

Individually and collectively, we can mitigate risk and maximize health for everyone by using masks, preferably KN-95 or N95 masks (or surgical masks but not cloth masks or gaiters), getting vaccinated and boosted, staying home when symptomatic, ensuring good ventilation, taking appropriate steps in the face of known exposures and distancing to the extent possible. We strongly encourage you all to follow those behaviors now. When we return to the classroom, we will continue to disallow eating and drinking in class and encourage maximum use of outdoor spaces, weather permitting!

FAQs and information updates. Last semester, we shared a detailed set of FAQs – which we updated and shared regularly – to help everyone understand processes for responding to illness and protecting our community. We will update and circulate that again next week. In the meantime, please consult guidance on the [Carolina Together](#) website. Also, please join us on **Monday, January 10, from 12:30-2:00pm**, for a **COVID Conversation with David Weber, MD, MPH, Sanders Distinguished Professor of Medicine and Pediatrics and Professor of**

Epidemiology. Dr. Weber will share up-to-the-minute information and answer questions, as he has done many times over the past two years. [Register here](#). We will post this Covid Conversation on the Gillings website [here](#) if you cannot attend.

We hope this communication answers many of your concerns. For our part, we are continuing to monitor the situation very closely and will reach out to you immediately if there are any additional changes in plans.

As public health professionals, we are saddened that our nation, state and university are once again at an inflection point due to COVID. We ask all of you – all of us – to come together once again to do everything in our power to support each other and to use the proven tools we have – vaccines, boosters, high-quality masks, meeting outdoors when we can, using online teaching and learning modalities, if needed – to protect our own and others’ life and health, even as we seek to preserve as much normalcy as possible. **Our engagement with each other, including the intellectual engagement of attending classes, is also a critical tool for health.** Please be engaged in your classes; stay in touch with friends, family, faculty, staff and colleagues. Students, reach out to your academic advisor or other student affairs staff for support and guidance; participate in our support pods. As soon as a person can be hired, we will have a counselor embedded at Gillings. Staff members, be in touch you’re your supervisor regarding any updates you may need to make in flexible work arrangements. We will be back in touch soon. Thank you for your support. Wishing all of a safe, healthy and successful spring semester!