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## Words of Encouragement and Faculty Wisdom

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Sun, Jan 9, 2022 at 10:46 PM

To: Stella Anderson <andersnse@appstate.edu>

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Bcc: burkebj@appstate.edu

Dear Colleagues

We want to take this opportunity to provide faculty with some encouragement in this challenging time of preparing for the start of the semester tomorrow. While we did not succeed in our effort to convince Chancellor Everts or Provost Norris to implement what the clear majority of faculty believe are needed, additional measures, we have full faith that faculty will move forward in doing what is needed for a safe and productive semester. We certainly hope faculty can make decisions about their classes they believe are right and best and that no faculty would fear repercussions for doing so. Also, in this challenging time, many faculty are likely struggling with what to communicate to students, perhaps even colleagues. We offer the following message that our colleague Rick Rheingans has prepared as an open letter to the student body in the hope it will prove helpful as we all think about and plan for these conversations with our own students.

Stella Anderson, Brian Burke, Emily Dakin, Nancy Love, Randy Reed and Rick Rheingans

Dear Appalachian Students,

We know many of you have already received messages from your individual instructors about covid and the coming semester. As those thousands of individual conversations are happening, it struck me that we need a broader conversation about how we get through this safely and while ensuring that you get the quality education you deserve.

Let me start by saying that I am writing this as an individual faculty member, just one more member of our community. I'm not writing this in any official capacity. That being said, I do bring some expertise to the issue. Earlier in my career I worked at the CDC and I spent more than two decades teaching in schools of public health. Most of my research publications focus on modeling effects of social dynamics on infectious disease in resource poor settings. However, I am not a COVID epidemiologist or disease modeler.

Like students, faculty have diverse perspectives on the pandemic. However, I'm confident that we all are making a sincere effort to find the right balance that ensures quality education and a safe environment for you, the faculty, staff, and our broader community. Unfortunately, in many ways we are left to figure this out for ourselves because the university is failing to provide the leadership, guidance, and support that students, faculty, and the broader community needs.

In so many ways, the Appalachian State administration has failed us throughout this pandemic and now, despite a month of warning that we would face another major covid surge, they have done virtually nothing to set us up for a safe, undisrupted semester. There are many things they could do, including requiring vaccines and boosters, providing better masks, better testing and tracing, clearer and more thorough quarantine requirements, clearer guidelines and support for faculty for dealing with student sickness and prolonged absences, and possibly beginning online temporarily to ensure an orderly semester. It seems extremely unlikely, however, that the university will make any policy changes that protect us beyond the CDC's minimal guidelines. The Chancellor even refused to meet with faculty to discuss these measures and told Faculty Senate that the university's safety officer would never take questions from faculty again.

Given this leadership vacuum, the only hope left is us. You and me. Students and faculty. If App's leaders are no more capable of

delivering a safe, undisturbed, high-quality learning environment now than they were two years ago, then it's up to us to become our own leaders. I don't have all of the answers, but I want to offer this e-mail as a starting point for a serious conversation about how we can take responsibility for our own health in order to reclaim our university and get the education you all deserve. I am focusing here on individual precautions, though we may follow up soon with details about collective actions we can take as well.

**Vaccines: “fully vaccinated is not fully protected.”** While a single dose of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine or two doses of an mRNA vaccine may categorize you as technically “fully vaccinated,” you are by no means fully protected—nor are the people around you! If we want to stay safe and maximize in-person learning over the semester, we all need boosters. If you haven't been boosted you are at risk and you are a risk to others. Now boosters will not guarantee that you do not get covid, but they will decrease the likelihood that you get covid, they'll decrease the likelihood you pass it on to others, they'll decrease the likelihood you get severely ill, and they'll decrease the strain on local hospitals and health workers. As a community, I personally think it is each of our responsibility to ensure that we are boosted. You deserve that, so do faculty, staff, and the community.

**Masks: wear the right one and wear it right.** Properly worn face masks reduce your risk of being exposed and reduce the chance that you will inadvertently expose others. Properly worn face masks are also university policy and the rule in most classes. I insist on properly worn masks in my classes because they increase the chances that we will all be able to continue with in-person instruction, and they decrease the chances of returning to the isolating and emotionally unhealthy learning environments of a year ago. I watched too many students and faculty suffer through those months and I do not want that to happen again.

Unfortunately, many cloth masks (including the university-provided ones) do not fit well and provide lower levels of protection. No one should have to take time out of class to remind others to wear their masks properly. We can all do this ourselves. Also no one should have to sit in a room with people who don't make the effort to have well-fitting masks. During the fall I started wearing a medical respirator (e.g. N95, KN95 or KF94) because they are more effective than cloth masks at filtering viral particles and tend to fit better than surgical masks. This difference is even more important with omicron because it is much more transmissible. Many universities have made medical masks a requirement. Some have provided these for free to students. Others have made it a strong recommendation.

Recent messages from the university have failed to emphasize the value of better masks. I appreciate that none of us actually like wearing masks. That's not why we do it. We should collectively agree to wear better masks (and expect others to do so as well) because it keeps us safer and it allows more of us to remain safely in person for longer.

**Testing and Quarantining.** CDC guidelines on quarantine following exposure state that we should “test on day five if possible.” A recent summary I received from the university left this out. I'm left to wonder whether we are expected to test, requested to test, or recommended to test. But this is another instance when we should all, collectively, hold ourselves to a higher standard of safety and community respect than the university requires.

I've been exposed to covid and I know it is not easy to quarantine. You can come up with a million stories to explain that you are safer than most people so you shouldn't have to put your normal life on pause. For me, it helped to remind myself of what's at stake. How will I feel if I do have covid and I'm the one who infects that elderly woman at the grocery store? Or if I get my friend sick and they lose their job after taking too much time off? These are real risks, and it's not worth it.

Unfortunately, this is one of the places where students are most hurt by the lack of a university policy and university support. I'm concerned that many students don't have the ability to isolate as needed because of their living and working situations, and because they don't have easy remote learning options. After two years of constantly shifting between in-person and online teaching, often while simultaneously supervising our own school-age kids, and while dealing with a small minority of “bad apples” who use online options as an excuse for coasting, I understand why my colleagues don't want to offer online options or don't have the bandwidth to do so.

After two years of the pandemic this still is not systematically addressed. The Chancellor writes to students telling them to talk to faculty about short-term remote options, but I have not heard a single message or policy or strategy regarding what that would realistically look like for faculty. What are we expected to do when 25% of students are on rolling remote options? What support do faculty need to do that? What happens when faculty say they can't or won't? There seems little path to policy change on this and at this late stage there seems to be little path to prepare in non-policy ways. I do think there may be ways to push this a bit by

highlighting the irresponsibility of telling students to talk to their faculty about remote options without supporting or talking to faculty. Would it help to get faculty stories about this? What about student stories or a survey of how many were effectively forced to attend class sick because there was no real policy on accommodation. I think it could be helpful to point out how the failure to act creates risky behaviors.

The university is messaging very clearly through public means and internal official channels that Appalachian will keep in-person classes in-person. There may be some changes but faculty have been given little guidance on how or when we can move classes temporarily online to ensure safety. Other UNC campuses and schools have announced temporary short-term moves to online classes to avoid the surge in infections and disruption that we are facing. It would be so helpful to have some guidance, but we are essentially told to figure it out ourselves or talk to our chairs.

In this vacuum of practical guidance from above, it is up to us to figure this out. Let's start by being compassionate.. Other students and faculty are trying to find the right balance of safety and quality education. Let's be supportive. Many of us are going to be put in a difficult situation over the coming weeks and we need the support of others. Lastly, let's collaborate. Many of us have been waiting for clear guidance from above. In the absence of that we need each other.

Thanks,  
Rick Rheingans  
Professor  
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