Preparing for Fall 2021

Dear Colleagues,

Planning for the fall 2021 semester is already underway, and current and prospective students are searching for clues that help them determine the kind of experience they can expect and inform their decisions.

We know it’s impossible to predict what the landscape of COVID-19 will be in seven months, with new variants in the mix, new vaccines rolling out, and new administration at the federal level to coordinate efforts that promote public health and safety. All these elements can significantly affect our ability to return to campus. So as we plan for fall 2021 semester, we will assume the best and remain prepared for the possibility of the worst. We know we can move quickly to take our classes, programs and services online if needed. Building from the promising news of COVID-19 vaccines, and in conjunction with safety practices and measures already in place, we will be intentional about planning for the scenario of further re-opening KU’s Lawrence and Edwards campuses so we are able to offer most classes through an in-person format for the coming fall semester. Of course, we will vigilantly monitor the public health situation, as we have, and we will be nimble and, if we need to, pivot as we get closer to the next academic year.

Instructors, as you work to schedule classes and develop courses, please do so with the view that campus offices will be open and most classes and labs will be in person. Instructors who require an online format for a course that had been in-person before the pandemic will need to secure approval from the dean of their academic unit. Deans will be in contact with instructors regarding criteria and standards they will apply with respect to online teaching in fall and a timeline for instructors to make appropriate arrangements. In the initial stages of the pandemic, instructors had more freedom to determine format based on safety and their level of concern. As we progress through the pandemic, and with the expectation that conditions will
improve with time, the university must resume in-person teaching.

This goal to have courses return to an in-person format is more than wishful thinking; it is our mission and it’s the unique value we provide to our students. It is also an integral component of our institution’s fiscal recovery, which is based on our ability to attract students and support them through timely graduation. Our success in this effort affects not only our students, it impacts each and every one of us and the university’s ability to serve our broader missions of research and service, and educating the leaders of tomorrow. Enrollment and other metrics this past fall and leading into spring make clear that students want – and many of our students greatly need – a residential college experience and in-person interaction.

Even though we must respond to this market-driven fact, the health and safety of our campus community are still guiding principles as we progress through the pandemic. Our protective efforts enacted for fall 2020 demonstrated that our campus modifications and safety measures for offices, laboratories and in-person classes were effective in mitigating the spread of the virus. De-densifying our spaces was an important measure, and adding more people to our spaces may raise concern among some individuals. Our planning shows our facilities and classrooms can accommodate a significant increase in class sections over our current schedule and still comply with CDC guidelines. In addition, our facilities team has worked through the academic break to modify additional classroom spaces and augment air filtration systems to stem the spread of COVID-19. Our hope is that given time we will be able to gradually ease some of the safety measures that have affected research, scholarship and creative activity. Until then, it is important that we diligently follow the guidelines that have kept our students, staff, instructors and researchers safe.

I, and I know many of you, remain hopeful that the vaccines being administered will protect the general health of our community. Despite these advances, we should anticipate that there are many unknowns that may complicate our efforts. Our Unified Command team, the Pandemic Medical Advisory Team and a number of other campus teams continue to monitor conditions and will make informed recommendations to KU leadership. As we work to restore our institution, we will not lose sight of our goal to protect ourselves and others. While no one desires an abrupt shift to online courses as we did in March 2020, we know how to transition to online should we need to in order to better protect the health of our students, employees and the community. We also will look for lessons learned and will evaluate the how our offices and staff have functioned over the past 10 months to identify ways we can best meet the needs of students and constituents, while also providing personnel with the benefits of flexibility, adequate support and improved
Thank you for all you’ve done to persevere through these difficult times and to serve the Jayhawk community. Our team has created a web form that will allow you to offer suggestions and ask questions, or you can send an email to provost@ku.edu. Please take care of yourselves and continue to follow all precautions and guidelines.

Respectfully,

Barb

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