



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

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Message from the Office of the President

June 14, 2021 — Sent Systemwide

Dear students, faculty and staff,

For more than a year, throughout this pandemic, you have been patient and kind. You have embraced simple and effective habits to elevate and protect each other's health, wellbeing, and safety. And you have been most generous in reaching out to share important thoughts and expectations about the pandemic, including what you deem best for our campus communities and ways to minimize risk. Over recent weeks, I have heard from many of you about the new academic year and what it might look like to learn, live, work, discover, and serve as a member of our campus community this fall. For many, there is great excitement about the possibility of a full in-person campus experience. For others, there is some concern about a return to campus, and we understand and respect those concerns.

As we continue to make important pandemic-related decisions together as a University, we remain grounded in guidance from the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH), the infection and vaccination rates of our campus' surrounding communities, and insights from our own internationally renowned public health and medical experts. This collective information and expertise has kept our COVID-19 rates at some of the lowest among our peers and has guided us, along with extensive consultation with you, to decide that the University will not require that students, faculty, and staff be vaccinated against COVID-19 prior to the start of the fall semester. Be assured that we remain vigilant and nimble and our assessment is ongoing even as pandemic conditions in Minnesota and the nation improve.

The rationale for this decision

Similar to every step of our pandemic response, it is challenging to address everyone's individual circumstance through any single University-wide approach. Vaccination is no different. It is a complex and personal issue. For example, among parents of children younger than 12, the childhood risks of COVID-19 continue to be a reality. However, tests of the vaccine are underway for children as young as 6 months old, and FDA approval of a vaccine for ages 5 through 11 is expected in early fall. Immunocompromised employees, students, or their household members also continue to be top of mind for our community. These individuals are encouraged to work through their campus' disability resources or human resources teams to address those concerns.

After consultation with our internal community and after seeking advice from public health and medical experts, we are putting the full weight of the University behind access to vaccines and information about the benefits of vaccination. Public health experts note that a 100% vaccination rate is not possible in any situation and the most effective strategy is access and information.

More importantly, more than 65% of Minnesotans older than 16 have stepped up to protect their communities and have already received at least one vaccine dose; an important measure in assessing safety on our campuses. Hennepin and Ramsey counties are now both over 74%, Olmsted County (Rochester campus) is over 79%, St. Louis County (Duluth campus) is over 65%, and Polk and Stevens counties (respectively the Crookston and Morris campuses) are both over 54%. MDH notes that within each county it is likely that the cities with a local healthcare institution—as in the case of Duluth, Morris, and Crookston—are likely to have a higher vaccination rate than the county as a whole simply due to ease of access.

Taking steps to enhance accessibility to vaccines and encouraging the University community's participation in our efforts is an effective way to achieve a safe fall semester. This approach is very similar to our M Test approach from last fall, which proved that clear messaging can be as effective, if not more effective, than mandatory policies. In fact, MDH did not confirm a single cluster or outbreak in any University of Minnesota environment since the start of the peacetime emergency.

Many members of the University community have already answered the call. A survey of Twin Cities students, faculty, and staff conducted in May showed 96% of respondents had received at least one vaccine dose or reported plans to be vaccinated, while 84% reported they were fully vaccinated. This is a great start that I hope is embraced across all our campus communities, and is also an important factor in assessing our safety and the safety of those we care for.

“Get the Vax”

If you are in that small remaining group that hasn't yet been vaccinated, we ask that you support our “Get the Vax” plan. Evidence overwhelmingly shows that being vaccinated is the single most important step you can take to prevent serious illness and protect others. So if you haven't been vaccinated yet, I urge you to [Get the Vax](#) as soon as possible. The State of Minnesota has a [comprehensive vaccination locator](#) and you can always call your primary care provider for more information.

As we look ahead, the University is committed to increasing vaccination rates in our campus communities, while also helping enhance accessibility and providing information to those with questions or concerns about the COVID-19 vaccine. Here are important things to remember:

- *The University will make vaccines accessible to our community in partnership with state and local organizations.* Enough vaccine doses exist for anyone in Minnesota 12 years old or older.
- *Vaccines currently available are the safest and most effective in the world.* Medical and public health experts agree that risks associated with the vaccine are far less than those associated with COVID-19.
- *We will respect individual choices.* Some may choose not to be vaccinated for medical, religious, or other reasons. Others may choose to continue to wear masks—even if they are vaccinated—for any number of valid medical reasons. We will respect these individual decisions and expect each member of our community to show the same respect to others.
- *The University is committed to protecting your privacy.* The University will not ask individuals to disclose their vaccination status to their fellow students, instructors, or coworkers.
- For our faculty, staff, and student employees, please reference [Office of Human Resources guidance](#) for details on returning to the workplace if you haven't done so already.
- *As part of our commitment, the University's Wellbeing Program will offer points during next year's wellbeing program* for those employees and spouses who have been vaccinated. These points will be a significant portion of the overall points needed to realize the premium reduction in 2023.

Ongoing public health considerations

While the data show that being vaccinated helps protect you and others from COVID-19, we also know that other public health precautions help us all stay healthier. Please continue to:

- Stay home when you are sick.
- For any reason you wish, wear a mask, and support those who choose to do so.
- Practice good hygiene habits, such as washing your hands frequently.
- Seek testing through [MTest](#) and follow isolation and quarantine instructions, in accordance with current public health guidance.
- Know that just as with the start of the pandemic, anxiety will surely be high for many of our friends and colleagues. Mental health resources exist for students, staff, and faculty and we strongly encourage you to use them when you believe necessary.

This pandemic continues to challenge all of us with new information, new concerns, and new solutions. Our collective ability to deal with this change will continue to be a challenge, but the University is prepared to support [faculty and staff](#) and students, whenever you need it. Students can find resources unique to their campuses at:

- [Crookston](#)
- [Duluth](#)
- [Morris](#)
- [Rochester](#)
- [Twin Cities](#)

Our choices make all of the difference in preventing the spread of COVID-19, for ourselves and also for our friends, colleagues, and our entire community. Thank you for all you have done to keep each other healthy, safe, and well, and I look forward, as I know all the Chancellors do, to seeing you around campus soon.

With warmest regards,
Joan Gabel