

January 14th, 2022

Dear Campus Community,

I had hoped to use the occasion of my winter campus update to highlight some of the exciting activities going on around campus in this new quarter in this new year (I look forward to sharing more of that in my next letter). Instead, I'm going to look back over the last several weeks to explain more fully how we made the decisions to move to remote instruction.

As recently as December 13, plans were in full swing for a return to in-person instruction on January 3, and we [announced our consolidation](#) from the five COVID working groups formed under emergency conditions in March 2020 into a single coordination committee to manage our ongoing response within the normal organizational structure of the university. Just a week later, on December 21, we [announced that UCR would begin winter quarter with two weeks of remote instruction](#), noting the emergence of the Omicron variant. And 17 days after that, on January 7, we [announced a two-week extension](#) of remote instruction.

These decisions were not made in haste. First, they were based on the alarming evidence that [daily national case counts](#) had increased more than fivefold from 118,000 to 648,000 in less than four weeks and that the new Omicron variant was wildly contagious. They were also based, in a sense, on the absence of evidence, namely, that nobody could say with any certainty how dangerous, long-lasting, or deadly the disease caused by the Omicron variant might be.

Second, they involved consultation with a wide array of colleagues. We coordinate closely with the other UC campuses. During that week in December, throughout the winter break, and into early January, Chancellor Wilcox met often with the chancellors, President Drake, and Executive Vice President Dr. Carrie Byington, who leads UC Health and is an expert in pediatric viral respiratory pathogens, to assess the situation and compare plans. Similarly, here at UCR, the COVID coordination group, the public health advisory group, and the chancellor's executive team (which consists of the chancellor, provost, vice chancellors, associate chancellor, and chief counsel), the chair of the Academic Senate, and the chair of the COVID coordination group were in almost constant communication. Gerry Bomotti, Vice Chancellor for Planning, Budget, and Administration, consulted with staff leaders, and Dr. Brian Haynes, Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, consulted with student leaders.

So, why did we decide to begin winter quarter with two weeks of remote instruction? On December 21, none of our metrics were particularly worrisome (most students had left the campus for winter break), but projections did not look good for January. We considered a short delay—perhaps a few days—before starting in-person instruction, to allow time to test students and employees returning to campus. In acknowledgement of the likelihood of positive case increases after holiday gatherings, the need to conduct more testing before repopulating the campus, the uncertainty about the impending magnitude of the Omicron wave, and our guiding principle of putting health and safety first, we decided to err on the side of caution with a two-week delay. Delaying in-person instruction until January 18 would, we thought at the

time, allow us to bring students back more gradually to relieve pressure on our testing and isolation/quarantine resources, and it would allow more time for anticipated positive cases to resolve before classes began. The options of a short delay or no delay at all wouldn't provide these advantages, and we would then be faced with the challenges of having many students and instructors unable to come to campus for in-person instruction. We were not alone in making this decision: Stanford announced its plan for two weeks of remote instruction on December 16, and over the next week, all the quarter-system UCs announced their plans to go remote.

Why did we decide to extend two weeks of remote instruction to a total of four weeks? Within the first few days of winter quarter, it was clear that our metrics and other parts of our operation were straining under the weight of the Omicron variant. By the end of the week, our testing had identified more than 800 positive cases among students and employees. Our established isolation space for students, including off-campus space at local hotels, was full. Our test positivity rate was around 16%, lower than in the surrounding county but high by any standard. In addition, many staff who are critical for in-person operations—including those in housing, dining, and our healthcare functions—were required to isolate or quarantine. Similar situations were developing at other UC campuses, mirroring the rapid rise in cases across the country and world. It seemed irresponsible (given our case rate and the still-rising Omicron spike) and untenable (given staff absences) to stick with the original date of January 18 for return to in-person instruction. Most UC campuses came to similar conclusions and delayed in-person instruction until January 31.

What happens next? I have to be honest: we don't yet know. Our dedicated staff will continue to keep campus operations running. Our amazing faculty and students will persevere in navigating the challenges of instructional modality changes and remote classes. We understand continued remote learning is frustrating for many, and we worry about the negative impact on our students' ability to move successfully through their curricula toward timely graduation. We weigh those concerns against concerns about the spread of COVID-19. We continue to track a series of metrics, including UCR test positivity and case rates, UCR isolation/quarantine space availability, Riverside County test positivity and case rates, and Riverside County ICU bed capacity. There is no definitive algorithm that we can use to inform decision-making, because there are still so many unknowns about the Omicron variant. Public health experts ([here](#) and [here](#)) are predicting the Omicron wave will peak by next week and then decline steeply thereafter. If these predictions are accurate, then we have good reason to remain optimistic about our planned return to in-person instruction on January 31. Stay tuned, and thanks again for your understanding, flexibility, and compassion for one another.

Before closing, let me note a few non-COVID updates.

1. Campus Safety Workgroup

Back in March 2021 (before I officially began as provost!), Chancellor Wilcox [announced](#) that I would be leading a to-be-formed committee on campus safety, in response to the [Campus Safety Task Force Report](#). The [Campus Safety Workgroup](#), composed of students, faculty, staff,

and community members, first convened in August. The group met six times during the fall quarter and will continue to meet through the end of spring quarter 2022. So far, the group has advised Associate Vice Chancellor Denise Woods on staff hiring for the new Health, Wellbeing, and Safety unit and has monitored progress made at UCR toward the implementation of actions outlined in the [UC Presidential Community Safety Plan](#). The plan is for the workgroup to transition into a standing advisory committee on campus safety by July 1; if you have interest in serving a term on that committee, please forward your name to [Erin Schuster](#).

2. Anti-bullying policy

This new campus policy went into effect on December 1, 2021. Please review the [announcement](#) and [full policy](#) and direct any questions you may have to the Chief Compliance Office at policy@ucr.edu.

3. WASC site visit

As previously announced, our regional accreditor, the WASC Senior College and University Commission, has scheduled a remote accreditation visit for February 10-11. More information about the visit, including the campus report, can be found [here](#). The visiting team recently finalized the schedule of meetings, and my office will soon reach out to confirm participation by faculty and staff who were asked to hold the visit dates. All members of our campus community will have the opportunity to contact the visiting team directly through a confidential email account and to attend the remote exit meeting scheduled for Friday, February 11, at 11:30 a.m. More information, including the email account address and Zoom link for the exit meeting, will be shared with the campus in the coming weeks. If you have any questions, please contact Associate Provost [Ken Baerenklau](#).

If you've read this far, thank you for your attention! And thank you for all that you do at UCR in your normal roles as well as in the abnormal roles you've taken on over the past two years. The people are what make UCR truly special, and I couldn't be more honored to work alongside you.

Sincerely,

Liz

Elizabeth Watkins, PhD (she/her/hers)
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