Dear Faculty and Staff,

As we near the beginning of the fall term, we find ourselves in a fourth wave of rapidly increasing COVID-19 infection and hospitalization. The scientific community continues to provide us with tools and understanding to win the battle against this evolving threat, and it is incumbent upon us, collectively and individually, to act. As such, we have issued revised [systemic guidelines](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.ulsystem.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Fall-2021-GUIDING-PRINCIPLES.pdf&sa=D&source=hangouts&ust=1627997262312000&usg=AFQjCNHuJUSL2zizmWK0zXOCuLU7Cf1xNA) to inform university COVID-19 mitigation efforts and policy.

Since the beginning of the global pandemic, the UL System and our nine member institutions have operated under a framework built on a hierarchy of guiding principles:

*All planning conducted, decisions made, and actions taken by UL System institutions, collectively and individually, shall adhere to the following hierarchy of principles:*

1. *The health and safety of students, faculty, staff, and our communities are paramount.*
2. *The continuity of learning and research must be maintained, adapting to fulfill Principle 1 as appropriate and necessary.*
3. *The financial health and viability of the enterprise must be protected and are dependent upon the fulfillment of Principles 1 and 2.*
4. *The social, emotional, and economic welfare of our communities must be considered and are dependent upon the fulfillment of Principles 1, 2, and 3.*

The expert guidance of national, state, and local public health officials will continue to inform our work. The recommendations of the CDC are particularly informative and serve as our guidepost. The recent update of those recommendations is in response to the data associated with the Delta variant, now the predominant variant in Louisiana and across the country. The viral load associated with this variant is roughly 1,000 times higher than the original strain, making Delta twice as transmissible. In accordance with the new recommendations, masks will be required in classrooms and all indoor public spaces at UL System universities in areas of high or substantial transmission (currently, all of Louisiana).

Vaccination remains the most effective tool in combatting the virus. The vaccines remain highly effective in protecting the vaccinated from severe disease, hospitalization, and death even against the highly transmissible Delta variant. Symptomatic breakthrough infection remains uncommon; however, data indicate the vaccinated who are infected may transmit the virus at similar levels to the unvaccinated. This is further support for universal masking in our facilities. Masking provides significant benefits to all in the community and enhances the remarkable personal protection afforded by the vaccines. A cloth mask traps respiratory droplets that are released when the wearer talks, coughs or sneezes. It also acts as a barrier to protect the wearer from inhaling droplets released by others. The higher viral loads associated with infected unvaccinated and vaccinated individuals makes mitigating spread through respiratory droplets even more essential.

We will continue to provide easy access to vaccination to all in our university communities. We are also providing informational and educational programming through multiple outlets to ensure our communities have an accurate, science-informed understanding of vaccine safety and efficacy.

For students, we have petitioned the Louisiana Department of Health to add COVID-19 vaccination to the required immunization schedules at all nine of our member institutions upon FDA approval of one or more of the vaccines. We expect that FDA approval in the coming weeks, and all universities will communicate the new requirement to continuing and entering students now for planning purposes.

Some have asked why we have not mandated the vaccine now. A great deal of misinformation and inaccurate messaging has permeated media reports, social media activity, and even public health pronouncements concerning university mandates. Louisiana is one of 15 states that provides for philosophical dissent from immunization requirements. No educational institution can mandate vaccination as a condition of attendance, even the private institutions that have added the authorized vaccines to their immunization schedules, unless the office of public health recommends the unvaccinated are excluded from attendance. That recommendation has not been made, and very likely cannot be made until an FDA approved vaccine is available. The immunization statute was not enacted to address a widespread public health crisis caused by a novel virus.

As public entities, our policies and pronouncements produce different effects and have broader impacts than those of private entities. CDC Director Walensky recently noted some people are “allergic” to mandates. This effect is decidedly more pronounced with public mandates. In this circumstance, the available “mandates” are paperwork mandates, not vaccine mandates. In effect, the available mandate is: show us you are vaccinated, provide a physician’s documentation that vaccination is medically contraindicated, or “tell us you do not want to.” Contributing to the false narrative by indicating public universities are mandating authorized but not approved vaccination would result in a backlash that would likely diminish our public and community health goal of increasing vaccination. Our efforts are better focused on dispelling misinformation and providing those in our communities the clear and compelling evidence of the extraordinary reduction in personal risk provided by vaccination. The expected approval from FDA, long the gold standard of pharmaceutical safety and efficacy, will be the catalyst that removes vaccination hesitancy among many in the general public.

If we have learned anything over the past 18 months, we should expect change. We will go through more cycles of hope, frustration, fear, and optimism. Public health guidance will evolve, often building on prior guidance, at times contradicting prior guidance. We will debate and disagree with each other, and even when we are in lockstep, we will not have to look far to find dissenters. Throughout, we will stay true to those guiding principles. Thank you for your ideas, your scholarship, your support of our students, and your commitment to learning.

For your Future. For our Future.

Dr. Jim Henderson  
President and CEO  
University of Louisiana System