

August 28, 2020

Subj: Reopening the University – Message 16

Dear Faculty, Staff, and Students,

By now you have probably seen or heard about Fr. John's announcement that we will begin a phased reopening of in-person classes next week. We write to provide added context. The [decision](#) announced by Fr. John this morning revolved around three critical questions:

- 1) Have we gotten beyond the surge that occurred last week, peaking August 17-19?
- 2) Can we respond quickly, effectively, and early to signs that cases are rising?
- 3) Have we made appropriate adaptations to ensure the appropriate level of care and support for our community?

Below, we address each of these questions.

Have we gotten beyond the surge?

Our numbers are looking much better:

- The number of cases diagnosed daily has declined substantially from our peaks last week, but we are still seeing new cases.
- The total number of tests we are doing has increased. Our overall positivity rate since August 3 (# positive tests/total # of tests) is 10.2%. Our positivity rate from August 20-25 is 6.3%.
- Our surveillance testing positivity rate is 0.8% over 1400+ (non-athletics) tests.
- The number of "true new" Red Pass A's (have one of the three major symptoms and have not already been diagnosed with COVID-19) has declined consistently into the low teens. Please note that not all of these cases turn out to be COVID-19. There is definitely something else with flu-like symptoms going around, which is typical for the start of the academic year.
- We are moving students out of quarantine that have been cleared through the Day 4/7 protocol, and the number of students moving out of quarantine is greater than the number moving into quarantine.

What Might We Expect in the Next Few Days

We had 85+ cases on each of August 17, 18, and 19, all of whom generated close contacts. The close contacts are in quarantine or isolation. For students who are close contacts, we conduct a PCR test on Day 4. If that is positive, they move from quarantine to isolation. If that is negative, they remain in quarantine, and we conduct a rapid antigen test on Day 7. If the rapid antigen test on Day 7 is negative, the student is cleared and released from quarantine. If it is positive, they move from quarantine to isolation. Importantly, we are required to keep students in quarantine for at least 7 days, regardless of when the close contact occurred with known positive cases.

We have been conducting Day 4 and Day 7 testing on the close contacts from the beginning of the August 17-19 peak. Because the positivity rates are higher for these quarantine groups, our case numbers may increase in the next few days. Importantly, these students have all been in quarantine, so should not be contributing to further spread of the virus.

What Does Contact Tracing Tell Us?

We use contact tracing to identify close contacts of diagnosed cases of COVID-19 (see below), but also to assess how transmission is occurring. We use a combination of interviews, network analysis, class roster data matched up with students who have tested positive, and the contact report for each student that has been contact traced. We have also double-checked on HVAC air exchanges in classrooms where students who have been diagnosed positive take classes. Contact tracing is pointing clearly to social interactions, although more recently not large or even medium-sized parties, as the dominant contributor to transmission.

Can we respond quickly, effectively, and early to signs that cases are rising?

We have implemented a series of improvements that should allow us to identify rising case rates overall, as well as hotspots that may need immediate attention.

Surveillance Testing

We have now conducted more than 1,400 general (non-athletic) surveillance tests, with a positivity rate to date of 0.8%. We include undergraduate and graduate students, as well as faculty and staff in our surveillance testing. These tests are done quickly. As an example, during timed testing Wednesday morning, we processed 15 individuals in 15 minutes, from start to finish. Our work to launch saliva-based surveillance testing is proceeding, and we estimate we will be able to pilot this testing by September 2.

Tests Taken Elsewhere

We want to make it as easy as possible for students, faculty, and staff getting tested elsewhere to be able to share their test results with us. We hope the following solution makes this easier:

- Faculty & Staff: Take a photo of your test result and email it to the Notre Dame Wellness Center at ndocchealth@premisehealth.com
- Students (both undergraduate and graduate): Upload a photo of your test results through your student portal in UHS

Especially for the students, we will be pushing messages via social media and will publicize this on the HERE website.

Stadium Testing Center

We continue to improve our processes, from managing the daily health check information through scheduling and conducting tests at the stadium and beyond. Our daily throughput at the stadium over the past three days averaged 500 tests per day. We have added additional staff at the testing center not only to support this increased throughput, but also to create more redundancy across various roles. Demand for diagnostic, as opposed to surveillance tests, has declined substantially.

Contact Tracing

We now have 15 people on our contact tracing team. The August 17-19 surge in positive cases stressed our contact tracing efforts, but our new systems and expanded staff are contributing to high quality contact tracing. In addition, the data we are now capturing is much more useful to our network analysis.

Have we made appropriate adaptations to ensure the appropriate level of care and support for our community?

We learned an enormous amount during the August 17-19 surge, and have adapted our plans in a variety of ways.

Care and Wellness Team

We have separated the Care and Wellness Team from the Contact Tracing Team. The Care and Wellness Team is focused on making daily calls to all students in quarantine and isolation to check-in on them and to see if they need anything. We have more than 20 dedicated full-time people on this team and hundreds of staff volunteers covering shifts on the weekends to give other team members a break. The students in quarantine/isolation also have a single number they can now call with any questions or needs.

Quarantine and Isolation (Q/I)

We shared this previously, but it bears repeating that we have enough capacity to meet the need for isolation and quarantine space. We have added hundreds of quarantine and isolation spaces to our already existing inventory of beds over the last month, and we have the ability to add more if necessary. We also have a talented team making sure our students in Quarantine/Isolation are well taken care of including their meals. We have also improved WiFi coverage to ensure connectivity to their classes.

University Health Services and Wellness Center

With the addition of staff, University Health Services is now able to respond promptly to daytime calls and voicemails. We have streamlined the process for students to get tested at the stadium testing site based on responses to the daily health check. We have also worked with the Wellness Center to make it easier for faculty and staff to get tested at the stadium testing site.

Mental Health and Pastoral Needs

We know that the pandemic is the source of frustration, stress and anxiety, and that these natural reactions are further compounded not only by the regular pressures of a busy academic year, but also by the racial injustice that has become so obvious, and the uncertain economic picture in the country. While we continue to stress the importance of protecting our physical health, it is just as important to tend to our emotional health. Resources to help support our [emotional well-being](#) can be found on the [HERE](#) website. In addition, the CRU hotline can connect Notre Dame community members to counselors available 24/7 for immediate supportive conversations or for help identifying additional resources. The number is (574) 634-HERE (4373). These are very difficult times, and we must take care of ourselves and each other.

Conclusion

Based on a suite of different data streams, we believe we have gotten past the surge that occurred last week. We have better systems in place for detecting and quickly reacting to new cases in ways that are allowing us to contain the spread of the virus on campus. We have adapted and invested more resources to ensure we deliver the care that you are accustomed to at Notre Dame. We believe that we can safely and successfully resume in-person classes.

We will begin a phased approach for in-person classes on Wednesday, September 2, for all courses in the 10000 and 20000 families. In addition, deans, in consultation with department chairs, may choose to restart additional classes on September 2. This will be communicated to those instructors on Monday,

August 31, who will then communicate directly with their students. The remaining in-person courses will restart in-person on Monday, September 7.

All of these decisions are contingent upon continued improved compliance with public health protocols that we have observed since our “cool-down” period began on August 19.

Closing Thoughts

We are committed to providing timely updates on our progress both through our regular letters and through Notre Dame’s public dashboard. This past Monday (August 24), we launched an enhanced [COVID-19 dashboard](#) that provides significantly more data, including a rolling seven-day average of positive cases and drop-down menus that allow users to sort some of the data categories. We hope to add additional components to the dashboard in the days and weeks ahead.

While we are encouraged by the data trends, we would not be where we are now without your resiliency and commitment. For that, we are deeply grateful. We learned from your feedback and thank you for it. You made us better.

COVID-19 is a formidable foe, and we will all be living with it for the foreseeable future. While challenging, the act of struggling through this together builds both character and community. In resuming in-person classes, we seek to provide the support and engagement that our students need. We must remember our worthy goal: to shape the hearts and minds of young people and to be a force for good in the world.



After the rain yesterday, this rainbow appeared over the stadium testing center. We are making our decisions based on science; we are counting on the prayers of the Notre Dame community; and we are hoping this is a sign that the luck of the Irish will be with us as well as we move forward.

Please remember:

- Wear your mask
- Practice physical distancing
- Wash your hands regularly
- Complete your daily health check
- Show up when selected for surveillance testing

And be kind to each other and generous with yourself.

Yours in Notre Dame,

Marie Lynn Miranda, Provost
Shannon Cullinan, Executive Vice-President