

## **University of Montana faculty support evidence-based COVID-19 mitigation strategies for on-campus learning**

### **\*\*Whereas:\*\***

The COVID-19 pandemic has killed over 1,780 Montanans, new cases in Montana and elsewhere are surging as the Fall 2021 semester begins (<https://arcg.is/L95qb>), the Delta variant comprises the vast majority of new cases in the state (as of Aug. 24, 2021; <https://t.co/V9JA9IDHQZ?amp=1>) and is estimated to be twice as contagious as the original coronavirus that dominated cases in the 2020-2021 academic year, and local hospitals are already in a 'crisis situation' due to COVID-19 (<https://tinyurl.com/kp5hfn7y>);

### **\*\*Whereas:\*\***

Over 790 institutes of higher-education across the United States are requiring COVID-19 vaccination for at least some students and employees this fall based on recommended best-practices to protect the health and safety of students, faculty, staff, and community members (<https://tinyurl.com/whehcted>);

### **\*\*Whereas:\*\***

HB 702 (<https://leg.mt.gov/bills/2021/billpdf/HB0702.pdf>), enacted by the legislature of the State of Montana, prohibits "discrimination based on persons vaccination status" but does not apply to vaccination requirements set forth for post-secondary schools.

### **\*\*Whereas:\*\***

Current (Aug. 26, 2021) campus procedures for fall 2021 do not include many best-practice measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and safely operate in the context of the ongoing pandemic, including: requiring students, faculty, and employees to be vaccinated against COVID-19; maintaining physical distancing in classrooms; requiring widespread testing for COVID-19; and masking in all indoor spaces and crowded outdoor spaces, per CDC considerations for institutes of higher education (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/colleges-universities/considerations.html>).

### **\*\*Therefore:\*\***

We, the faculty at the University of Montana, strongly support our faculty and administrative leaders' ongoing and continued efforts to enact evidence-based strategies to mitigate the risks of COVID-19 at the University of Montana. Further, we support efforts to convince the Montana University System Board of Regents and the Montana Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education that such measures are necessary for safely fulfilling the mission of the University of Montana. These measures include:

1. Requiring vaccination against COVID-19 for students, faculty, and staff. As of July 23, 2021, the CDC highlights that institutes of higher education "where all students, faculty, and staff are fully vaccinated prior to the start of the semester can return to full capacity in-person learning" (<https://tinyurl.com/2n334jxn>). While we have missed this opportunity for the start of Fall 2021, we support pursuing this objective to help the University of Montana safely return to full capacity in-person learning as soon as possible.
2. Requiring masks for everyone in indoor spaces and crowded outdoor spaces while Missoula County is "an area of substantial or high transmission," per CDC guidance as of Aug. 19, 2021 (<https://tinyurl.com/bbdvfyz6>).

3. Defending these policies in court if challenges are brought based on HB 702 that seek to prevent University leaders from undertaking fundamental mitigation measures to safely execute the mission of the University of Montana.

Until these basic mitigation measures are adopted, we strongly support the implementation of the following layered, evidence-based prevention strategies, based on the CDC's guidance to institutes of higher education (updated July 23, 2021; <https://tinyurl.com/2n334jxn>).

1. Offering faculty resources to deliver classes safely, as done in fall 2020, including outdoor classrooms, indoor classrooms with sufficient physical distancing, or on-line/remote/hybrid modalities for classes too large to support physical distancing. Decisions on modality should be at the discretion of individual faculty.

2. Implementing a "robust, frequent SARS-CoV-2 screening testing program with high participation from the unvaccinated campus population," as identified by CDC's guidance to institutes of higher education (updated July 23, 2021).

3. Providing faculty and/or administrators anonymized information about COVID-19 vaccination coverage of the University of Montana community (e.g., analogous to how COVID-19 cases are reported). The CDC's guidance to institutes of higher education (updated July 23, 2021) identifies "COVID-19 vaccination coverage, including among students, faculty, and staff" as one of the three primary factors that "should inform the optimal implementation of layered prevention strategies" by institutes of higher education. We support existing mechanisms for collecting information on immunization status, while protecting individual privacy, as done for other vaccines required of students attending the University of Montana.

Given the urgency of this situation and that the Fall semester is already underway, the Senate requests a response to this resolution from the UM President and Provost as soon as possible or no later than five business days of its adoption.