



VCU

Office of the President

Dear VCU and VCU Health communities,

This has been a summer unlike any other. We have seen unparalleled support for each other and our community, including remarkable calls to action that have reshaped our educational and health-care experiences and the human experience beyond us. We have seen peaceful demonstrations against racism and injustice, providing brave reminders about who we are and what we value. We have seen new ways of teaching and learning, of coming together to rethink what we can all become.

All of this, just since March.

Now we are ready to return to campuses that look and feel different but are still home to all of us. We are a diverse community of people who value and respect each other, who listen to and learn from each other, and who continue to make each other's safety our top priority.

We have chosen to come back as scheduled for an in-person fall semester because we have a community with varying needs. We have created different models of working and learning to accommodate those needs. We have invested significant time and effort to offer the Covid-19 testing capacity necessary for the safety of our community and the ability to carry out that testing. We have the expertise of a nationally premier health system, which has been on the front lines of this health crisis since the beginning, to assist us in our return. And, most importantly, we have trust in each other, recognizing that fostering a safe return to campus depends on our shared commitments.

In fact, with careful planning and collective commitment, almost 2,000 health science students have already successfully returned in-person to our MCV Campus to pursue their training and our commitment to health-care workforce development for the commonwealth. Across VCU, we will build on what's working. We will wear face coverings in public spaces. We will observe physical distancing in shared living, learning, and creative spaces. Our students told us overwhelmingly in summer surveys that they will honor these commitments when they return, and we fully trust that they will and that they will lead by their example.

We also recognize that returning to campus is better for many of our students who may face overwhelming challenges with lack of access to remote learning. Other students may thrive in this format. Our goal is to meet our students wherever they are. This is why we have worked closely with our Faculty Senate, deans, and other academic leaders to balance in-person and remote learning options and give students abundant choices about what works best for them.

Already, our residential students have completed Covid-19 tests and training and are clear to return to campus. More tests for faculty, staff, and students are forthcoming. So are frequent reminders of safety measures and daily attestations of health.

Still, we know the situation in Richmond and statewide may change, and we are monitoring this carefully. While Central Virginia has trended downward in positive Covid-19 cases, some other parts of our state have not. Some of our students live in these areas. Accordingly, we must be flexible and ready to adjust in a moment's notice if the situation changes and our safety requires it. New informational videos about [our safe return](#), including information specific to [faculty and staff](#) and [to students](#), are now posted on our One VCU: Responsible Together website, and we will continue regular communication with you through this [website](#).

We are also grateful that this challenging time has shown us where we can continue to improve. Many of you have reached out to me regarding public safety, and we have begun making necessary changes in policing and law enforcement. This includes a new [Safety and Well-Being Advisory Committee](#) co-chaired by School of Education Dean Andrew Daire, Ph.D., and Sheryl Garland, chief of Health Impact for VCU Health System, both of whom have national expertise in social justice and health equity. This committee will be entirely independent from VCU Police and will guide our transition from policing the community to more options for campus safety, wellness, and inclusion. More details on this are forthcoming.

Going forward we will support VCU Police by continuing de-escalation training for officers, as we have for several years; continue significantly reducing use of force; and actively implement other changes to better understand what our communities want and need.

We all recognize that no physical environment is without some level of risk. But, under the current circumstances, the university has worked diligently to implement measures that promote a healthy and safe environment. Our people come first in everything we do—and always will. All of us, together, depend on each other to build a safe and welcoming environment for learning, living, and working. I truly appreciate all your input, support, and ingenuity, and I value the commitments we make to each other.

I look forward to a safe, healthy, and productive fall semester.

Sincerely,

Michael Rao
President, VCU and VCU Health System