

# Academic Dispatch



Student by duck pond. Credit: University Communication and Marketing.

## October 23, 2020

All of us are watching the rise of COVID cases with concern. We are fortunate that our collective efforts to keep Lobos safe have been paying off so far. Our case counts are remarkably low compared to other universities (see the [dashboard](#) linked on [Bringing Back the Pack](#)). Due to education, prevention, cleaning, and testing, the UNM rate is much lower than the rate in the rest of the state. Our efforts are not perfect, but they are paying off. Over the 7 days ending Oct. 20 the UNM community (excluding our health care workers) averaged 4.6 positives per day. Based on 880 test results over 7 days, UNM's positivity rate is less than 2%, much smaller than the state rate of 7%.

If UNM COVID rates do start to rise quickly, President Stokes and I are prepared for a rapid response based on established metrics and regular consultation with health, public health, and emergency management specialists. Thank you for your contributions to keeping our community safe.

There are multiple systems that are in operation to allow us to manage our COVID response. Many of these are visible to all of you, like wearing your mask and social distancing, but some are less visible, and I'd like to share one of these with you.

### SARS-CoV-2 testing for students

[Student Health and Counseling \(SHAC\)](#) provides health care for our students and is a critical resource for managing SARS-CoV-2 infections on campus. Every day you all complete the covidscreen symptom survey that arrives in your morning email. If you are a student, SHAC receives your report, reviews it, and reaches out when there are concerning symptoms. Students with symptoms can also call SHAC directly at (505) 277-3136. In either case, a health care provider evaluates the potential for the patient's being infected by the virus. Based on this, SHAC can order a test for SARS-CoV-2, and the sample might be gathered either at the Lot C collection site, or in a special space within the SHAC clinic. The results of the test are entered into the student's medical record, and a provider follows up to order appropriate actions

or treatment. A negative test does not necessarily mean the student is cleared to reenter our community – a SHAC health care provider must evaluate the full medical situation, of which the test result is only a part. The provider might still require the student to quarantine, even though the test is negative. Or they might not. The application of medical judgment is important, and it's critical that the test for SARS-CoV-2 RNA happen within a health care context.

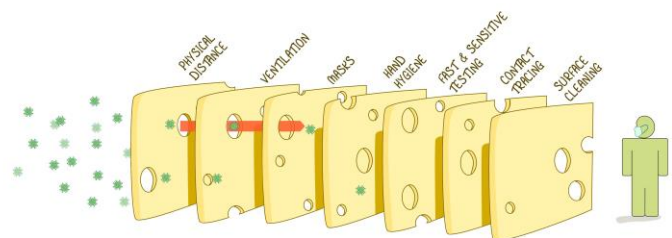
There's another way that SHAC orders tests for SARS-CoV-2. UNM's Rapid Response Team (RRT) meets first thing every morning to evaluate reports of positive student cases and identify intervention actions. The team includes medical professionals and representatives from the Provost Office and the UNM COVID Coordinator. When a student has a confirmed positive test, no matter where the test was done, the RRT pulls together information on where the student lives, who they take classes with, when they were last on campus, and other relevant data, and will have SHAC order tests for the appropriate set of students who have had exposure contact with the infected student. The potentially exposed group of students receive an email with instructions and a link to self-schedule at the test site. SHAC then contacts them with their results and manages their cases as needed. This rapid interventional testing strategy was designed by experts in testing and infectious disease from HSC. The RRT communicates closely with Environmental Health and Safety Services so that interiors affected by a positive COVID-19 case will be closed and thoroughly disinfected with a specific protocol [prior to being reopened](#).

For employees of UNM – setting aside those with clinical roles in the health system who, naturally, have similar but different processes – when their daily symptom screen flags a concern, or they report a positive test, our occupational health staff follow up with the employee and direct them to their health care providers for professional medical follow up. *Your* health care provider – SHAC for students or a personal provider for employees – is in the critical center of the loop with full access to your medical history so that they can make the right recommendations and evaluate the results of any COVID-related medical tests. Our COVID-19 call center at (505) 515-8212 helps triage cases and concerns.

Layered over all of this is a process of contact tracing overseen by the New Mexico Department of Health, who evaluate every case of COVID in the state and follow up to identify close contacts who may have a risk of exposure. As agents of the state, these contact tracers have the authority to trace contacts outside of the UNM community, so they provide an additional layer of follow up for each case and extend the follow up beyond the borders of our campus. Positive employee

### THE SWISS CHEESE RESPIRATORY VIRUS DEFENCE

RECOGNISING THAT NO SINGLE INTERVENTION IS PERFECT AT PREVENTING SPREAD



EACH INTERVENTION (LAYER) HAS IMPERFECTIONS (HOLES).  
MULTIPLE LAYERS IMPROVE SUCCESS.

IAN MACKAY  
VIRUSOLOGYANDDEFENCE.COM  
DERIVED FROM: PROTECTUM.PANOS  
BASED ON THE SWISS CHEESE MODEL OF ACCIDENT CAUSATION BY JAMES T. REASON, 1990  
VERSION 1.3  
UPDATE: 12/01/2020

Image: The Swiss Cheese Respiratory Virus Defense: Recognizing That No Single Intervention is Perfect at Preventing Spread. Credit: Ian Mackay.

cases are also automatically reported to the Higher Education Department and the NM Environment Department, who both independently monitor for areas of concern.

### **How is it all working?**

So far, we have not had widely spreading infection events traced to participation with an in-person class (wear your mask!) or within a UNM dorm (no guests!). We have seen cases brought in from outside the state (quarantine upon return!), we have seen transmission linked to parties off campus (don't do that!), we have seen transmission related to close physical contact without masks (mask up!), we have seen transmission associated with employees having lunch in break rooms (this is not allowed, don't do that!).

The state is currently seeing a large increase in SARS-CoV-2 infections, and UNM is seeing its own smaller version of this spike, but we appear to be doing relatively well. Our process is working to minimize the spread on campus, and while things can change quickly in this pandemic, we do not at present see evidence of exponential growth in the Lobo family. But UNM's protocols – which are rooted in masks, distancing, staying home when possible – are also a cause of challenge. Our students are disconnected, from each other, and from our faculty. Many are here alone, separated from their family support systems. At SHAC we are seeing a concerning increase in anxiety, depressed mood, and stress. By Oct. 16, SHAC had provided 20% more counseling sessions compared to last year; besides individual sessions SHAC is now offering 5 drop-in groups every week, and the Women's Resource Center and Psychology Clinic are supporting our students mental health needs as well. With state restrictions pushing gatherings down in size, we are challenged to find ways for students to feel connected. For some students, their in-person classroom experiences can be the most meaningful social interaction they have.

In the end, humans still need each other, we need to come together as physical beings, and not just as little chicklet squares on a Zoom screen. Reach out, support each other, provide reliable health information, ask for help. Each of us defines all of us: who knew, when UNM adopted that motto, how true it would be in the middle of a public health crisis.

For more, please see the [Bringing Back the Pack](#) website, which includes information on [what to do if a student reports they are positive](#), [how to self-report your own positive test](#), and provides information on other protocols and processes. For one last piece of good news, I'm pleased also to report that 67% of faculty, 55% of staff, and 45% of students who report coming to campus also report having a flu shot. This is far better than a normal year. Please get yours.

**James Paul Holloway**

**Professor of Nuclear Engineering**

**Provost & Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs**

A PDF version of this Academic Dispatch is available on the [Academic Affairs website](#). Your feedback and input are welcome at [academicdispatch@unm.edu](mailto:academicdispatch@unm.edu).