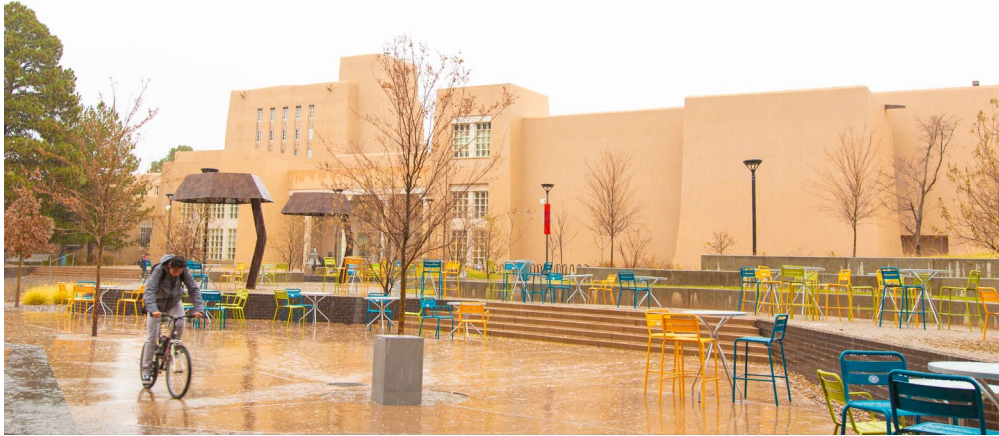


Academic Dispatch



University Communication and Marketing.

January 14, 2022

This remains a time of tough choices and real concerns, and many of our students, staff, and faculty are anxious about the coming weeks. After careful consideration, UNM is moving forward with spring term including largely in-person classes and research activities, with most classes starting on January 18th (a few units have actually already started). Let me explain this decision and the measures we are taking to protect the health of our campus.

President Stokes, EVP Ziedonis, and I, along with our colleagues in UNM leadership, speak to multiple health experts multiple times each week. We weigh the information they provide and seek to balance the essential mission of the university with the well-being of our people and with the health of our NM community. Clearly, Lobos are already contracting COVID and our community will experience illness, ranging from inconsequential to serious. This will be true no matter how we arrange the semester.

So what can we do? This is not the start of the pandemic, when our only real tools were masking and distancing. Our most powerful tool now is vaccination. Each of the initial series of vaccine injections and the booster shot stimulates our antibody production and enhances our critically important and long-term cellular immune response. We have achieved a vaccination rate over 94%, well above the state norm. Individuals with qualified exemptions, required to complete weekly testing or attest that they would not visit campus, accounted for the remainder. In Spring 2022, we need to do as well or better in booster completion to suppress the spread of COVID-19 and the potential health consequences.

Our next most important tool is good masking. We have upped our mask game. Everyone must wear a medical/health grade procedure mask (three ply or better, ASTM Type 1, 2 or 3, or better). These are more effective than cloth masks.

Next, we have judiciously spaced out our learning environments, with 25% of our Albuquerque courses online (and even more at the branches) and we have reduced our density in classrooms. The average occupancy of classrooms this spring in Albuquerque is 40%, and 66% of classes are at 45% occupancy or below. On average, we are spread out more than last term.

None of these tools is perfect—in our current circumstances no tool is. But they do allow us to serve our learners and to serve society. Our communities need both the talent we graduate and the new knowledge we are creating.

We are challenged now to do important work in a time of uncertainty, stress, and doubt. The President and I and all of her leadership team wrestle with this every day—as I know you do—and we constantly consider alternatives and mitigations to our pandemic predicament. Weighted against our concern for the critical mission of the university is the concern of SARS-CoV-2 spread. The omicron variant is very transmissible, possibly even as transmissible as measles, and we see steady reports of infections in our state, nation, and the world. This variant is also less severe than previous ones, with symptoms that range from a mild cold to a serious flu, and with the infection focused on the upper respiratory tract and mercifully not the lungs. This does not mean people cannot get seriously ill, but it is much less likely. At UNM we have a highly vaccinated population, but this is not a force shield—vaccinated persons can get the infection. But in the vaccinated it is far less likely that this infection will lead to serious illness. The real challenge is that high infectivity even with a low probability of poor health outcomes will still lead to serious illness in some. This morning, January 14, UNMH had 80 covid positive patients in house. This creates significant strains on our hospitals, and our health care workers are striving to care for those who are ill not just with COVID, but with other illnesses that have been too much neglected during the pandemic. The UNM academic enterprise, spread over 6 sites in the state, represents about 1.3% of the population of the state of NM. If none of us at UNM get COVID, it would have little impact on the overall number of cases.

A number of colleagues have asked me why we don't follow other universities, like Duke (an oft cited example), and start late. Duke did start late; instead of starting classes on January 5th, Duke [decided](#) to start in person on January 18th, the same day UNM starts. Many of the universities that delayed starts, or decided to start remote, were like Duke, early starting schools that pushed their start later into January. But UNM is already a late-starting school. Some have asked, why not start online anyway, and do “two weeks” of remote instruction? The reality is that nothing will be different in two weeks. The daily case numbers, breathlessly reported on the news, will remain concerningly high. They might be going down by then, but in magnitude will be similar to what they are now. So, if we focus on case numbers, it will be four or six weeks before new case numbers reach levels like early fall 2021. There will be no basis there to change. Going remote really means doing so for much of the term, and we know too bitterly the harm that causes to the learning of our students, to the intellectual creation capacity of our researchers, and to the mental health of all.

The last two years have taught us—with data both qualitative and quantitative—that the personal, social aspect of education and discovery is essential. Denying our learners, our researchers, our creators, this environment is stunting to them. Our work is important—we help others achieve their dreams, and a dream delayed is a dream denied.

We remain vigilant about the health of the New Mexican community. We will see many cases of covid over the next few weeks, and we consider constantly if there are changes we should make to balance health impacts and the important need to deliver on our mission.

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