



MONTANA UNIVERSITY SYSTEM  
OFFICE OF COMMISSIONER OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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560 N. Park, 4<sup>th</sup> Floor – PO Box 203201 – Helena, Montana 59620-3201  
(406) 449-9124 - FAX (406) 449-9171

To: Montana Board of Regents; Montana University System Chief Executive Officers;  
Montana Community College Presidents; Governor Steve Bullock

From: Clayton T. Christian, Commissioner of Higher Education

Date: December 17, 2020

Subject: **COVID-19 UPDATE: January return, in-person spring semester, and Fall 2021 calendars**

As we plan for the spring semester across the Montana University System, it is important to emphasize the wide-ranging benefits of providing a largely in-person academic and campus life experience for our students. While we should all be proud of our improved ability to operate remotely, there is no doubt that students prefer, and benefit from, in-person learning, advising, mentoring, extra-curricular activities, and mental health supports.

We will always be ready to adapt as necessary to changing public health circumstances, but the Montana University System continues to plan for an in-person approach to the Spring 2021 semester that closely resembles our approach to the Fall 2020 semester.

Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to pose serious challenges to every part of our campuses, the surrounding communities, and the entire state. Newly approved vaccines offer hope, but comprehensive vaccination campaigns will take months to complete. As such my office continues to seek guidance from the Healthy MUS Task Force and partner with the MUS Board of Regents, campus leadership, state and local public health authorities, and other statewide authorities to prioritize the health and safety of our students and employees. I write today with guidance for campuses as they prepare to welcome students back to campus in January, and guidance for campuses as they finalize Fall 2021 Academic Calendars.

**Guidance Related to January Return.** The COVID-19 outbreak changes every day, as does the portfolio of resources (e.g. vaccines, tests, funding, medical professionals) we have available to fight the virus. With that in mind, campuses will need to stay in close contact with OCHE and their local public health offices as planning for January and the spring semester is likely to stay fluid into the New Year. At this point, campuses should develop plans based on the following guidelines:

- **Outreach and Education.** Students and employees should receive clear and consistent messaging from campuses during the winter break, including but not limited to information about best health practices while away from campus, specific information about the January return to campus, any changes to the academic calendar, and what to expect in terms of general campus protocols throughout the spring semester.
- **Pre-Return Protocols.** Campuses should encourage all students to complete a 10-day precautionary quarantine and daily health check immediately prior to their return date, and to return to campus only if they remain symptom free for that entire quarantine period and avoid close contact with a positive COVID-19 case. Students experiencing COVID-19 symptoms at any point before or after campus return should obtain a COVID-19 test. Campuses may also choose

to encourage all students to obtain a COVID-19 test prior to campus return, and to delay their return in the event of a positive test. Campus faculty should be prepared to provide remote options and/or other relevant support to students who delay their return to campus because of COVID-19 symptoms or a recent positive COVID-19 test.

*Note: OCHE will continue to work with our statewide partners to explore opportunities for enhancing Montana's overall capacity for asymptomatic testing. If Montana is able to effectively increase statewide capacity for asymptomatic testing, OCHE will work with campuses to explore additional asymptomatic testing for MUS students, **especially prior to January campus return.***

- **Return Logistics.** Campuses should design residence hall move-in schedules, spring semester orientations, and all welcome back gatherings to allow for social distancing, traffic management, and avoidance of any large gatherings.
- **Ongoing Health and Safety Protocols.** Campuses should maintain, and where possible enhance, health and safety protocols in the classroom setting, residence halls, campus facilities, and with respect to extra-curricular activities, event hosting, and education related to student behavior while off campus.

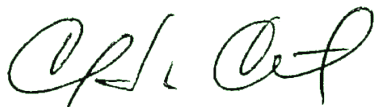
*Note: The Healthy MUS Task Force will produce comprehensive updates to its planning guidelines by the second week in January.*

**Guidance related to Fall 2021 Calendars.** Given both the ongoing uncertainty regarding the public health situation we are likely to face in advance of the Fall 2021 semester, and the very different student and academic profiles of MUS institutions, it is appropriate to give campuses flexibility in finalizing their Fall 2021 Academic Calendars. In general, campuses should plan around two options for Fall 2021:

- Option A: Early start date (1-2 weeks), with completion by Thanksgiving.
- Option B: Normal start date (similar to pre-COVID), with completion after Thanksgiving.

Campuses need to coordinate directly with OCHE should they choose to depart from these two basic approaches. All campuses should submit their proposed Fall 2021 Academic Calendar to Deputy Commissioner Brock Tessman ([btessman@montana.edu](mailto:btessman@montana.edu)) for final approval. This guidance is relevant for the Fall 2021 semester only; guidance for the Spring 2022 semester and beyond will be forthcoming.

Thank you for our patience and ongoing flexibility as we continue our work together. We all wish for easy answers, advance notice, and predictable change, but the COVID-19 virus continues to ignore those wishes. As we look toward 2021, our success will depend on our continued ability to communicate, collaborate, and innovate in support of the students, employees, and communities of the Montana University System.



Clayton T. Christian  
Commissioner of Higher Education