



MONTANA UNIVERSITY SYSTEM
OFFICE OF COMMISSIONER OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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

From: Clayton T. Christian, Commissioner of Higher Education

Date: March 25, 2021

Subject: **COVID-19 UPDATE: Ongoing Safety Protocols, Fall 2021 Planning, Events and Travel**

As we work hard through the second half of the Spring 2021 semester across the Montana University System, it is heartening to see a number of positive trends related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Weekly case counts are headed in the right direction, more and more MUS employees and students are being vaccinated, and everyday we hear about the excellent teaching, research, and service taking place largely in-person on our campuses. Indeed, there is much to look forward to as the weather turns warmer and we make plans for Spring Commencement.

But there is still much work to do and 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 updates related to ongoing safety protocols and our plans to return to normal operations by the start of the Fall 2021 semester. I also write with guidance for campuses related to event hosting and MUS-affiliated travel.

Ongoing Safety Protocols and Fall 2021 Planning. The entire MUS community has demonstrated dedication and discipline in adhering to public health protocols on our campuses, and that collective effort has allowed us to maintain the largely in-person instructional and student life experience that our students want and need for success. And while we fully anticipate a return to normal operations without restrictions in all areas by the start of the Fall 2021 semester, all MUS public health protocols – including the mask requirement – are still in place on all MUS campuses for the current spring semester.

As they monitor the public health situation across our campuses, the Montana Board of Regents will use part of their May meeting to consider changes to COVID-19-related restrictions and the process for transitioning to normal operations by the start of classes in the fall. With this in mind campuses should plan to use the summer term as a period of steady and careful transition.

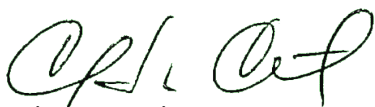
Spring 2021 Guidance Related to Event Hosting, Including Athletics. It is exciting and inspiring to know that our campuses are once again planning to host larger in-person gatherings such as athletic events, Commencement, and other cultural and entertainment events. As they plan, campuses should use the guidelines below as a baseline for planning while ensuring that all events meet any additional guidelines or restrictions required by the relevant local public health authorities. For athletic events, campuses should continue to plan in collaboration with guidance from relevant athletic conferences.

- **Venue Capacity:** Events should be designed to allow for physically distanced pods of attendees, and attendance should be substantially below venue capacity and aligned with requirements established by local public health authorities.
- **Outdoor Preference:** For events that are equally amenable to indoor and outdoor venues, priority should be given to outdoor venues.
- **Physical Distancing:** The standard, 6-foot physical distancing protocol will be in place for all aspects of events from all lines, to seating, and general congregating areas.
- **Face Coverings:** All staff and attendees will be required to wear a face covering at all times, except when *actively* eating or drinking.
- **Seating and Ticketing:** Where practical, seats will be sold (or reserved for free events) as a reserved ticket with associated contact information recorded and stored. Where practical, tickets will be electronic/mobile tickets to eliminate physical contact when purchasing or picking up tickets from will call.
- **Communication and Enforcement:** All staff and attendee requirements will be extensively communicated prior to the event and will be on signage at the event location. All event staff and security personnel will be trained to enforce all policies throughout the event.
- **Tailgating –** No tailgating will be allowed at athletic events or other events.

Spring 2021 Guidance Related to MUS-Affiliated Travel. All allowable travel outlined below requires campuses to ensure that travelers meet, at a minimum, campus notification and approval standards that resemble those in place prior to the pandemic.

- Within Montana, MUS-affiliated travel is allowable. Travelers will follow local safety protocols and procedures while in travel status. Travelers may use personal vehicles or elect to use campus vehicles if they follow existing COVID-19 protocols related to occupancy and face coverings.
- Essential MUS-affiliated travel is allowed outside Montana under certain conditions. Campuses will require travelers to submit a travel safety plan prior to departure that is reviewed by a relevant campus committee and approved at the cabinet level. At a minimum, travel safety plans should justify the essential nature of the proposed travel, detail plans for following current COVID-19 guidelines and restrictions at each travel destination. Where necessary, travelers should also work with campus to establish a return-to-campus work and/or study plan that accounts for any self-quarantine requirements resulting from travel that the campus identifies as high-risk.
- The MUS continues to have a moratorium on MUS-affiliated international travel, while recognizing that the health risks of international travel are changing rapidly and that decisions regarding fall study abroad, research, and other travel will need to be made well in advance of the fall semester.

The past year has been unlike anything we have experienced in the history of the Montana University System. But we have been up for the challenge, and I know we will all continue to buckle down and conquer the remaining challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thank you for your leadership, and here's to that light getting brighter at the end of this tunnel.



Clayton T. Christian
Commissioner of Higher Education