

**To:** Montgomery College Employees  
**From:** Dr. DeRionne P. Pollard, President  
**Subject:** **Return to Campuses Planning**  
**Date:** May 26, 2021

Good afternoon. The College will be taking some first steps soon toward conducting increasingly in-person operations on our campuses. It has been a long 14 months and we have been through a lot. But the risks of COVID transmission have been significantly mitigated and it is time to refocus on serving our students and community in person again. All faculty and staff will begin a **gradual return to campuses by July 6, 2021**, subject to staggered schedules and/or rotating shifts.

Several **dynamics have improved** to allow this shift toward increased face-to-face working and learning. Most of you are likely aware of them as of:

- Today [50 percent of all residents](#) of Montgomery County are fully vaccinated (two shots, where needed);
- Today, [62 percent of all residents](#) of Montgomery County have received one shot (partially vaccinated).

A **decline in several important, countywide metrics**, which the College has used as benchmarks of local health conditions, is the second factor in our decision.

- On January 14 of this year, there were at 47 new cases of COVID per 100,000 residents—today there are [two new cases](#) per 100,000 (seven day average).
- In early May, 2020 the test positivity rate was 32 percent—[today it is 1.2 percent](#).
- These two measures were once markers of “very high risks of transmissions” but today are evidence of “very low risk of transmission,” according to the guidelines on the Montgomery County COVID-19 Surveillance dashboard.

Third, **science has given us a deeper understanding** of how the Coronavirus behaves, who is most vulnerable, and how it spreads. The advances in these areas over just 14 months have been considerable, empowering mitigation strategies in most environments.

The College has been working intently to put these strategies in place so that risks to students and employees are significantly diminished in our classrooms and work places.

That said, people who are not eligible for vaccination—due to medical status or religious practice—are still vulnerable to contracting COVID and potentially falling seriously ill. People who have been vaccinated are largely protected from serious illness and death, according to studies published by the [Centers for Disease Control](#).

I would be remiss if I did not mention the equity implications which have arisen in these past 14 months and how they have been considered in our return-to-campus planning. The College is keenly aware of the existence of vaccine hesitancy among some in our communities, given the history of unethical medical research in some eras. As an institution we have made sustained efforts to educate people about the creation of vaccines and their safety, the increased risk of illness and death to which unvaccinated people are vulnerable, and the cultural barriers that may impede trust. These are all realities which we continue to navigate as we encourage vaccination for individual safety and the wider health of our community. When I made the decision to be vaccinated, I did so for my own health, my family's health, and the wider safety of the community. I believe the social contract of the collective begins with each of us.

The other side of the equity issue, though, is **access to higher education**. Many of our students face vulnerabilities in their lives such as poverty, job loss, and food insecurity –for which higher education is the best mitigation strategy. We know from this past year that some of our students learn better in person. In order to accommodate those needs, all MC employees will need to be prepared to return to physical work spaces in measured, carefully structured ways that protect everyone's health.

My senior leadership team is working diligently on these plans and will be **communicating them tomorrow**. My Chief of Staff/Chief Strategy Officer and my senior vice presidents are preparing details including a timeline, general standards and expectations, and June forums for communication. This core team will comprise the leadership of our transition efforts, in partnership with a **new Return to Campus Advisory Team (RTCAT)**, which will be chaired by Dr. Kevin Long, Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy and Planning. This RTCAT group will replace the Coronavirus Advisory Team (CAT) which has served so tirelessly during the emergency period. Several of MC's public health experts will transition from CAT to the new RTCAT team, and will assist with providing health protocol recommendations based on CDC and County Health Department guidance. I am extremely grateful for the remarkable service and expertise of the CAT members throughout this extended crisis.

Given the realities of this past year, we all likely have **some anxieties** about coming in close contact with others again. But vaccination, enhanced cleaning, and continuing health protocols have made our environments much safer for students and employees. Montgomery County as a whole is taking steps similar to ours, with county facilities returning gradually to in-person operations and the Maryland Board of Education directing schools to return to in-person learning for a full 180-day school year starting this fall.

This will be a transition for all of us but the College will continue to provide **careful guidance and direction** as we take the next measured steps. I encourage you to watch for the coming communications about returning to campus and for forums where you can ask questions and provide feedback. Acclimating ourselves to the next phase of normal will be a process, but we have careful planning, thorough consultation, and a strong mission-focus on our side. Until next time, stay safe.