UF leaders shared vision and answered questions during a Faculty Senate-sponsored
July 14, 2020 town hall

Several UF leaders and some of UF Health’s foremost experts on epidemiology and infectious diseases came together to answer questions about the university’s plans for moving forward together this fall in a town hall held on July 14, 2020. Faculty and staff were provided the opportunity to ask questions prior to and during the event hosted by the Faculty Senate, and approximately 2,500 were in attendance.

In his opening remarks, President Fuchs reiterated the four priorities he shared with the university community last spring, namely that:

- Everyone be safe and well
- Students finish the spring semester successfully
- The work of the university continue
- We seek to minimize the financial impact on our students and employees

President Fuchs went on to express his gratitude to faculty and staff for how much our university community has accomplished, but acknowledged that as students come back, this will be even more challenging. However, he also provided reassurance that, thanks to the support of UF Health and the all the university has done in recent weeks to get ready for the fall semester, we are in a much better position to move forward than when the pandemic emerged last spring.

“We have learned a huge amount about this virus,” he said, “and we are as prepared as any university in the nation.”

President Fuchs also shared that he had one “ask” of faculty and staff as we enter the new fiscal and academic year.

“This coming year, in all that we do in our teaching and our scholarship, I ask that we be even more effective, and that for our students, in our research endeavors, the university excels and soars in all that it does,” he said. “That’s a huge ask in the midst of a virus that’s affecting us. But that is our commitment and our goal as a university.”

President Fuchs was joined by Senior Vice President and COO Charlie Lane; Provost Joe Glover; Vice Presidents Jodi Gentry and Amy Hass; UF Health Chief Epidemiologist Nicole Iovine; and UF Health Screen, Test & Protect Director Michael Lauzardo and epidemiologist Jerne Shapiro. Faculty Senate Chair Sylvain Doré hosted the event, posing questions that were submitted both prior to and during the event.

Below is a summary of some of the questions asked and answers provided during the event. For additional answers to frequently asked questions, please visit the Our Plan Forward website.

Will everyone be able to get tested for free, regardless of symptoms? Will more screenings be available?
In terms of testing, the answer is yes. Long-term, UF Health Screen, Test & Protect is more than simply a back-to-campus effort; it’s a comprehensive public health surveillance unit. We will continue to monitor campus with cluster sampling and other opportunities to test. Limitations will still be in place, but we will do as much as possible that makes sense epidemiologically.

**Why aren’t students being required to complete testing?**

We’re a public institution, so constitutional considerations come into play in terms of what we require—and how we will be able to enforce that requirement. On balance, considering the value of the test and our ability to enforce, we require all students to complete a screening and require testing for students who indicate COVID-19 symptoms in the screening questionnaire. We also require testing for students that are in clinical or research settings when working with vulnerable populations. All students are encouraged to take a test, and we expect many will do so voluntarily. The more tests that are done, the more significant data points we are able to gather.

**What will be the nature of the extent of contact tracing? For example, will professors be notified? How does it align with HIPAA and FERPA? If a student comes to class coughing or sneezing, am I allowed to ask or insist they leave?**

Contact tracing is new to many of us, but rest assured, it’s an age-old practice. The process UF Health Screen, Test & Protect is following in partnership with the Department of Health is:

- Interviewing the person who tests positive to find out where they initially may have been exposed and infected (e.g., house parties, gyms, bars)
- Conducting public health education with the individual on how to isolate or quarantine safely in the home and how to protect others so we don’t continue to spread.
- Performing contact tracing by identifying who that person was around during the infection period and gathering contact information

Our team at UF Health Screen, Test & Protect, working with UF affiliates, has kept on top of contact tracing every day. You will be notified if someone tests positive. While you will not know the identity of the individual, you will be notified that you have been in contact with someone who has tested positive and you will be put into quarantine.

In terms of notifying parents and families, students are treated like adults and their privacy is respected, so parents and families are only notified if needed to stop the spread of disease.

While no one can ask for anyone’s medical information, the Dean of Students Office and Human Resources have a kind of “magic button” to withhold someone from campus and to return them. Reports are pushed out to the Dean of Students Office and HR each day with status changes.

**Considering new research suggesting that the disease is largely airborne, what are the university’s plans to preserve air quality in buildings on campus? What is being done in terms of physical distancing, especially in labs or in the College of the Arts, for example, to ensure safety?**

In terms of air cleaning, the UF Facilities Services team has changed out filters where they can with higher efficiency filters. These filters tax the air system to some extent, so we have to be careful about
that. Our guidance from UF Health suggests that because COVID is airborne, we need to pay attention to how many exchanges there are before people return to space if someone in the space has tested positive. We are paying attention to that and doing what we can.

In the research space, Dr. Norton has put together a comprehensive plan to address the cleaning of animal care facilities and other research spaces as well as physical distancing and the wearing of face masks.

The College of the Arts is unique in its diverse activities, and various scenarios have been reviewed with a group of physicians and epidemiologists. In some scenarios, activities can’t be done safely, so recommendations include holding class outdoors, keeping groups small, the use of masks, etc.

The greatest risk for anyone is being indoors with an infected person without a mask. As time goes on and we learn more and more about the virus nationally and internationally, our priorities with regard to mitigation of infection necessarily changes as well. The risk of transmission, for example, from contaminated surfaces is being deemphasized, but respiratory transmission is the major area where we need to focus our efforts.

How realistic is it that faculty, staff, students and others will comply with wearing masks or face coverings? And who will be responsible for enforcement?

The emphasis has always been to create a culture of caring and to inform people. We need to take care of our colleagues. By complying with masks, it makes a difference. But with public health, we’re talking about population health — meaning there’s a benefit, even if everyone doesn’t comply.

There are obviously a variety of venues and situations on campus. When students enter certain areas like the Reitz Union, for example, the supervisors in those areas will ask those not masked to mask-up. For faculty teaching classes, any student not wearing a mask should politely be asked to wear one. If the student does not, they should be asked to leave the room. If the student refuses, faculty should exercise good judgment, which could mean terminating class for the day, for example, and report the event to the Dean of Students Office to take disciplinary measures.

Similarly, we do have faculty and staff policies that follow the same steps. Supervisors or managers should remind anyone not wearing a mask to do so. Anyone who does not comply will be sent home, and a disciplinary process is in place that will be followed.

How will PPE and masks be made available and distributed? Should a teacher who is in front of a class remove his or her mask to talk?

It is university policy that everyone is to wear a face covering when they are in a building and within six feet of others, including classrooms. Our plan is to distribute appropriate masking materials through the departments. The finalization of class schedules will help determine what’s needed based on those who will be in front of a class. We want to make it as easy as possible to comply.

Campus was closed with relatively few cases. Now we are facing a major surge, and the university is going to open to a certain extent. What is the justification for this, and when will campus close again, if needed?
The campus did not truly close — that’s a misnomer. In the spring, thousands continued to work on campus. As we prepare for fall, we should follow the guidance of UF Health. We meet weekly with a medical guidance committee, following all of their recommendations for reopening. We have taken steps to reduce face-to-face, direct contact. Most of what we are doing is in online mode, along with research laboratories operating under medical guidance. Things change daily, and should UF Health recommend we change our plans, we’ll take it into account.

We know a lot more now about the virus, how it spreads and how to treat it than we did four months ago. The university is much better prepared with equipment, safety protocols and testing. Circumstances are dramatically different. If we get into the situation we did in the spring, the financial impact on students and employees will be dramatic. We won’t be able to absorb this impact well. That’s why we’re having this balance—to fulfill our mission, but doing it as safely as possible based on what we’ve learned.

There is a perception that we are being influenced by politics, but we, as a UF community, control what we’re doing and how we’re doing it. Given all the uncertainties, both UF Health and the university are prepared. Even in the midst of an increase in cases, that is not a threat to our health system, which is a real trigger for our community.

**Is UF going to be remote after Thanksgiving?**

No, while some universities have adopted this plan nationwide, UF has not. But we are asking faculty to make it optional for students to return after Thanksgiving, so students do not have to return if they don’t want to.

**Childcare has always been a challenge for working families, but particularly now. Faculty and staff are unable to work effectively with children at home. My worry is schools will reopen too soon, shut down again and parents will be left with inconsistent work schedules and the expense of backup care.**

We are looking to see if we can forge some partnerships with community resources to offer some additional options. If a faculty or staff member is experiencing financial hardship, they are encouraged to seek financial assistance through Aid-a-Gator. Flexibility through UF’s Alternate Work Location policy and leave are also available. UFHR is a resource to help think things through for those who need assistance.

**Can departments be given discretion to give employees the ability to work remotely? Does UF prefer individuals to return to work?**

The Alternate Work Location policy has been around for a long time and continues to be available. The policy really centers on the job. UF doesn’t have a position on whether employees work off-campus or on-campus. The policy always has been and continues to be focused on the job and the outcomes expected as well as any institutional requirements that leader might want to address.

**If a faculty member believes they may have been exposed, may they lecture remotely until they have been cleared?**
After evaluation by UF Health, the faculty member should talk to his or her department chair. Teaching remotely may be the appropriate response and what is recommended, depending on if class can be held that way. If not, the faculty member may take paid leave.

**Will the gym be open during fall semester? What about football and other athletics?**

The Southwest Rec Center will be open, but this is always subject to the guidance of UF Health; if the spread of the virus worsens on campus, we may be advised to close the facility.

No decisions have been made yet about major sports, including football. We expect some soccer and volleyball competitions early on may get delayed. In terms of NCAA sports, no decision has been made yet.

**How will concerns for public transportation be addressed?**

We work closely with RTS and intend to ask some questions about additional steps we can take. We don’t know to what extent they will limit the use of buses, but UF’s transportation group is working closely with them.

**How are we monitoring activities outside of campus?**

UF leaders are conducting a series of discussions with the city and county to talk about how we can increase safety in the community. A conversation with bar and restaurant owners was held on Tuesday, so more information is to come on this.

UF Health Screen, Test & Protect also is working with the Department of Health, based on relationships with them over time. Contact tracing overlaps with the county, so the team meets with them regularly to share information and is integrated from a public health standpoint.

Our Plan Forward is a comprehensive guide for students, faculty, staff, and our community on what the fall semester will entail. It is a living yet flexible document as our understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic and best practices to address the virus evolve.

We encourage you to check the following sites for the latest information and updated FAQs:

- For the Fall 2020 Reopening Plan details, visit Our Plan Forward
- For information the Screen Test and Protect initiative and COVID-19 prevention on campus, and much more, visit UF Health
- For the latest federal updates as well as information about how to prevent COVID-19, visit the CDC
- For the latest Florida-specific information, visit the Florida Department of Health
- Visit the Human Resources site for guidance in returning to the workplace
- For a list of available resources for student, faculty, and staff, visit Our Plan Forward

**Will there be funding, and resources allocated towards food insecurity and housing for students?**

UF’s Aid-a-Gator financial assistance program and the UF Hitchcock Field and Fork pantry are available for students and employees experiencing financial hardships.
Hundreds of students and employees rely on public transportation and it could be very difficult to follow CDC guidelines?

UF is taking steps to ensure the safety of passengers on our public transit vehicles. For instance, all drivers and maintenance workers as well as passengers are required to wear masks or cloth face coverings at all times while onboard UF public transit vehicles. Frequently contacted surfaces such as door handles, handrails, armrests, seat belt buckles, and armrests are cleaned and sanitized every half hour (for our Campus Connector shuttles) and after every passenger trip (for our Campus Cab and Gator Lift vehicles) using EPA-approved products for removing coronavirus. Plexiglas barriers have been installed between the driver and passenger compartments in all transit vehicles. In addition, passenger capacity in Campus Connector Shuttles has been reduced to 33% per shuttle bus to maintain physical distancing among riders; the remaining 67% of seats are identified as unavailable by signage. To view a list of comprehensive measures please visit: [https://coronavirus.ufl.edu/forward-students-families/forward-students-families-parking-transporation/](https://coronavirus.ufl.edu/forward-students-families/forward-students-families-parking-transporation/)

Childcare has always been a challenge for working families. With parents in Alachua County required to choose a method of instruction, can you speak whether the university will continue to support remote work options?

The Alternate Work Location provision may be of assistance during this time for some. For others those jobs do not lend themselves to working from home, faculty, and staff may wish or should to discuss options for adjusting their schedules with their supervisors. Eligible employees who are unable to report to work and unable to work remotely may use Emergency Paid Sick Leave. For guidance on taking leave, please visit [https://hr.ufl.edu/covid-19/guidance-on-taking-leave/](https://hr.ufl.edu/covid-19/guidance-on-taking-leave/)

Could you share some of statistics as how many class sections will be fully online and what % will be face-to-face or hybrid?

Across all undergraduate, graduate and professional courses, 35% of the sections are scheduled to be held in face-face or hybrid modes. the distribution of these courses among colleges will vary considerably, depending on pedagogical needs. An additional 35% of the sections are scheduled to be delivered in synchronous, online format. That means the students will be engaging with the instructor and course activities at a prescribed time over the internet. For additional guidance, please visit [https://coronavirus.ufl.edu](https://coronavirus.ufl.edu)

Can you clarify the university’s expectations around face coverings while on campus in outdoor settings?

When returning to campus, all students, staff, faculty are asked to wear a mask or cloth face covering when in UF and UF Health facilities, with only a few exceptions for children less than 2 years old or those who are ill. For those who are unable to wear a face covering, face shields will be an acceptable alternative. Face coverings are to be worn in all classrooms, in patient care areas, and when in public/common areas, including lobbies, conference rooms, elevators, stairwells, bathrooms and lounges. Face coverings are also required on employee and visitor shuttles. Exceptions include when in private offices, private workspaces with adequate physical barriers, and well-ventilated outdoor spaces where appropriate physical distancing can be maintained. The university’s policy on masking and social distancing can be found here [https://policy.ufl.edu/policy/masking-and-physical-distancing/](https://policy.ufl.edu/policy/masking-and-physical-distancing/)

What about individuals who cannot wear a mask for medical reasons?
For those who are unable to wear a face covering, face shields will be an acceptable alternative. Face coverings are to be worn in all classrooms, in patient care areas, and when in public/common areas, including lobbies, conference rooms, elevators, stairwells, bathrooms and lounges, on employees and visitors’ shuttles.

**Will UF retest employees after a certain period?**
It is possible that UF Health Screen Test & Protect will encourage testing for faculty, staff and students again. There are certain circumstances where retesting would be recommended. For instance, anyone with fever or symptoms of COVID-19 should leave campus and arrange for testing through UF Health or anyone who is told they have come in contact with an infected person and that infection is likely will be required to self-quarantine for 14 days and testing will made available and is recommended.

UF will continue to update the FAQ sections within [Our Plan Forward](#) website to keep the UF community informed.