



## **Administration's Recommendation to Delay Implementation of Fall On-Campus Plan**

On June 20, 2020, the University Board of Trustees, based on a recommendation from the Administration, approved a plan to recommence in-person instruction utilizing a mixed modality approach and the resumption of on-campus residence living and work.

Given the increasing spike in the number of positive COVID-19 cases in the U.S. Virgin Islands and the continuing public health crisis and surge on the U.S. mainland associated with the risks of the pandemic, the Administration is proposing to delay the implementation of the Fall 2020 semester (Fall) reopening plan that was approved on June 20, 2020. As we consider, like many other institutions, how best to safely reopen in these rapidly evolving and uncertain times while still delivering on our mission, one of our fundamental guiding principles has been the flexibility to modify our Fall plan if circumstances in the Territory regarding COVID-19 dramatically dictate a change. The decision to propose this delay is not being made lightly and is being done in conjunction with a review of the evolving circumstances and current climate of the public health crisis by our Task Force, Cabinet and other leaders. At the heart of our decision is preserving the health and safety of our students, employees, and the public.

With a sense of great disappointment, I now share with you that our proposed recommendation is that all instruction for Fall be conducted virtually until such time that the local conditions improve. Our academic leaders will review those courses that require internships, clinicals and labs and make a determination on how best to facilitate student needs in light of this proposed change. Another important consideration of the proposed decision to remain virtual will be that no on-campus residential housing will be available to in-territory or out-of-territory students, except in compelling and extenuating circumstances.

Due to escalating COVID-19 cases nationwide, a growing number of universities are also reversing their previously advised Fall in-person and hybrid plans. This growing national trend, coupled with the below underlying factors, dictated the shift in our recommendations for the delay in the Fall reopening plan:

- 1) At the time the Fall plan was approved, the circumstances in the U.S. Virgin Islands were substantially different. The V.I. Department of Health reported total confirmed cases in the USVI of 76 with only 6 active cases (as of June 20, 2020). A month later, the total confirmed cases in the Territory stands at 308 with 144 active cases (as of July 21, 2020).

- 2) The recent outbreak on the island of St. Croix at the Limetree Bay refinery resident facility is a stark and sobering reminder of the uncertainty and potential for increased risk and community spread that can escalate while living in residential and communal environments similar to residence hall settings on college campuses, and particularly in our small and connected local community. With residence halls on both St. Croix and St. Thomas campuses, this potential risk is further enhanced and complicated with students traveling from the mainland and international areas coupled with the requirements for prior testing and safely providing on-campus quarantine housing and related services on both campuses.
- 3) The new travel restrictions and quarantine protocols for traveling and to the Territory will negatively impact the ability of students outside of the Territory to easily and safely commence the Fall semester as planned.
- 4) The University is cognizant of the extension of the Territory's State of Emergency Declaration through September 9, 2020, which was set to expire on July 11.
- 5) The Tenth Supplemental Executive Order and Proclamation issued by the Governor on July 9, 2020 recommends that all businesses that have employees who are not critical to in-person/on-site operations or that are classified as essential to work from home or remotely and can do so should be encouraged to do so. In light of the local public health concerns, Safer-at-Home is recommended but with the caveat of ensuring that work is still completed in collaboration with supervisors and department heads and that front-facing and customer service areas have a plan in place to ensure no interruption in service and availability.
- 6) In consideration of the VI Department of Health's issued phased-reopening guidelines in partnership with the VI Department of Education to safely support the reopening of all schools in the Territory as well as the announcement to delay the start of public schools until September 8, 2020, the University's employees who have children in schools will be challenged in fulfilling their responsibilities at the traditional work site as the plan requires.

We understand that this proposed delay comes as a significant disappointment, particularly to our students who were looking forward to resuming instruction in-person and all aspects of campus life, albeit within the conditions and confines of this new COVID-19 normal. These are by far not easy decisions to make, but please be reassured that we will be guided by local and national public health officials as well as the science and best practices in higher education.

We are continuing to strive to keep the University functioning and doing so in a safe manner. The campus environment will still require meticulous adherence to public health practices including hand hygiene, physical distancing, proper cough/sneeze etiquette, frequent disinfecting of common and high traffic areas, symptom assessment, testing and/or temperature checks, and use of face masks and approved facial coverings. To enhance safety in the work environment, the University is installing protective barriers in high traffic areas and many offices. We recognize that a shift to virtual instruction will allow flexibility for many of our employees to continue teleworking. Each area however must develop a plan that ensures that quality customer service to our students and others is not adversely impacted by this telework option and that service is being delivered in a consistent and thoughtful manner. This may include offering and posting in-office hours, staggering employees work hours/days, ensuring that calls are forwarded when working remotely, and timely responding to messages, emails and communications.

While we operate in a virtual environment, we will monitor the COVID-19 epidemiological data to make determinations, following the guidance of the local public health officials, as to the appropriate time to consider the full reopening of the campuses. I seek the Board of Trustees' serious and prompt consideration of this regrettable and challenging recommendation.

Sincerely,

David Hall  
President

July 22, 2020