

11/21/21 [AllUnit] COVID, Bargaining and Upcoming Events

Happy New Year! Best wishes from the MSP for a healthy and happy 2022.

We've received many emails about the university's plans given the high rates of Covid infections in Massachusetts and beyond. We have appreciated the availability of PCR tests as well as vaccines and boosters, which have been crucial to keeping our community safe. Weekly updates from Ann Becker and Jeff Hescock have information about testing and vaccines, and MSP has been attending weekly meetings along with the staff unions to talk about health and safety. However, we still have many unanswered questions about the start of the semester.

Here is what we know:

- Students were required to mail in a PCR test this week. Many kits have been returned and they are being analyzed. The administration will look at the data before making a decision about the start of the semester. Students who showed a positive result will be asked to quarantine at home for the next ten days, and will not need to take a PCR test upon their return to campus (because PCR tests can show positive results for up to 90 days in some cases) – thereby relieving pressure on UMass's testing and quarantine spaces.
- For students whose initial PCR test was negative, we have asked for PCR testing to be required at the start of the spring semester. The administration is considering this option but no decision has been made.
- The unions asked for everyone to have the flexibility to work remotely until January 25, which mostly affects staff, but also librarians and some lecturers who are currently being required to work on campus. This request was granted and supervisors were encouraged to allow non-essential-onsite personnel to work remotely until the semester begins.
- We have asked the administration to consider starting the semester with a couple of weeks of remote work, as other Massachusetts campuses have done, until we see what is happening with Covid rates. The administration said they are considering the options, but they will not make any commitments yet. We know that students are anxious to come back to an in-person semester, and the administration does not want to risk some students dropping out – but we believe that two weeks of remote work would be prudent.
- MSP has talked with EH&S about the crisis in local hospitals, which are at maximum capacity, and they said they are monitoring the situation.
- The unions have all asked for N95 or KN95 masks to be provided to all employees, and we'd like them to be required for students as well. The administration has ordered a large shipment of masks but it's unclear when they will arrive. We also want to have crystal-clear policies about how instructors should respond if students are unmasked or not following protocols.
- MSP has talked a lot about what happens when our members have any symptoms of illness, or if we have children at home because daycare or schools are closed, or if children are not allowed to attend school because they have cold symptoms. In any of these situations, the administration has agreed that faculty and librarians have the right to take paid sick leave, or to move a class temporarily to remote format (synchronous or asynchronous) as appropriate, until your own or your family's health conditions improve.

MSP continues to have your back; if you are in a difficult situation and need assistance, please don't hesitate to reach out. We don't necessarily have the answers – in particular, we can't answer "what if" questions, and we are all trying to be patient as the administration figures out

policies – but we can reassure you that we are asking the hard questions and advocating for our members' and our students' health and safety.

As you know, we also are continuing to negotiate our next contract. The bargaining team will send an update once the semester begins, but we want you to know that we have continued to meet regularly with the administration to advocate for the issues that matter most to faculty and librarians. An amazing group of non-tenure-track faculty testified at our most recent bargaining session, and made a strong impression with their descriptions of the work they do and the need for recognition and equity, as well as the need to retain existing job security. We may need more MSP members to participate in future sessions, especially if we are not able to make more progress around issues including pay equity, a merit pool, and salary increases.

Please mark your calendar for an on-campus rally on Groundhog Day – Wednesday, February 2nd, at noon. We plan to meet at the Student Union, along with the other UMass unions, to talk publicly about health and safety and about the need to settle strong contracts with all the unions. Please join us!

Finally, Monday is Martin Luther King Jr. Day. MSP is part of the Western Mass Area Labor Federation, which has organized an event to fight for voting rights, in coalition with unions and community-based organizations in Springfield. Join us on Monday at 1:00 pm, at the Federal Building in Springfield:

<https://www.facebook.com/WMALF/photos/gm.1322033748227281/4703016163120966/>