

November 3, 2021

TO: William McQuitty, President, and the APA Executive Board

Thank you for your letter, dated Sept. 16, in which you shared some concerns as well as requests related to COVID-19 policies and procedures. I appreciate your leadership and stewardship on behalf of WMU and staff. I have spent some time, along with various Cabinet members, carefully monitoring developments on campus while considering and discussing the items raised in your letter. We would like to offer the following thoughts and perspective.

As you know, we continue to take a multilayered approach to keeping our students, faculty and staff safe while COVID-19 persists. We have been pleased to communicate these results to campus on an ongoing basis. Since the start of fall semester, vaccination rates for both students and employees have dramatically increased and continue to rise each week. To date, 79% of our campus community has their verified COVID-19 vaccination on file with Sindecuse. As of this week, 78% of students who live on campus, attend in-person classes, or take advantage of the SRC and dining are vaccinated. If their vaccination is not verified, students are moving through the mandatory weekly testing protocol. Those who are not compliant are engaged in progressive discipline through the student conduct process. Among faculty and staff, 88% have had their vaccinated status verified by Sindecuse. These numbers also continue to climb each week. We appreciate that for those employees not vaccinated, the vast majority are proceeding with mandatory testing.

To see if these efforts are working, we encourage you and your members to continue to follow updates on the [COVID-19 dashboard](#). We are testing 2,500 to 2,700 individuals per week, far more than we did at any point last year. Even with this increased testing, our positivity rate is substantially lower than in surrounding Kalamazoo County and has been less than 1% for several weeks running. All and all, as we look at our vaccination rates and level of positive cases, we know that WMU's campus is a much safer place than our surrounding community and the state as it relates to COVID-19 exposure.

Leave provisions

When COVID-19 first made its unexpected and challenging appearance in 2020, WMU led with leave programs specifically designed to help our faculty and staff deal with an acute and severe situation. We did so far in advance of mandated federal programs. Since then, as vaccines have become widely available, the federally mandated COVID-19 leave programs have lapsed. WMU, in alignment with our other Michigan public universities, has transitioned back to accommodating our employees needs through our long-established sick and vacation leave plans, as well as FMLA. As we all understand, COVID-19 is just one of many illnesses that could cause us or our colleagues to need time away from work. In such instances, we always encourage both the employee and their manager/supervisor to contact their Human Resources representative to understand the options available as well as any accommodations that can be made.

Telecommuting

In response to the evolving needs of our employees and the campus, we introduced the new [telecommuting policy](#) earlier this summer. The new measure provides greater flexibility for our employees while still meeting the operational needs of the University. It applies to work situations in which job duties may be performed over a more flexible work schedule and/or remotely. As with any policy, this one sets a common floor so that it can be implemented and meet the diverse operational needs of the University. This policy was an attempt to create a means for flexibility in our approach to work, however, by their very nature, policies set guidelines for a common approach rather than individualistic action. Policies also require that there be some reasonably consistent application to provide balance and equity. For any University policy, periodic review is required to make sure it is operating in the desired way, so the telecommuting policy will also be revisited in the future.

Your letter posed several questions regarding how the telecommuting policy relates to COVID-19 (or any other illness). Our various *leave programs* exist to address health-related situations, including COVID-19. That said, we do and will strive to work together to find flexible ad hoc solutions that accommodate the needs of the staff member as well as WMU. Again, we encourage our staff as well as supervisors/managers to connect with their Human Resources representative if they have ongoing concerns.

Over the past 22 months, we have seen how quickly change can occur. We continue to recognize the need to remain vigilant and responsive as conditions evolve, campus needs change and decisions need to be made. Our commitment remains to communicate with campus regarding what is occurring on campus and to be transparent about WMU's response.

Regards,



Edward Montgomery, President

Members of the President's Cabinet