September 9, 2021

Dear WMU-AAUP Executive Committee:

Thank you for your recent letter expressing your concerns about COVID-19 safety measures and accommodations. Over the past year and a half as the pandemic has evolved and our knowledge and tools to combat it have changed, we have remained attentive to the science as well as federal, state and local governmental health and safety guidance, and conditions on our campus and in our community in developing and adapting our strategies to fight COVID-19. We believe it is critical for all students to be able to pursue the transformative impact of higher education. As a residential university for nearly 120 years, we have a strong belief and tradition of offering first-rate interactive educational experience to a broad and inclusive cross section of Michigan residents and students from around the world. To continue to meet those goals, we have sought to develop policies that maintain inclusivity, provide the best pedagogy and maintain a safe environment. While we have continuously updated campus on our strategy and approach over the last 18 months or so, we welcome the opportunity to further expand upon the thinking behind our decisions.

Vaccines

From December 2020 when the Pfizer vaccine was first approved we have encouraged and facilitated efforts to make it available to our community. From coordinating with county health authorities to registering faculty, staff and students to holding vaccine clinics on campus, we have been consistent and staunch advocates for vaccinations. In numerous emails, newsletters, social media posts, videos and other media placements we have consistently stressed its importance. More than that, earlier this summer we launched an extensive incentive program targeting students with thousands of dollars in scholarships offers, time off to get vaccinated and other inducements. Our program was noted by Governor Whitmer and cited along with other universities by the federal government. Consequently, we are puzzled by the claims of a lack of clear and consistent messaging and approach. A fair reading of our messaging or policy approach would find clear and convincing evidence of our belief in—and promotion of—vaccines to our community.

Our current policy adds to these exhortations and incentives by now requiring faculty, staff and students to provide proof of vaccination status or submit to regular testing. It would seem that our community has heard our messaging and is responding. Our overall verified vaccination rate of 58.7% exceeds that of the general public in Michigan with a rate of 56.2%. At Western to date, 56.3% of students have a verified vaccination and 70.9% of faculty and staff have a
verified vaccination. Verified vaccinations among our students have increased considerably in the past two or so weeks. Compared to our broader community, our faculty and staff vaccination rate exceeds Kalamazoo County’s rate of 61.4%, and that of our students far outpace their peer age groups in Kalamazoo County who have a vaccination rate of 40.3%. WMU is raising the bar, not lowering the standards in our area.

Our approach is consistent with current state and local public health requirements and ahead of what’s required of Michigan state employees or adopted by the largest employers in the state like GM, Ford and Chrysler and solidly within the mainstream of other universities. Indeed, in not having a vaccine mandate, Western’s policy is not dissimilar from most colleges and universities, joining 72% of institutions nationwide and 85% of all higher education institutions in Michigan.

While you assert that there is only one pathway, that view is not shared by most universities, employers, government agencies, schools or the general public. A university vaccine mandate is not a magic bullet nor does it guarantee protection from COVID-19 for two reasons: First, the university community does not operate in a bubble but rather has regular interactions with the surrounding community. Even if everyone on campus were vaccinated, our exposure risks would remain until the surrounding community achieved “herd immunity.”. Second, university vaccine mandates do not guarantee everyone on campus will be vaccinated. To see that, let’s look at the experience of two of those universities you cited for adopting vaccine mandates. Indiana University (IU) has imposed a vaccine mandate. IU requires its community at its nine campuses to attest (not show proof) of vaccination status and allows 5 different exemptions. This is not surprising as mandates at public universities that may affect access to fundamental rights like employment or receiving an education often come with constitutional or legislatively required exemptions usually including “philosophical” or “ethical” grounds (as is required for the dozen or so vaccines mandated for children in grades K-12 in Michigan). Due to the evolving nature of the pandemic, law in this area is complex and nuanced.

Among students, IU’s Bloomington campus leads the system at 91.8% but the variability across its campuses ranges from that high down to 65.4% on the IU East (Richmond) campus and 69% at the IU Kokomo campus. We see the same in our own state at one of the other universities you cited. The University of Michigan also has a system-wide vaccine mandate. Ann Arbor reports a student vaccination rate of 93% but only 65.8% of Dearborn students and 41.8% of Flint students are vaccinated. Clearly, the imposition of a mandate has again not generated universal coverage. Now what do each of these universities do in the face of substantial numbers of unvaccinated students (and faculty and staff)? They regularly test the unvaccinated. The “onerous” testing requirements in your critique of WMU are still being widely used even at universities with mandates.

The WMU-AAUP Executive Committee has urged the adoption of a vaccine mandate. The difference between our current policy and this mandate would be that students, faculty and staff would be compelled to comply or presumably face some serious consequences including dismissal as they do at UM or IU. On some of their campuses, a third to a half of their communities are facing sanctions. On our campus, dozens of faculty, hundreds of staff and thousands of students could face dismissal for noncompliance. Perhaps that is why neither WSA nor GSA, neither APA nor PSSO and neither AFSCME nor MSEA nor the POA have made a similar
public call for a mandate. It’s surprising that you would seem to advocate for the removal of thousands of students, faculty and staff in pursuit of this “one pathway.”

While sharing your goal to increase vaccination rates, we have pursued a different path which we believe is more consistent with our public access mission and that promotes safety without sanctioning or dismissing large portions of our community who are hesitant to get this vaccine or resistant to mandates. As the UM and IU experiences demonstrate, mandates are most effective where there is widespread popular support and high rates of voluntary compliance. Where those conditions are absent, herd immunity or high rates of vaccination are difficult to achieve without broad-based sanctions. There is widespread vaccine hesitancy, especially among minority or disadvantaged populations, and resistance across our local area and in much of our state. A Free Press poll conducted in August found that 61% of Michiganders oppose vaccine mandates in general and when asked about college students, as many opposed such a requirement as supported it. Such hesitancy plus the experiences at our peers outlined above lead us to believe there will inevitably be large numbers of noncompliant faculty, staff and students at universities, regardless of whether the “attestation” process identifies them or not. Now of course one could have a mandate without sanctions but then isn’t such a policy just a “strong encouragement,” or an even weaker version of our current policy which you find concerning.

While you cite a failure to involve faculty in decision-making, in fact we are thankful to members of the WMU-AAUP who proposed at the last Faculty Senate meeting a solution that ultimately became core to our strategy: required testing for the unvaccinated. We were happy to implement that suggestion. The approach is more practical from an enforcement perspective because there are very few reasons for an exception to testing and alternative methods for the few who need to be exempt from the standard method are widely available.

What we have learned from local and national public health experts is that a layered strategy is the most effective, and that is what we have enacted. Those layers include:

- Strongly encouraged and incentivized vaccination. In fact, we worked with the health department in late 2020 to ensure that Broncos were among the very first to have access to vaccinations. We will continue to push vaccination as the most critical and accessible way to protect yourself. Breakthrough cases are possible, but they are rare, and when they do occur the chance of severe illness is very small.
- Required testing with extremely limited exceptions and real and immediate consequences for noncompliance
- Encouraging all Broncos to monitor their symptoms and required daily health surveys for all Broncos who are not vaccinated
- Required masking indoors at all Western facilities and recommended masking at large outdoor WMU events
- Creating and making available a badging system that makes everyone’s COVID-19 status on campus clear.

When it comes to tracking vaccinations, we believe our vaccination verification approach is both rare and important. Individuals must first submit their official vaccination record which is then verified through the relevant state vaccination database. We apply this high level of rigor
because the actual vaccination is the needed behavior. A self-report without verification or a vague verification process is of little use in terms of safety.

**Guidance for the classroom**

We hear you asking for more guidance for managing classrooms with regard to masks and badges. We will readily acknowledge that we have been reticent to provide structured guidance because the classroom is the faculty domain. Over the past year, hundreds of faculty with hybrid or in-person classes already successfully managed classrooms with mask mandates and where our health screening and badging system was in place. We are grateful for the Faculty Senate’s guidance, issued prior to the start of the fall term, that outlines concrete steps and scenarios for how to manage classroom-based inquiries around masks and testing.

In our desire to be helpful, we will attempt to supplement this thought leadership while endeavoring to avoid the pitfall of being too prescriptive.

First, we are a community and the authority of faculty in the classroom is crucial to both delivering our mission and providing an environment conducive to learning. COVID-19 is not the only potential interruption to learning—we have snow days, students get sick, we monitor and enforce academic integrity. We expect and maintain a level of decorum and respect among our students in our classroom discussions.

In all of these and so many more common occurrences, faculty members use their skills, tools and experiences to manage classes and classrooms. Expectations are explained on the syllabus. Feedback is offered through formal and informal means. If a student becomes so disruptive that learning is impeded, class can be cancelled and the student referred to the Office of Student Conduct.

Our universal mask policy and badging systems are simply additional tools that are available to faculty members. The campus-wide mask policy provides a common understanding and expectation throughout the University that provides the faculty authority for enforcement. Last spring when we surveyed mask behaviors in a study from the CDC, we found compliance on campus in excess of 90%.

Badging is another tool available for monitoring safety at the faculty member’s discretion. We strongly encourage enforcement because it can enhance safety of the faculty member, their classes and the entire community and enforcement from faculty members will help increase compliance levels.

Even under the stress of the pandemic, we should not lose sight of the fact that disruptive student behavior in the classroom is rare. That has continued to be true throughout the pandemic and as we enter this fall semester. If you believe faculty need assistance honing classroom management skills, we’d be happy to have WMUx develop faculty training resources to help.
Again, thank you for the opportunity to offer more detail on our thinking. We wish you, the Executive Committee and all of our faculty the best for a productive academic year.

Sincerely,

Edward Montgomery  
President  

Jennifer Bott, Ph.D.  
Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs