January 26, 2022

Dear UC Santa Barbara Campus Community:

On Friday, January 21, Chancellor Yang sent a message reaffirming the campus plans to resume in-person instruction on January 31, 2022. Since the UC Santa Barbara announcement, every other UC campus has announced similar plans to resume in-person instruction in the month of February.

As Chancellor Yang noted, the decision to resume in-person instruction was done after significant consultation, both here on campus and with medical and public health experts in our community and across the UC system.

The initial decision to begin the quarter in remote instruction was based solely on logistical concerns, taking into consideration the large number of expected absences due to COVID-19 among faculty, staff and students alike. Delaying the return to campus allowed our community members more time to meet UC mandated vaccination and testing requirements and reduced pressure on campus medical resources. The delay had the added benefit of maintaining a lower population density on campus amidst the surge attributed to the Omicron variant.

The Omicron surge now appears to be waning. Our campus testing and surveillance program already has seen the case positivity rate in our UCSB community drop precipitously (more than 40% from week one through week three) — even as more students have returned to campus housing and Isla Vista and the number of in-person courses increased. This data mirrors corresponding data around the country and in other parts of the world that experienced earlier Omicron surges, indicating that our campus has passed the peak and should anticipate a continued decline in the coming weeks.

Further, our available data shows that the vast majority of campus cases have been either asymptomatic or mild, which corresponds to what other highly vaccinated communities have experienced. Data from December 2021 acquired in Southern California shows that risk of serious illness (requiring hospitalization) from an Omicron infection, across all age groups, is approximately half that of the Delta variant.
To read more information from campus medical experts regarding the Omicron variant data please visit https://www.news.ucsb.edu/2022/020529/omicron-and-beyond.

Prior to Fall Quarter, as the Delta variant was surging, we surveyed all our campus buildings and classroom spaces to assess and implement all required mitigation protocols and procedures related to our ventilation systems. As part of this effort, faculty experts conducted modeling that confirmed an extremely low risk of classroom transmission. Taking into consideration the nature of the Omicron variant, our experts have now updated their modeling, which indicates that we can expect a similarly low rate of possible transmission in classrooms and offices for the rest of this quarter. During the fall quarter, our contact tracing efforts did not report any normal person-to-person transmission in the classroom. Other UC campuses report similar findings regarding classroom transmission.

To learn more about the updated classroom modeling please visit https://www.news.ucsb.edu/2022/020528/hard-work-pays.

Our campus has an extremely high rate of vaccination. We have seen a significant increase in our booster compliance as well. We expect that by the time fully in-person instruction resumes next week that our campus compliance will be at the same overall level as it was in the fall. Given our campus vaccination rates, our mandatory masking requirements, our rigorous testing protocols, and our other mitigation efforts and procedures, our campus is positioned for a successful resumption of in-person learning.

As a reminder, students who have remained off-campus during the remote instruction period are encouraged to return as soon as possible before January 31, in order to obtain a COVID-19 test on campus and, if necessary, complete the 5-day isolation period. (Students returning to campus who need additional information on testing and other campus resources should review the Student Affairs checklist.) Eligible students also must get the required COVID-19 booster by January 31, and follow all the mitigation protocols, including masking and testing, highlighted in our December 27, 2021 message to students and in the January 6, 2022 message to faculty and staff. Eligible faculty and staff must obtain a vaccine booster by February 4, 2022.

Appointments for in-person COVID-19 PCR tests, or to drop off a self-collected test for analysis, can be made via the Student Health Patient Portal. The self-collected COVID-19 PCR kits are available for pickup at Loma Pelona Center, the Student Resource Building, the Library (mountain side), the RecCen, and at the front desk of many campus housing facilities.
The university has recently extended through February its partnership with the Santa Barbara County Public Health Department to provide COVID-19 booster vaccine clinics at Embarcadero Hall to the campus community as well as to the Isla Vista and broader communities. Appointments are available via MyTurn.

We will continue to share information with the campus community regarding any changes to public health guidelines, campus policies and best practices. We also ask community members to check the campus’s COVID-19 Information page to keep abreast of any new developments or updates to policies and protocols. As always, the UCSB COVID-19 Call Center is available for general questions by email at ucsb-covid19@ucsb.edu, or by phone at (805) 893-3113 weekdays from 8 am to 4 pm.

We echo Chancellor Yang’s deep appreciation for all the hard work that is being done to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 in our community and the commitment our Gaucho community has shown to look out for each other.

Sincerely,

Scott Grafton, M.D., Ph.D.
Campus COVID-Mitigation Program Manager and Professor of Psychological and Brain Sciences

Stuart Feinstein
COVID-19 Response Team Coordinator and Professor of Molecular, Cellular, and Developmental Biology

Vejas Skripkus, M.D.
Executive Director of Student Health and Campus Physician

Mary Ferris, M.D.
Campus COVID-19 Clinical Advisor