Subject: RE: GWS response to lifting the mask mandate

From: Office of the Chancellor <chancellor@wisc.edu>
Sent: Sunday, March 20, 2022 8:51 AM
To: Judith Houck <jahouck@wisc.edu>; Secretary of the Faculty <sof@secfac.wisc.edu>; Beth Meyerand <memeyerand@wisc.edu>; VAISHALI P BAKSHI <vbakshi@wisc.edu>; Secretary of the Academic Staff <soas@soas.wisc.edu>; Jessica Karls-Ruplinger <jessica.karlsruplinger@wisc.edu>; UW-Madison Provost <provost@provost.wisc.edu>; Susan Zaeske <susan.zaeske@wisc.edu>; Tina Nielsen <tina.nielsen@wisc.edu>; DENISE PATRICIA HICKEY <denise.hickey@wisc.edu>

Subject: Re: GWS response to lifting the mask mandate

Professor Houck,
Thank you for your message and for sharing your request about our campus’s COVID-19 masking decision.

After consulting with experts at UW Health and SMPH, reviewing changes in Dane County and elsewhere, and talking with Deans and other on-campus groups, we have phased out the indoor masking requirement, with exceptions for clinical and health care and childcare settings. UW System has encouraged campuses to end their requirements as of Spring Break. Dane County has also ended its requirement as of March 1.

We understand that individuals have different reactions to this transition and to the phasing out of the mask requirement. Some on campus are hesitant about the change for the reasons you outline. It is important to state that anyone who chooses to continue wearing a mask should do so. Instructors may also ask, though not require, students in their classes or lab to do so as well. We are urging respect for everyone’s personal decision on masking. If there’s another variant or uptick in transmission rates, we know that wearing a mask is an effective way of reducing the spread.

I will also note that there have been costs to masking requirements, including strains to our mental health and inhibiting the ability to fully communicate, teach and learn.

We are not in the same environment that we confronted in 2020, when COVID-19 first appeared in our community. We now know much more about the virus and how it behaves. And thanks to a high vaccination rate, boosters and the immunity many have gained from natural infection, our bodies now respond differently to the virus as well.

As such, it’s time that our campus response also changes. We have the tools to operate alongside a virus that will remain circulating at variable levels and continue to evolve. The research evidence suggests that if you are wearing a high quality mask, and vaccinated and boosted, you have high protection from infection regardless of the choices made by others around you. This means we are now at a point where it is up the individual to decide how much protection they want and need.

Infections on campus have collapsed in recent weeks. This offers us the opportunity to use our public health tools in more strategic ways.

In accordance with the [CDC’s recent guidance update](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html), masks and respirators are recommended in areas with ‘high’ COVID-19 community levels. The measurement for ‘community levels’ takes into account new hospital admissions and staffed inpatient beds occupied by COVID-19 patients. Currently, [Dane County has ‘low’ community levels of COVID-19](https://www.danehealth.org/covid-19). The recommendation is to stay up to date with COVID-19 vaccines and get tested if you have symptoms — guidance that currently aligns with our own.
We are fortunate to work in a community that is highly vaccinated against COVID-19 and responsible in taking appropriate public health precautions. As an added step, we will continue to make free PCR and antigen testing widely available and we have asked students to test upon return from Spring Break, if they travelled to areas of higher spread.

We have tried to communicate clearly about these changes, including two campus online forums with campus and UW Health experts. The most recent forum is viewable at http://go.wisc.edu/spring22 should you have additional questions.

We will continue to support the health of our campus community based on the available science and guidance from experts. Thank you again for your message and your continued work on campus to support our students.

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From: Judith Houck <jahouck@wisc.edu>
Date: Friday, March 11, 2022 at 4:56 PM
To: Secretary of the Faculty <sof@sefac.wisc.edu>, Beth Meyerand <memeyerand@wisc.edu>, VAISHALI P BAKSHI <vbakshi@wisc.edu>, Secretary of the Academic Staff <soas@soas.wisc.edu>, Jessica Karls-Ruplinger <jessica.karlsruplinger@wisc.edu>, Office of the Chancellor <chancellor@wisc.edu>, UW-Madison Provost <provost@provost.wisc.edu>, Susan Zaeske <susan.zaeske@wisc.edu>
Subject: GWS response to lifting the mask mandate

Greetings,

The Department of Gender and Women’s Studies asks the chancellor to reinstate the mask mandate on the UW-Madison campus. Abandoning the mask mandate and denying instructors the ability to require masks disempowers individuals in their efforts to keep themselves and their families safe. We understand that many people will continue to wear masks on campus. Masks, however, provide the greatest protection when everyone wears them. By not requiring masks, particularly in spaces that do not allow for social-distancing, we have lost a crucial tool for individual and community safety.

Clearly, the consequences of this decision are not borne equally; those with complicating conditions and/or care responsibilities for unvaccinated children and elderly family members (care burdens that are still disproportionately borne by women and especially women of color) are left without good options. We also note the disproportionate risk shouldered by our teaching assistants who tend to be the instructors with the highest student loads and most frequent student contact. As a result, lifting the mask mandate marks a weakened commitment by the university to protect the most vulnerable members of our community. Given the unjust burdens of disease and death that have tracked along hierarchies of race, gender, Indigeneity, class, and ability under Covid-19, this decision also means a failure of the university to live up to its commitments to racial and social justice.
At the very least, we believe that the mask mandate should be reinstated in lab spaces and classrooms where students and instructors may be unable to distance themselves from others. We urge the Chancellor to require masks in these spaces and we stand in solidarity with the TAA, UFAS, ASM, UW System Caregiving Task Force, ACLU Student Alliance, and other groups and departments who are organizing and speaking out in support of continuing the mask mandate.

Judith Houck, Chair,

for the Department of Gender and Women's Studies

Judith A. Houck (she/her/hers)
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