



**Saint Mary's
University**

Office of the President

26th January 2022

Dr. Karen Harper
President
CUPE 3912

Dear Karen, Erica, and Lauren,

Thank you for your letter of January 21st and for the meeting on January 25th with Karen and Erica. We can now respond knowing the questions you have to date. Your letter referenced the issues raised in the letters from SMUFU. You also raised concerns that some information seemed to be sent only to SMUFU members and not to your part-time faculty members. We have investigated and all information was sent to all faculty, and we are unsure as to why some of your members did not receive those emails. The same email list was used in all correspondence to faculty last week. We are reviewing and will redistribute messages as necessary. But we assure you that we were attempting to reach all faculty members in both bargaining units.

Given that the issues you raised align with those raised by SMUFU, we are sharing the key elements of our response to them, here.

We understand there remain concerns as we return to in-person learning this week. Our weekly communications to the Saint Mary's community (and to faculty specifically, including in the week prior to the return to in-person learning) have addressed concerns raised with us and have provided guidance for faculty, staff, and students. The guidance for faculty, found [here](#), was developed in response to specific questions heard from faculty by Deans, Associate Deans, and others at Saint Mary's. We are listening and responding daily, although we acknowledge that you have asked additional questions that are answered directly in this correspondence.

Several universities in Nova Scotia have returned to in-person learning on their campuses this week and others will do so next week. A return to campus is a responsible plan, considering the stabilizing public health situation, and proceeds with the support of Advanced Education and Nova Scotia Public Health. Our plan is fully compliant with the Post-Secondary Framework approved by Occupational Health and Safety and Public Health. We have consulted with public health officials, and the 'appropriate measures' recognized by Dr. Strang in place at Saint Mary's include exceptionally-high vaccination rates of students, staff and faculty, enhanced mask protocols, adherence to physical distancing, and attention to ventilation in classrooms and public spaces.

As you know, students are not eligible to attend in-person classes unless they have submitted proof of full vaccination. Over 99 per cent of students have done so, with a smaller number signing an attestation that they will not be on campus for any purpose this term. The vaccination mandate for faculty and staff has a similarly-high percentage of full vaccination and we continue to encourage all members of our community to receive booster shots (which are now available to the 18 years and above age groups). Further, other events

on campus have been cancelled for the coming weeks to reduce density on campus and give priority to in-person learning.

We have proceeded with our plan to return to campus and prioritize in-person learning because we have a commitment as a university to the learning needs of our students. Dr. Strang has given clear guidance to the university sector throughout the pandemic and has helped establish a framework for universities to safely deliver courses in person. We know the negative impacts of prolonged online learning on student mental health are significant; we hear this from students, from SMUSA, and within wider society. The negative impacts extend to other components of student life, and we know that, as we move into the third year of the pandemic, students are missing vital pieces of their education journey that will not be recovered. This is recognized in Dr. Strang's encouragement to universities to return to in-person learning (we attach his statement again to this letter). Saint Mary's adherence to the Post-Secondary Framework and regular conversations with Public Health are reflected in the dedicated work of our Return to Campus committee, which has collaborated with similar committees at other universities. The engagement of so many people within our community in developing our response to the pandemic has been exceptional, and we are confident that our campus is safe for a return to in-person classes. We recognize, of course, that we need to remain agile and in continued conversation with Public Health and others.

Responding to your request for concrete responses to three specific faculty concerns:

1. We will not provide N95 masks and face shields to all members of faculty. This is not a recommendation of health authorities. Saint Mary's provides PPE to faculty where it is required under the Occupational Health and Safety Act to complete their work (for example, to those handling chemicals in Science). Following public health guidance regarding face masks as an individual responsibility, all staff and faculty, and students are responsible for their own masks and compliance with the university's mask protocols. Guidance on recommended masks was communicated last week and is found [here](#).
2. We recognize that faculty may have to communicate with a student who is not following mask requirements in class or around campus. Guidance was provided to faculty on January 19 in this regard. We refer you to this guidance and note that students who violate university policy may be subject to discipline under the Code of Student Conduct. You can first remind the student of the requirement, and then follow the guidance suggested on January 19 if the student remains un-cooperative. With respect to the vaccination status of a student, faculty play no role in supervising compliance with the vaccination policy and the personal health information of any individual student should be protected in accordance with law. Students who are not vaccinated are not permitted to attend in person classes during this term, so this concern should be alleviated.
3. With respect to air quality and filtration, most classrooms and laboratories have highly-effective systems in place. Some individuals have questions whether we can add stand alone HEPA systems. In general, these compromise the operation of larger mechanical systems and are therefore not recommended. However, for a limited number of some smaller rooms without mechanical ventilation, we are installing stand-alone HEPA filter systems. In all cases, we recognize that safety requires a multi-layered; ventilation monitoring and changes are just one component and we must continue to use the physical distancing and masking protocols for post-secondary operations as outlined by Dr. Strang and in our guidance, along with the exceptional vaccination compliance of our community. We acknowledge that there are varieties of settings for in-person teaching. All protocols should always be followed, regardless of the setting, and

because we have introduced a mask requirement in all classrooms, Public Health has confirmed that it is safe for us to resume full classroom capacities. Please note that these classroom capacities are approved independently of the public health order and its gathering sizes.

With respect to your call for a commitment to respond to faculty concerns in a respectful and timely way, Dr. Butler did meet with Drs. Harper and Fischer on January 25th for further conversation. We do note that the President's Town Hall, held on January 26, 2022 provides another forum. Holding these Town Halls almost monthly over the last two years has proven to be an invaluable way of communicating with our University community and we have always responded to concerns raised in that forum in respectful, transparent, and timely ways.

Lastly, your letter suggests that faculty who wish to teach remotely for specific health and safety reasons should have the option to do so until there is more clarity around the concerns expressed in your letter. We hope that clarity has been delivered in our responses above. However, we want to clarify that individual faculty members have always had the option to request flexibility due to exceptional circumstances, whether related to a medical situation or other personal circumstance. To ensure we can meet the expectations set for students for the Winter Term, and perhaps more importantly ensure equitable treatment, these situations must be addressed on a case-by-case basis. Any individual with specific needs should reach out to Human Resources at hr@smu.ca for assistance.

We are monitoring the situation closely as we return to campus, including monitoring our capacities to provide on-campus services and operations, and will continue our close collaboration with Public Health over the coming weeks. This past Friday, we also alerted Senate to be prepared should circumstances warrant considering and taking actions under the Senate Policy on the Academic Implications of Disruptions of University Business. We will be maintaining close contact with the Chair of Senate and academic administrators over the coming days and weeks to ensure we remain ready to act if needed.

Sincerely,



Robert Summerby-Murray
President and Vice-Chancellor
Research



Malcolm Butler
Vice-President Academic and

cc. Ms. Michelle Benoit, Vice-President Finance and Administration
Mr. Mark Moffett, Associate Vice-President People and Culture
Mr. Kennedy Fitzgerald, Director, Employee and Labour Relations