

## From President Tim Sands: Vaccines offer promise, but we have to do more

Dear Hokies,

We start the spring semester with hope – hope that vaccines will bring a rapid end to the pandemic; hope that we will not lose another friend, family member, or member of our community to COVID-19; and hope that the fullness of everyday life as we knew it will soon return.

This past fall, in the face of tremendous adversity, Hokies really came through. From mid-September to mid-November, the average daily case rate fell steadily from about 50 to below 10 on the Blacksburg campus, while the positivity rate dropped from nearly 20 percent to less than 3 percent. We ended the in-person portion of the semester with an average daily new case rate of about seven and a test positivity rate just above 1 percent. If the academic year were a game of basketball, we would say that we were fighting hard to keep up at the beginning, but rallied to take control by halftime.

We start the second half of our year with an updated plan, but an even tougher set of circumstances. The seven-day moving average for cases in Montgomery County was four times higher than on the first day of in-person classes this semester than in the fall. There are also concerns about new variants that have taken hold in other parts of the world and are now appearing in the United States. Despite these serious challenges, I believe now is the time for us all to share in clarity of purpose. Although there are countless factors directly impacting the pandemic at a global scale, we can take control of the pandemic locally by aiming to drive the new case rate and positivity nearly to zero.

The array of approved vaccines offers great promise for the months ahead. But, waiting for vaccine-induced “herd immunity” to turn the corner is not enough in the near term. We have to do more. Fortunately, we have far more knowledge than we did in August or even November. We also have new and better tools at our disposal. I’d like to highlight a few lessons learned from last year, where we stand at the moment, and some strategies for how we’re moving forward.

- **Testing:** Our entry process for on-campus residential students in January revealed that 10 percent of our students had previously tested positive and did not require a PCR entry test. Of

the remaining students, about 0.9 percent tested positive. Screening for past infections yielded a 0.5 percent net positivity. This is a relatively low percentage, but it is higher than we saw with entry testing in the fall, reflecting the challenging circumstances the virus currently presents in our communities.

One of the most important lessons from last semester was the critical role of mandatory random prevalence testing of students and surveillance testing of high-contact employees. These testing regimens provide reliable estimates of the actual prevalence of the disease in our on-campus and off-campus populations and help us identify asymptomatic cases in order to reduce the spread of the virus. Combined with testing of symptomatic individuals, current results indicate we are seeing daily new case rates and positivity rates approaching levels characteristic of the middle of the fall semester. Depending on the numbers and the patterns, we will adjust testing frequency and focus resources on higher prevalence sub-populations to help push these rates back down.

- **Quarantine and Isolation:** One of the most challenging experiences of the fall was spending time in isolation or quarantine. For the spring, our case management teams have been expanded, more activities have been added, and the length of stay in quarantine has been adjusted to allow for shorter stays under certain conditions, in concert with recently updated CDC guidelines at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/quarantine.html>. We will continue to search for ways to lessen the burden of quarantine and isolation and emphasize the importance of mental health in our community overall.
- **Masking:** By far, the most important lesson from the fall is that masking, physical distancing, good hygiene, and avoiding large gatherings are the most effective tools for crushing COVID. We did not see transmission in well-controlled, well-ventilated indoor settings, such as classrooms, nor did we see transmission outdoors when maintaining distance and wearing masks. The most important adjustment we can all make is to upgrade our mask game. Single-ply cloth masks are not sufficient, especially indoors. Our official recommendation, consistent with VDH and CDC guidelines (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/about-face-coverings.html>), is to use multiple-layer face coverings with a fit that is snug.

- **Pods:** We currently have 1,300 students in registered pods of up to 10, and many more are in the process. Registering a pod (<https://vt.starrezhousing.com/StarRezPortalX/F4102030/1/1/Home-Home?UrlToken=7478A4D1>) is a formal recognition of your commitment to other members of your pod, and it allows for a return to more normal interactions with others in controlled settings. Of course, you should continue to avoid indoor gatherings in poorly ventilated spaces with individuals who are not in your pod.

Being vigilant now will help us push infection rates lower and position us for a more rapid transition to the in-person Virginia Tech experience we all miss. If we follow the data and learn continuously from the emerging science, we can win the battle against COVID this semester, on campus and in our larger community. Please take care of yourself and others, and remember that we are Better Together (<https://well-being.vt.edu/mental-health.html>). Thank you all for rising to the challenge, again and again.

Be Committed. Be Well.

Tim Sands,  
President

## Virginia Tech to mark 2021 Day of Remembrance

Because of the university's ongoing commitment to limit the spread of COVID-19 and protect the members of our extended community, Virginia Tech will alter its 2021 Day of Remembrance events to promote physical distancing and discourage large public gatherings.

On the Day of Remembrance, to be held on Friday, April 16, all members of the Virginia Tech community will be encouraged to pause and honor the 32 individuals who lost their lives on April 16, 2007, in a manner most meaningful to you.

On that day, the ceremonial candle at the April 16 Memorial will burn for 24 hours, but there will not be a public ceremony at midnight and 11:59 p.m. as has been university tradition. Flowers and wreaths will be placed at the memorial and individual memorial stones. All public gatherings traditionally held on that day will not be held.

As was done last year, Virginia Tech's 3.2-Mile Run in Remembrance will be offered as a virtual event. Between April 16 and 18, students, staff, faculty, alumni, parents, and all others in the extended community may participate in the virtual run consistent with physical distancing and current public health guidelines. Participants may run, walk, or jog on their own and post a picture online using #VT32Run.

In addition, University Libraries plans to host a weeklong online exhibition to mark the 2021 Day of Remembrance. The exhibit will be curated by Special Collections and University Archives.

As additional information on all 2021 Day of Remembrance events becomes available, updates will be posted to the Virginia Tech News at <https://vtnews.vt.edu/> and We Remember at <https://www.weremember.vt.edu/> websites.

## New signatory policy for state employees

The Virginia Department of Human Resource Management (DHRM) (<https://www.dhrm.virginia.gov/>) has issued a new signatory policy, approved by the General Assembly. The policy requires state employees provide their state phone numbers and email addresses in their email signature line.

Virginia Tech Brand Guidelines at [https://brand.vt.edu/content/dam/brand\\_vt\\_edu/downloads/FINAL%20Brand%20Guidelines%2010.29.19.pdf](https://brand.vt.edu/content/dam/brand_vt_edu/downloads/FINAL%20Brand%20Guidelines%2010.29.19.pdf) suggest email signature lines follow the example below:

First and last name, professional designations, and title  
(should be in bold)  
Virginia Tech | Department  
0123 Street Avenue, Suite 0011  
Blacksburg, VA 24060  
(540) 123-4567 | email@vt.edu

DHRM's memorandum regarding the new email signature requirements approved by the General Assembly states:

"Item 83 M. of Chapter 56 of the Virginia Acts of Assembly was passed by the General Assembly in 2020 Special Session I and approved by Governor Northam on November 18, 2020. It mandates that the Director of the Department of Human Resource Management communicate to all executive branch agencies the requirement that all employees with state email addresses and state phone numbers include contact information in their email signature, which shall include, at a minimum, an office phone number and/or state cell phone number.

This requirement seeks to improve government accessibility to employees who work remotely, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic."