



## Office of Mayor Miro Weinberger

August 5, 2020

*VIA EMAIL*

President Suresh Garimella  
University of Vermont  
Office of the President  
85 South Prospect Street  
Burlington, VT 05405

Dear President Garimella,

I am appreciative of the work that many at UVM have done to prepare for the safe return of your students. I am writing today to express several concerns about components of that plan, and to request your assistance in addressing these concerns as we prepare for the return of students to the University of Vermont's campus, and Burlington more broadly, in the coming weeks.

As you know, I have repeatedly, publicly voiced support for UVM's goal of bringing many students back to campus to resume in-person classes. I consider UVM's students and employees valued members of our community, and I know that UVM brings enormous cultural, social, and economic vitality to Burlington. The City has worked tirelessly in coordination with the State, the UVM Medical Center, and many other partners to keep the virus "boxed in" and chart a different, better path than much of the rest of the country. By sustaining for months some of the lowest numbers of any community for daily new cases of the coronavirus, infection rate, positive test rate, and other key metrics, the people of Burlington and Chittenden County have made it possible to consider safely re-opening our public schools and institutions of higher learning.

UVM bears a great and unique responsibility to sustain that success and to help keep vulnerable Burlingtonians safe. I know that you have led a major effort to plan for a safe re-opening of on campus learning. However, despite weeks of coordinated planning and multiple discussions with your team, I continue to have concerns with UVM's current plan in a number of key areas:

- 1) **Testing:** I have six material concerns or questions with your plan for regular Covid testing:
  - First, UVM has not articulated a strong enforcement strategy for your testing plan, and uneven compliance could threaten the sacrifices that Burlingtonians have collectively made to keep transmission rates low. De-activation of CATCards is a potentially helpful sanction, but more meaningful incentives are needed during a pandemic. I urge you to consider a student missing one test to be an "egregious violation" under the standards that you have established, and missing a second test to result in suspension, at least for undergraduate students who are taking in-person classes. Standards for enforcement need to be clear and public for this to be effective. It should also be made clear to the public which senior UVM official is responsible for managing the testing plan and communications about it.

- Second, UVM's current plan of sharing only the total number of positive tests once a week is unacceptable. As a result of the lag between infection and when individuals test positive, test results are a lagging indicator of infections to begin with, and a further delay because of weekly reporting will undermine efforts to contain and suppress the virus. Providing the public daily updates on testing numbers will give the public confidence in the testing program if they demonstrate high compliance as well as giving members of the public accurate, real-time information about the status of the virus in the community for them to make risk assessments about their own decisions. If a goal of UVM is to build public trust in its plan, it is in the institution's interest to meet the standard the state – and much of the world – has established of releasing new test results daily.
- Third, it is critical that the City be advised immediately of any off campus students testing positive and kept informed daily about material emerging details of each infection case (we are not asking for individualized medical information that should be protected). Our experience working with the State Department of Health since the pandemic began is that circumstances and the threat to the public varies greatly from one infection to another, and the City's local knowledge and capacity is often critical to containing the virus once an outbreak begins. However, we can only deploy this assistance successfully if we are briefed immediately on all new infections. I am requesting that UVM work with Brian Lowe, our Chief Innovation Officer, to develop a protocol for such notifications.
- Fourth, we would like to understand UVM's contingency plan in the event that you experience complications implementing the planned weekly testing effort. The re-opening plan established depends on regular testing. If results are not readily available, the value of the plan erodes dramatically just as with a lack of compliance. With testing delays across the country an unresolved and potentially growing problem that could impact testing facilities in this region, we are requesting an understanding of how UVM is thinking about acceptable wait times for test results, and what kind of delays would trigger the need for a dramatic re-thinking of its on campus posture. While we hope such contingencies will prove unnecessary, agreement on them now will benefit all parties if such circumstances come to pass and may make it possible to collaborate on additional mitigation strategies that could help keep the University functioning safely.
- Fifth, in our previous conversations, and in written plans posted to your website, you had committed to twice weekly COVID-19 testing for all students. Last Thursday, the City was told that you are reducing this commitment to once weekly. Almost simultaneously with your announcement, a [new study was released by Yale University](#) finding that students on college campuses must be tested every two days and that other social interventions must be strictly enforced to control the virus on campus. I am formally requesting that you review the decision to reduce testing to once a week given this study and publicly explain the results of that review.
- Finally, UVM has stated that it will “reevaluate” the need for ongoing testing on September 18. We know that the threat of the virus will persist well beyond this timeframe and that a college campus presents an environment where a small outbreak can mushroom into a major outbreak quickly. While a re-evaluation of this unprecedented testing effort a month into the students' return is certainly appropriate, it would be assuring to the public for UVM to acknowledge that rigorous ongoing surveillance testing will be necessary to protect the campus until a vaccine or widespread Covid treatments exist, and to commit to consulting with the City and State regarding the new testing plan before changing the planned protocols.

2) **Isolation:** Your current plan gives students who live off campus the option to isolate at a facility in Shelburne. I am concerned that this location will not be well-utilized relative to available on campus options, and, given the congregate living arrangements of many off campus students, this will lead to

new, avoidable infections. I do not understand why UVM has not agreed to make the 5 percent of on campus beds that you are reserving for isolation available to off campus students as well as on campus students.

If this is being driven by an interpretation of the Governor's orders, we should take this up together with the Agency of Human Services and Department of Health as I believe the State is likely to see value in offering these beds to infected off campus students, and will not require an increase in the bed set-aside as a result. In the event – which I hope to be unlikely – that somehow all 250 of these beds on campus are filled, the City, State, and UVM can then consider off campus solutions together. This is a known area of concern that my team has raised multiple times.

**3) Off campus students:** I am concerned that your Health Pledge largely is focused on students who live on campus, with few requirements or consequences for students who live off campus in group living environments – though these students pose a greater risk for transmission of the virus in the Burlington community.

UVM has many options for establishing and enforcing requirements for students regardless of their residence, from class registration to enrollment status to publicly releasing names and locations of off campus parties that violate the Governor's Order. Other Universities like the University of Texas-Austin and Penn State have taken proactive action regarding off campus parties, appropriate during a pandemic. I request that you to outline more clear standards that students who live off campus will be required to meet, inclusive of information about how you will monitor and enforce these standards.

Further, UVM has not articulated a plan for dealing with off campus student gatherings that violate the Governor's Covid orders. Since UVM opted to end the successful joint quality of life patrols that the City proposed expanding to enforce the Governor's Covid orders, the City will not reliably have the capacity to respond to the large, rule-violating gatherings of students that we typically experience in late August and September. We have been awaiting, since this decision was made in June, an alternative, proactive strategy for monitoring and addressing in real time such gatherings. During the pandemic, this is not only a quality of life issue but is now, potentially, a matter of life and death. We need an alternative proposal now for how we will address this substantial and legitimate community concern.

The City is eager to continue to collaborate with you to find solutions. Since early June the City's supportive quarantine program has been a new service for residents, including students, who are told to quarantine, whether they are coming to Vermont from out of state or referred as part of a contact tracing effort. We will continue this program for as long as it is needed, and request that UVM notify all quarantined off campus students of this service and encourage them to sign up. We would like UVM to confirm that it is providing supportive services, including meal delivery and daily check-ins, to its on campus students under quarantine.

Thank you for your attention to these concerns. It is critical for both UVM and the City of Burlington that we do everything we can to ensure that the return of students to campus in fall does not lead to a surge in cases of Covid-19.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Weinberger', written over a light blue horizontal line.

Miro Weinberger  
Mayor