December 27, 2021

**Highlights:**

- The Omicron challenge
- NAU’s plans for spring 2022: Jacks are Back as planned on January 10
- Mitigation measures NAU will employ for spring 2022
- Encouraging all Lumberjacks to do their part

**Dear Lumberjacks,**

I hope you are enjoying the holiday break, as am I with my family in Puerto Rico. The New Year is full of promise for all who teach, learn, explore, and create at NAU, and together we will accomplish much.

**Omicron: Our newest common challenge**

As we head into the New Year, we have reason to be both vigilant about Omicron and optimistic about our ability to meet this now dominant pandemic variant head on.

In the waning days of 2021, colleges and universities across the nation have been considering how to position their campus communities for a successful spring 2022 term. Unsurprisingly—given variability in level of preparedness to meet the evolving public health challenge and the differing social, geographical, and political contexts in which institutions operate—there is a wide variation of approaches. In recent days, some institutions have announced delaying the start of the semester or starting online for the first one or two weeks, others have instituted booster mandates for all eligible faculty, staff, and students, and most have either confirmed there will be no changes to their calendars or have yet to announce any changes to their plans.

Today, I write to announce NAU’s cautiously optimistic approach to spring 2022.

**NAU’s cautiously optimistic approach to spring 2022**

Over the last several weeks, NAU’s leadership team has been in daily contact about how best to meet the Omicron challenge by balancing our university’s dual commitments to:

1. Promote health and safety within our NAU community at all levels by following science, data, and best practices; and
2. Deliver on our educational mission and support our students in the attainment of their goals through an exceptional, student-focused community of care approach.

In thinking about these commitments, we must also factor in the reality that COVID-19 will be with us for the long haul, that each day that passes brings with it new knowledge, new therapeutic treatments, and new public health strategies, and that to date—in the case of NAU—we have amassed an impressive track record of success through intentional mitigation practices and the deep commitment of our Jacks to the safety of all in our community.

And so it is that as of this writing, based on a careful consideration of the options available to us, we intend to move forward with our current academic calendar and mostly in-person activities for spring 2022: **NAU will be open for business on January 3, with the start of classes on January 10.**

**Leveraging what we have learned throughout the pandemic**

Based on our successful management of the Delta variant during the fall semester, we are planning for a full in-person living and learning experience on our Flagstaff Mountain Campus with academic courses offered as scheduled throughout our statewide sites. We are confident in the effective protocols that we have in place and our ability to adjust to the changing environment.

We will continue to use the following mitigation measures:

- Making vaccines, including booster shots, available and accessible to our community—and strongly encouraging their use to help protect all of us from the virus. Vaccines and boosters remain the best public health measure to protect people from **COVID-19 and its variants.**
- Providing continued testing at the NAU Fieldhouse site throughout the spring, and continuing our mitigation testing program to monitor for early warning of potential transmission.
- Requiring the use of masks in settings where physical distancing is not possible—including classrooms and labs—strongly encouraging the use of masks everywhere, and making masks available to our community to limit the potential for the virus to spread.
- Continuing to educate and encourage all members of our community on science-based best practices for staying safe and healthy so that together, we can have a healthy and vibrant semester.
- Evaluating the prudence of having large gatherings and establishing the conditions under which they can move forward in the safest manner possible.
- Remaining attentive to any and all developments with the virus and being prepared to pivot our operations as needed. This has been our commitment—and it will continue to be as long as we navigate the ever-changing pandemic.

Additionally, we will continue to stay in close communication with our university community in the weeks leading up to our January 10 **Jacks are Back** date as
the situation evolves and our plans come into sharper focus.

**Jacks do their part**

Our success managing the Delta variant in fall 2021 was due in great part to Jacks doing their part. So, as we head into spring 2022, here are some things we highly encourage you consider:

1. **Get vaccinated and boosted.** For those of you who have chosen to be vaccinated, please plan to get your booster shot (if you have not received it already) prior to returning to in-person work and study or within the first week of your return—the booster shot has proven to be an effective tool to reduce severe illness from Omicron. Shots and boosters are readily available across the state and country, as well as conveniently [accessible at the NAU Fieldhouse](#).

2. **Get tested.** For your own peace of mind as well as the well-being of others, please plan to get tested at least 48 hours prior to returning to in-person work and study or within the first week of your return. This will provide NAU an important baseline from which to fine tune its mitigation strategies. Tests are readily available across the state and country, as well as conveniently [accessible at the NAU Fieldhouse](#).

3. **Upload your vaccination card.** The more faculty, students, and staff who [upload their vaccination card](#), including boosters they have received, the better prepared NAU will be to meet the Omicron challenge. This baseline information is crucial as we think about risk management. To increase the number of uploads, we will soon be announcing new incentives for faculty, staff, and students.

4. **Mask up.** The consistent use of masks in public settings has proven to be effective in limiting the spread and severity of Omicron. Please plan to wear masks prior to your return to NAU and on campus when in all areas where social distancing is not possible—as we all did to great effect last semester.

**The weeks ahead**

One thing we have learned during the 21 months since COVID-19 upended our way of life is that the best way to manage uncertainty is to keep abreast of new developments on the scientific and public health fronts, as well as be finely tuned into the development and implementation of guidance from local, state, and national experts in public health, infectious disease, epidemiology, and healthcare administration.

Thus, we will continue to rely heavily on consultations with our (renamed) AY2021-2022 Steering Committee, Public Health Advisory Committee, and Academic Success, Learning, and Engagement Advisory Committee, as well as discussions with our sister institutions, UA and ASU, the Arizona Board of Regents, elected officials, and partners in the public health arena.

And if at any point our deliberations suggest changes to our mitigation strategies are warranted, academic calendars need to be adjusted, and/or educational delivery methods need to be reassessed, we will do so swiftly—leveraging the
many lessons we have learned on how to successfully pivot our practices to better meet our commitments to the NAU community.

We will continue to communicate with you over the next several weeks to keep you informed as we work to bring our Jacks back safely in the spring.

Here’s to a healthy and vibrant spring 2022 semester!

Sincerely,

José Luis Cruz Rivera
President