Dear members of the University community,

Many members of our University community, and the community at large, have asked why the University is not moving more quickly toward re-opening and is instead delivering almost all classes remotely in the Fall 2020 semester, and has not ruled out the same approach for the Winter 2021 semester.

Why universities are taking a more cautious approach

Universities differ markedly from typical elementary, junior high, high school, or office/business environments.

Since the onset of the pandemic, our primary focus at the University of Regina has been to ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of our students, faculty and staff as we continue our academic mission. In doing this, we also recognize the reach that our campus has into the local community, and have taken seriously the need for precautionary steps to keep the community safe as well. Our approach aligns with that of most Canadian universities. Here in our province, postsecondary institutions have been working with the Ministry of Advanced Education and are in alignment on Fall plans. But just how do we differ from other school and business environments?

The density of our on-campus population is high. At the height of the Fall and Winter semesters, the number of people on our main Regina campus can exceed the population of Swift Current. Some 2,000 faculty and staff, approximately 15,500 students (another 1,000 Nursing and Social Work students are in Saskatoon), scores of campus visitors, and numerous contractors can swell the on-campus population to close to 20,000, all concentrated in an area of just a few city blocks.

Our vector points, or the number of individuals one person might encounter in a day who could spread COVID-19, are ultimately too numerous to warrant the risk to students, faculty, and staff. A newly published working paper analyzing course enrolment patterns at Cornell University found that nearly all students are connected via a shared classmate. The report goes on to state that over a typical week, the average student will share classes with more than 500 different students. Cornell’s student population is not significantly larger than the University of Regina’s.

Comparatively, a typical primary or high school classroom may average 25-35 students, many of whom live in the immediate neighbourhood of the school. Some University of Regina lecture theatres can hold hundreds of students who come from across the city, province or around the world and who may live on campus. If a spike in COVID-19 cases should occur, primary and secondary schools can send students home immediately and close their doors within the space of a few hours. That is not the case for universities and their students. Many would find returning home extremely challenging. Given that a significant number of students live, study and socialize on campus, the implications are significant.

Our measured approach to keeping the on-campus population as low as possible during the pandemic also reflects the number of “pinch points” on campus. There are several hundred of them: elevators, hallways, washrooms, stairwells, the food court in Riddell Centre, and other common areas. In this respect, we are similar to Mosaic Stadium, a location in which people congregate in great numbers, where it is difficult consistently to practise prevention measures such as physical distancing, and where the level of sanitization necessary to prevent the transmission of the virus would be impossible to achieve as thousands move through these pinch points throughout the day.

Finally, we cannot endanger those employees who are required to be on campus to ensure critical services are maintained throughout the pandemic. In all of our decisions, we must bear in mind the heightened risk of contagion for these people.

Second wave risk

While Canada and Saskatchewan have thus far done a good job of managing the spread of COVID-19, reports over the last few days from the United States and elsewhere in the world are cause for sharp concern. We are attentive to the changing North American COVID-19 patterns including spikes in cases in numerous US states. This morning The New York Times reports that “younger people are making up a growing percentage of new coronavirus cases in cities and states where the virus is now surging.”
Coupled with the concern that a second wave of the pandemic could coincide with the annual flu season this autumn, we believe a conservative approach to the Fall 2020 semester is not only prudent but imperative.

All of us, I am sure, would like to return to something closer to what we previously knew as “normal.” We understand that working at home for faculty, staff, and students can be challenging. Through this uncertain and extraordinary time, I urge each of you to pay attention to your own health and well-being. If you can, take some time for rest and relaxation over the summer months. Shut down your computers, take some vacation, continue to practise physical distancing, and enjoy our beautiful Saskatchewan summer.

Thank you for all you have done and continue to do for the University. We will regularly update you as more information about the Fall 2020 and Winter 2021 semesters becomes available.

Sincerely,
Thomas Chase
Interim President and Vice-Chancellor

*Source: https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/14/sociologists-say-their-findings-student-interconnectedness-suggest-caution-needed