Dear members of the UMass Boston community,

I write to thank the community for the thoughtful feedback we received on UMass Boston’s [draft plan for starting the new academic year in fall 2020](https://t.e2ma.net/message/c7alpg/0lyzzme). Through your eyes, we see just how profoundly your lives have been impacted by the pandemic and how much you wish—as do we all—that we could turn this page and go back to all of the activities and friendships that are the stuff of life. We greatly appreciate the many expressions of support for the prioritization of health and safety reflected in our fall plans.

As you know, we are absolutely bound to abide by and adhere to CDC guidelines, and follow the recommendations of our federal, MA, and local health and governmental officials, knowing that circumstances remain fluid and largely unpredictable. Our deliberations have been undertaken with this fundamental requirement in mind.

Many members of our community expressed their approval and support for the plan to continue to operate remotely. They noted that they themselves or members of their family are at risk, especially in Black and Latinx communities nearby that have suffered disproportionately from COVID-19. Social distancing is hard to do on public transit. These respondents agree that a remote semester in the fall, while not perfect by any means, is the safest alternative given the pandemic we must deal with.

At the same time, we heard from many students who were not fulfilled by remote instruction and truly miss being in class. They worry about maintaining motivation when they are alone or have to study in places that their families need for daily activities. The quiet of the campus library, the atmosphere of academic engagement,
really matters and they are longing to have it back. Some are convinced that campus safety can be preserved by social distancing or medical testing.

Some universities have elected to remain remote as we have (e.g. the entire California State university system, the largest in the country, our local counterpart, Harvard, and UCLA [which will be 80% remote]). However, a number of private universities in our region have announced they are coming back “on ground.” Students asked why are those campuses able to manage the risks while UMass Boston leaders believe this is not feasible for us?

We know other universities have made different decisions, and we respect that. They know their campuses, programs, and students. In important respects—especially the extent of daily reliance on public transportation and the prevalence of COVID-19 in the communities they serve—these institutions are very different from UMass Boston. Medical and public health professionals—whose guidance, direction, advice and opinions we must be bound by—have made it clear that each university campus is unique and must tailor its plans to their particular circumstances.

UMass Boston’s physical location and transportation patterns, as well as its relationship to the surrounding, large urban area, make it difficult to execute and enforce standards vis a vis social distancing and health/safety rules compared, for example, to a fully residential campus in a more removed setting.

Beyond that, our read of the scientific and public health guidance suggests we must pay attention to some uncomfortable facts:

- Infection rates are spiking in states that have opened up.
- Our community members commute every day from some of the most vulnerable neighborhoods in the commonwealth, those who have been hardest hit by the pandemic. We have a responsibility to ensure their safety and that of their older relatives.
- Student athletes are particularly sad about the loss of team sports, and we deeply regret the effect that our fall plan has on everyone involved in our athletics program. If there were a way to make a different decision in a manner that we feel is responsible, we surely would. Sadly, the virus is spreading...
amongst athletes in states that have opened up. We don’t want that to happen to our Beacons.

- While we appreciate the good intentions of those who feel they can abide by wearing masks or social distancing, even a cursory examination of public behavior makes it clear that many are resistant to the very practices that will help keep us all safe.

- Comprehensive weekly testing of a large urban population of commuting students, faculty and staff, isolating those who are infected from their fellow students, colleagues and family members, and quarantining at scale would be very hard for our campus. Opinions vary on how necessary it is to invoke such a strict standard for a largely commuter campus, but we feel that our community deserves a significant degree of caution given the many unknowns about this virus.

For all of these reasons, we have concluded that it is important to stick with the plan we articulated two weeks ago. Certain lab courses in the sciences and nursing courses that require the use of the simulation center will remain on campus. The rest of the curriculum will be delivered to you via remote instruction.

We want to assure you that fall 2020 is going to be a vibrant and engaging semester. As I write, faculty are reworking their course plans, developing new methods of interacting over electronic platforms. They are conducting workshops to learn from one another about effective techniques for stimulating discussion, working through problem sets, maintaining robust contact with their students, and encouraging break out groups. The libraries are supplying materials that are new and interesting to incorporate into their classes. Everyone will be encouraged to participate in clubs and student activities on line, including wellness “clinics” and, perhaps, e-sports or other electronic games. If the public health conditions permit it, we will bring some limited student activities back to Columbia Point in the middle of the fall term. But not unless we are sure it is safe for our students, faculty and staff, and for those with whom they live beyond the campus.

Chancellor-elect Suárez-Orozco has been an important partner in the decision making that led to these conclusions. He joins all of us in committing to the development of a rewarding fall term, laying the groundwork for what we all hope will be a return to campus in the spring semester.
I close by thanking everyone who shared their thoughts and concerns. It was immensely helpful in conveying an in-depth understanding of your perspectives.

Cordially,

Katherine Newman
Interim Chancellor