UNIVERSITY STAFF ADVISORY COUNCIL
WEB SUBMISSIONS
March 8, 2022

The below web submissions were received before March 1, 2022 and were addressed during the closed session of USAC’s meeting on March 8, 2022.

Idea/Rationale: The campus recently received an email with an update concerning the process for students to notify faculty when they test positive for COVID-19. However, there is no current guideline or requirement for notifying supervisors if the students are employed on campus. This creates a significant safety issue for both staff and student employees who may not be included in contact tracing or notified of potential exposure. Please provide a requirement and appropriate guidelines for students employed on campus to notify their supervisor(s) of any positive COVID-19 test result.

Response: This submission was sent to HR on February 17, 2022 and the following response was received from Carl Sorensen.

Thank you for letting us know about this. It's true that students don't always contact their supervisor but, the contact tracers would normally contact a supervisor if an employee (student or other) tests positive. If this isn't happening, I would like to know more so I can make sure the process is corrected.

Idea/Rationale: I believe UR should retain its mask mandates in its office areas and publicly accessible campus buildings. It is presumptuous to rescind mask mandates overall when we are still at what is considered a high level of community transmission. At the time of the notification, Virginia is still at an 11.4% positivity rate per 100,000 of population. At the local scale, Henrico is sitting slightly less at 10.2%. Many of our staff are high risk, or have regular interactions with high risk individuals, and the accommodations that have been rolled out do not factor in faculty or staff who might have responsibilities to vulnerable family who live nearby, but not with them. This flat change, coming this quickly, does not give staff who might have felt safe enough before with the mandate in place time to seek reasonable accommodations prior to its being enacted. All in all I think this change is highly irresponsible and I am disappointed in the administration for its shortsightedness. I have included this epidemiologist's framework on responsible personal actions based on level of community transmission as a guide to a responsible course of action:

Response: This web submission was sent to Jeff Legro, David Hale, and Shannon Sinclair on February 17, 2022 and the following response was received.

The decision for the University to no longer require universal masking in all indoor locations, effective Feb. 21, was taken after careful consideration. This modification to the University’s Mask Policy was made in light of both decreasing COVID cases on our campus and in our region and with the recognition that the University will continue to maintain many of the COVID mitigation measures in place on campus.
These other dimensions of our COVID response include the vaccination requirement, access to testing, contact tracing, isolation and quarantine protocols, enhanced air handling systems, disinfection and cleaning procedures. All of these measures provide important safeguards for our campus community members. Given that we are a highly vaccinated community, the symptoms reported have typically been milder during this Omicron phase of the virus, and our number of cases has come down significantly, we have decided that the time was right to adjust the University’s masking policy.

We continue to carefully monitor the Virginia Department of Health COVID data for Virginia and our local community and are pleased to see the current downward trajectory of cases in the region. We also know, from almost two years of experience, that the COVID-19 experience on our campus does not mirror that of the local community for a number of reasons including our very high vaccination rates, the fact that tests are readily available to faculty, staff, and students, our capacity for isolating students outside their residence halls, and our continued commitment to contact tracing.

It is important to remind folks that in the Feb. 16 announcement of the change to the University’s mask policy, it was also noted that “Masks have been and will continue to be an important part of our mitigation strategy. We continue to strongly support individual decisions by members of our campus community to wear a mask, and the University will continue to maintain a supply of high-quality masks available at no cost to students, faculty, and staff.”

As has been the case for almost two years, we will be watching conditions closely and will continue to adjust policies as needed.

Idea/Rationale: In light of the campus mask mandate being lifted, I am writing to request that the work-from-home opportunity for employees who are immunocompromised, or live with someone who is immunocompromised, be extended by two more weeks. While the number of campus cases may be declining, the risk posed by COVID to those who are immunocompromised has not. In fact, relaxing the mask mandate has increased the risk to these employees and our families. Faculty may mandate masks in their own classrooms, but other employees who do not teach and work in frequently-trafficked buildings like dining facilities, THC, and Boatwright Library cannot mandate the same in our work areas. In my specific situation, I cannot rely on members of my department to follow campus policy. Recently, my supervisor, who had multiple COVID symptoms at the time, decided to hold 1-on-1 meetings in person and attended events where food was being served and eaten rather than quarantining at home pending a negative PCR test. This is not the first time this person has shown reckless disregard for me, my colleagues, and our families’ health, but reporting them has resulted in no change in their behavior. Lifting the indoor mask mandate without also extending the temporary WFH conditions will only increase the risks posed by this person to me and my family. The only safe alternative is for me to continue working from home.

Response: This submission was sent to Jeff Legro, David Hale, and Shannon Sinclair on February 17, 2022. An extension to the policy in question was announced to staff using this option on February 23, 2022.
Idea/Rationale: Does the university have or have they ever considered, having tuition remission for employees families who have children that require going to a specialty k-12 school? Some employees families struggle to pay for specialty k-12 schools. They can be quite expensive and most cannot afford this schooling. If our mission is for education, why couldn't this be a benefit. Without these schools, most of these kids would not even consider a higher education.

Response: This submission was sent to HR on February 21, 2022 and the following response was received from Carl Sorensen.

The university does not provide dependent tuition support for k-12 students. As the submitter notes, the vision of the university is to “…be a leader in higher education, preparing students to contribute to, and succeed in, a complex world; producing knowledge to address the world’s problems; and modeling the way that colleges and universities can effectively meet the challenges of our time.” In alignment with that purpose, the university offers dependent tuition support at colleges and universities through tuition remission at UR and tuition exchange through the Tuition Exchange program.

Idea/Rationale: HealthEquity, the new HSA administrator charges a $1/month fee for paper statements. Is there anything the University can do about this? This is regressive and unfair to those who may not have the computer skills or internet access needed to access online statements (which I have heard is the case for some of our oft-overlooked colleagues in facilities and dining services). Also, this should be covered by the account administration fees the University already pays.

Response: This submission was sent to HR on February 21, 2022 and the following response was received from Carl Sorensen.

Thank you for raising this issue. The fee for paper statements from Health Equity has been waived through the end of the year – 12/31/2022. We will reevaluate later in the year.

Idea/Rationale: The administration should work to compensate staff appropriately for work during COVID. In last month’s web submissions, benefits from the previous two years were mentioned, including: avoiding layoffs or furloughs while the campus was closed, providing Care.com memberships, providing $1200 per semester of additional child care support, providing 15 days of COVID leave, providing two additional staff holidays, and providing access to COVID testing through Better Med. As a member of staff who directly supports faculty, has no children, and has not caught COVID, the only benefit in this list that I received was the additional two holidays. The lack of merit-based raises last year was disappointing for those of us who have been working throughout the pandemic. How does the administration plan to address this discrepancy?
Response: This submission was sent to David Hale and Carl Sorensen on February 28, 2022 and the following response was received.

The University is proud of the decisions not to furlough or lay off employees or cut benefits throughout the pandemic even though many other colleges, universities and employers made different decisions. The absence of layoffs and furlough is, in fact, a quite meaningful University commitment to each and every regular full and part-time employee, which was granted before the additional benefits mentioned by the submitter were put in place to protect employees with additional family care needs.

The University’s response to the pandemic consists of two primary objectives – to keep the campus safe for working, teaching and learning and to provide as much protection and support as possible for employees who found themselves financially impacted by the pandemic, through no fault of their own. Fortunately, many of our employees did not need to access any of the broad array of protections offered by the University. In addition, the University provided a 3.5% salary increase for all employees effective March 1, 2021. This increase was implemented four months earlier than our typical annual increase effective date in recognition of the fact that salaries were not increased at the beginning of fiscal 2020-21 given the uncertainties surrounding the opening of both the fall 2020 and the spring 2021 semesters. Earlier this month, the University announced a salary increase pool equivalent to 5.5% of the total annual salary budget along with an increase to the minimum wage bringing it to $15/hour, both effective on July 1, 2022. The 5.5% increase will be allocated based on performance (“merit-based”).