July 29, 2020

Dear Notre Dame Students, Faculty and Staff,

I look forward to the new semester and to continuing the University’s work of teaching and inquiry here on our beautiful campus. It will, as you know, be a year like no other. Never before have we begun the academic year so early; never before have we had to follow the health precautions that will be required this year; and never before have we had to ask of you such vigilance in keeping the campus safe in the midst of a pandemic. We are asking so much of ourselves and one another to gather safely for the 2020-21 Academic Year because we believe so deeply in our work of education and inquiry. Here on this campus, we learn from one another, how to work with one another and how to care for one another.

The novel coronavirus is a formidable foe. It has brought disease, death, economic devastation and social disruption around the globe. Guided by advice from medical professionals, public health officials and the experience of other institutions, we have built a medical health infrastructure and established practices and protocols that will enable us to meet the challenge of the virus and keep the campus safe. As important as these measures are, however, I believe the most important asset we have in the coming year is our sense of community—a commitment to care for one another—that has always characterized Notre Dame.
The current circumstances present us with a powerful opportunity to teach and learn. At Notre Dame, we strive to educate the whole person—mind, body and spirit. Beyond what we learn in our classes or discover in our research in the coming year, we can learn to work collaboratively as a community to contain this virus. At this time, when we see so much division and acrimony in society, there is perhaps no more important lesson we can teach or learn.

There is still much we do not yet know about the novel coronavirus, but the overwhelming medical consensus is that the adoption of four simple practices by each of us is critical:

1. Wear a mask.
2. Practice physical distancing.
3. Wash your hands often.
4. Complete your daily health check.

As part of the online training we each completed, we were asked to affirm that we would comply with these directives as a condition for returning to campus, and it is critical that we follow through on doing so. Reporting symptoms honestly, wearing masks, practicing physical distancing and washing our hands regularly must be part of the fundamental commitment we make to one another.

The special character of the current challenge is that success does not depend on the actions of a single individual nor on each person’s commitment simply to take care of his or her own health. Success depends upon all of us together complying with the directives above—and challenging one another to do so—to keep the whole community safe. For students who are younger and healthy, COVID-19 may not seem a grave, personal threat. Yet if you fail to follow these directives either on campus or off campus, you endanger your professors and hall rectors, dining hall workers and custodians, and the local South Bend community—and potentially your own classmate whose health vulnerabilities are unknown to you.

A group of our distinguished faculty members—Alex Perkins, Bernard Nahlen and Jenna Coalson—has been working to develop a model for the spread of the virus on campus under different scenarios. The importance of our four principal required health practices was brought home to me in a recent presentation of their work: the difference between only 60% of us wearing masks as required compared to 90% or more doing so could be the difference between our having to shut down campus again or having a successful, safe semester here. Each of the four practices is important and supports the other three. The success of the semester and the safety of the community really do depend on our compliance with these directives.

Because compliance is so critical to the health and safety of the members of this community, we must hold each other accountable for these behaviors. Please remind your colleagues and peers to comply and emphasize that adopting these practices protects us all. Serious or persistent failure to comply will be handled as a disciplinary matter for students, faculty, and staff. Students, depending on the nature of the incident, violation of our standards could jeopardize your presence.
in our campus community. Faculty and staff, failure to comply with the directives will be considered significant, deliberate personal misconduct for which you will be subject to serious sanctions up to and including dismissal from your position.

On August 10, we will be one of the first universities to begin the 2020 fall semester under the conditions imposed by the pandemic. The nation will be watching. We have the chance to show the world how to continue the work of the University in the midst of the threat of this terrible virus. Success depends on the choices we make individually and collectively.

We often tell the stories of the hardships through which Notre Dame had to struggle in its early days. Whether it was the disruption of the Civil War, a typhoid epidemic or a devastating fire, the Notre Dame community came together, made extraordinary sacrifices and continued the University’s educational mission. Persevering through such trying circumstances, the Notre Dame community became stronger. We have the opportunity to write the next chapter in that story. Let us work together, supported by all the resources and protocols we have put in place, to meet the challenge of the novel coronavirus as a community.

In the Catholic tradition, Mary, the patroness of our University, is seen as the one who prays for, protects and advocates for us. In this year above all, we ask for her prayers and help. May Our Lady, Notre Dame, intercede with God to give us strength, wisdom and generous hearts, that as we work, learn and discover, we may keep ourselves and this community safe and healthy.

In Notre Dame,

Rev. John I. Jenkins, C.S.C.
President