

January 5, 2022



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Dear University Leadership:

In light of [explosive growth](#) of the extremely contagious Omicron variant and rising COVID-19 hospitalizations across the country and [in Arizona](#), the student, staff, and faculty members of United Campus Workers of Arizona call on our University administrators to show real leadership and protect our campuses and surrounding communities during the current surge.

In recent days, clear indicators of Omicron's rapid spread have appeared in Arizona. **Official [COVID-19 case counts](#) are currently spiking to levels we haven't seen since last winter's pre-vaccine surge**, and these numbers do not reflect positive cases not reported to health authorities.

Moreover, **Arizona's hospitals and healthcare workers cannot sustain another tsunami of COVID-19 patients**. Public health experts agree that even if Omicron is somewhat less severe than previous variants, such a high number of cases will continue to overload the healthcare

system in Arizona, which was already burdened by a sustained level of Delta infections this past fall. Many local hospitals have already [reached or exceeded their ICU capacities](#), and the Omicron wave has not yet neared its peak.

Promoting vaccination – while critical in preventing acute/severe disease and death – is not enough to halt Omicron, which spreads quickly even amongst vaccinated and boosted people.

If university leaders refuse to implement improved mitigation measures now, unchecked spread of COVID-19 will soon make normal University operations impossible as large numbers of students, staff, and faculty fall sick. In addition, the risk of “Long COVID” remains, even for those who only suffer mild or moderate initial infections. How will our universities function effectively in the future if significant numbers in our workforce suffer this disabling, long-term condition?

Despite these dire conditions, all we have received thus far are blithe assurances that our institutions will be able to manage their way through the Omicron wave without significant changes to operations.

This is not an appropriate response to an extraordinary surge of a deadly virus that threatens to disrupt everything we value about our learning communities this semester. **We cannot enter 2022 with 2021 policies in place and expect them to hold Omicron at bay on our campuses or in our communities.**

Instead, we must face the Omicron threat head-on and join other institutions of higher education in taking concrete, reasonable, science-based steps to limit the spread of COVID-19 in our community during the next several weeks, before hundreds of us fall ill.

Arizona State University and the University of Arizona must immediately:

- **Move to remote operations for all course instruction and work until January 28, 2022** in order to reduce COVID-19 transmission during the predicted worst weeks of the Omicron surge (i.e., ASU Learning Mode 4 and Housing Mode 4; UA Instructional/Housing Stage 1).
 - After January 28, flexible work options should be made available to employees who are at high-risk for severe disease or who are caretakers of high-risk individuals.
- **Provide free, high-quality respirator masks (N95, KN95, KF94, or equivalent) to all students, faculty, and staff** prior to the return to campus in late January, and **mandate their use in all indoor spaces on campus**. Clear instructions for the proper fit and appropriate use/re-use of these respirators must also be provided.
 - Cloth and surgical masks are not effective enough barriers to Omicron transmission.

- **Require twice-weekly COVID-19 testing for all on-campus students, staff, and faculty** to commence with the return to in-person instruction and on-campus housing in late January, and **make rapid antigen tests freely and widely available on campus.**
 - Encouraging students to test before returning to campus is a step in the right direction, but does not address the ongoing need to stop transmission chains as the semester progresses.
 - Rapid antigen tests are a vital public health tool that indicate whether or not an individual is currently likely to be infectious to others. We need them at the ready to prevent transmission on campus in situations where waiting for PCR results is not possible.
- **Require COVID-19 vaccinations for students** (except those with religious, or medical accommodations, as permitted by federal law).
 - On November 2, 2021, the Arizona ban on vaccine mandates was [ruled unconstitutional](#), and the Pfizer vaccine has received full FDA approval. University leaders must now protect students and our broader communities by requiring COVID-19 vaccinations, just like we require other vaccines for enrollment.

Throughout this pandemic, the University of Arizona and Arizona State University have made important contributions to public health by providing and promoting testing and vaccinations. **We cannot abdicate our responsibilities now by refusing to acknowledge the scale and severity of the Omicron threat to our University's operations, our local healthcare system, and the people who make up our communities.** For successful, safe learning and work to continue this spring, our Universities must demonstrate true leadership by implementing improved mitigation strategies that are sufficient to meet this challenge.

Finally – in the spirit of shared governance – we strongly encourage our leaders to increase transparency and solicit more participation from rank-and-file staff, student workers, and faculty in setting pandemic-related policies going forward. We deserve a voice in the decisions that directly affect our health and the safety of our workplaces.

Sincerely,

The Student, Staff, and Faculty Members of United Campus Workers of Arizona, Local 7065
<https://www.ucwarizona.org/>