

COVID-19

Recommendations for Winter Semester 2022



Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been influencing the student experience at Trent University since March of 2020. With access to vaccines, we are able to have a successful in person Fall semester. Sadly our Winter semester has been cut short and the first three weeks of term has transitioned to online. The University previously indicated that the campus will be returning to in person learning as of January 31, 2022. To properly address student concerns about preventing the spread of the contagious Omicron variant of COVID-19, it is clear that the University must take preemptive steps to protect the learning environment they provide to Trent students. Many students have expressed disapproval with the current Trent Forward plan, especially with announcements of other Ontario post-secondary institutions delaying re-opening or indicating a stepped model to return for in-person classes. Students have expressed concern about lack of available accommodations for those members of our community who may be at risk or have friends or family members who are part of high risk categories. Students have also expressed concern about the lack of available testing and Public Health's recommendation to stop contact tracing in classrooms.

The Association would also like to recognize that for many students, a return to in person learning is a positive development that will help reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness that occur during online learning. In order to best provide informed recommendations for Trent University's COVID-19 readiness plan, the Trent Central Student Association has prepared this document to outline student concerns and provide recommendations on how to best make students feel safe about their return to in person learning. While the Association supports a return to in person learning, **our overall recommendation to Trent University administration is to delay the reopening of campus. Until safety measures and protections for students are in place and can effectively respond to the significant demand on such systems, Trent's campus should remain closed.**

Concerns/Recommendations

Contact Tracing

The TCSA is calling on Trent University administration to create a procedure for contact tracing for instances of COVID-19 cases on Trent University campus. While we understand that Peterborough Public Health has informed the University that they are not required to do this, we do not support this decision.

Transmissibility

While the COVID-19 vaccines are protective against infection, the coverage is not perfect. It is known that even individuals who are fully vaccinated against COVID-19 may still become infected. This possibility is a particular risk for individuals who are immunocompromised, those who live with immunocompromised individuals, those with children, and those who are unable to obtain the vaccine for medical reasons. It is also true that transmission risk increases in indoor settings where many people are coming into contact with each other (Public Health Ontario, 2021). Lectures where students are forced to sit in rooms with possibly hundreds of other students with no social distancing requirements in place is an avoidable precondition that may contribute to the spread of the Omicron variant.

Contact Tracing Feasibility

Contact tracing is incredibly important to successfully manage outbreaks of COVID-19. Due to the uncertainty regarding the transmissibility of the new Omicron variant, individuals who are exposed to COVID-19 may very well become infected. Furthermore, many students travel home to see family members, have jobs or placements dealing with vulnerable populations, or have immunocompromised roommates. Without reliable knowledge of COVID-19 exposure, students may not only be at risk themselves, but may also risk transmitting the virus to others. The TCSA maintains that contact tracing must be part of any viable return to in-person plan to protect both students and the community.

Policy for Classes Where There is an Outbreak

Trent University must create and communicate a concrete policy for professors and students about steps to be taken if a case of COVID-19 does occur in a classroom setting. This policy must be student centered and should be developed with consideration for the opinions of students in consultation with Peterborough Public Health.

Isolation Guidelines

Individuals who are immunocompromised and considered a close contact (such as in a lecture) are required to self isolate for 10 days, even if they do not have symptoms (Public Health Ontario, n.d.). Students who work or have placements in high risk settings are required to not return to work for 10 days following exposure (Public Health Ontario, n.d.). By removing contact tracing from classrooms, individuals are unable to abide by public health guidelines as they will not know they have been exposed to COVID-19.

Reasonable Accommodations

The Trent Central Student Association is calling on Trent University to provide reasonable and accessible accommodations for immunocompromised students, students who have children or immunocompromised individuals living with them, as well as students who do not pass the COVID-19 screening check before coming to campus. The TCSA is also encouraging professors to do everything possible to make their courses accessible online for students who are at high risk or who are not comfortable with taking the risk of returning to in-person classes.

Immunocompromised Students

Students who are immunocompromised themselves or have people in their lives who are immunocompromised must not have their education hindered due to their medical status. Especially when many of these immunocompromised students are upper-year students who have already paid thousands of dollars to receive an education at Trent University. A clearly communicated plan to make accommodations accessible to this demographic of students will mitigate the impact their health status has on their education.

Students Who Present Symptoms

The COVID-19 screening tool has been a staple for many businesses, and the University throughout the duration of the pandemic. There is concern that once the school year starts and students feel stress from their classes, they will ignore the screening tool's recommendations. There must be a policy in place that is uniform across all departments that requires professors to provide accommodations to students who do not pass the University's screening system so that students have assurance that following public health guidelines will not impact their education. The province of Ontario COVID-19 self assessment includes that if one member of your household is infected with COVID-19 or presents symptoms of COVID-19, that all individuals within that household must self isolate (Public Health Ontario, n.d.). This means that if one student gets COVID-19 not only themselves but other students will also have to isolate due to students living in congregate settings with others. Accommodations must be guaranteed for students to mitigate the academic impacts of following public health guidelines.

Immunocompromised Professors

It has been shared by Trent administration and many students that professors who are immunocompromised have been given the option to continue teaching their classes virtually. While the TCSA absolutely supports the protection of professors who are at high risk, we want to draw attention to the privilege that is being offered to professors that is unavailable to students. Professors are given the opportunity to teach remotely and make decisions that are best for themselves, however students are not afforded the same protection. To students this appears as though Trent University does not believe it needs to provide for the safety of their immunocompromised students, while doing so for faculty.

Vaccine Requirement

The Trent Central Student Association strongly recommends that students who are medically able obtain their booster shots of the COVID-19 vaccine as soon as they can. Vaccination remains the best defence against severe symptoms and hospitalization due to COVID-19. As such, the TCSA calls on the University to release concrete timelines for students to be required to get their booster shots in order to maintain the highest possible level of vaccination coverage at Trent University.

Policy Development

The TCSA is calling on Trent University administration to include student voices in the policy development process related to COVID-19. Throughout the year, the Association has requested student involvement many times, only to be continually left in the dark until the finished policy is communicated. Student representation is vital in the development of policies that impact their own lives and safety. The Association expresses disappointment in the lack of student involvement in Trent University administrative decision making process, particularly as many of those making decisions are not the ones who are at risk in classrooms and large congregate settings. The Association calls for the establishment of a student seat on the Case Management committee in order to involve student voices in the development of University policy.

Conclusion

The Trent Central Student Association provides the recommendations noted above to best keep students, staff, faculty, and the broader Peterborough community safe through changing circumstances related to COVID-19. Many students have expressed their concerns relating to in person classes, and these concerns must be heard by Trent University Administration. Protections for students, including academic protections, contact tracing, and reasonable accommodations must be in place to adequately provide students with the ability to abide by public health regulations and make decisions about their own health and safety. The Association is calling on Trent University to implement realistic protections for students before a return to in-person classes can safely occur.

