

We are three weeks away from the first day of classes, now close enough to feel the rush of anticipation of the new academic year – the excitement of being together again, resuming classes, activities and athletics, and welcoming new members to our community. The Berry community has long been known for its warmth, caring and sense of responsibility. Part of Martha Berry’s legacy is a spirit of generosity that is demonstrated as individuals set aside their own preferences and entitlements, when needed, for the well-being of others and the community as a whole. For Martha Berry, this spirit was integral to an education of the head, heart and hands, and the basis for the school’s motto.

Our commitment to being part of a larger good will likely be tested again as we start the new semester. We are close enough now to have more clarity about the directional trends of the continuing COVID pandemic as well as the precautions that may be necessary.

While the COVID context was looking somewhat encouraging in late June and early July, the situation has worsened considerably this month. In Floyd County, 34 patients are hospitalized due to COVID, up from 5 at the beginning of the month of July. There have been 687 new cases in northwest GA in July, up from 88 June.

The percentage of positive COVID PCR tests in Floyd County the last 14 days is up to 6.8%. On July 9th, the Floyd County percentage was 2.1%. The five surrounding counties currently range from 9.7% to 20.0%.

Infectious disease experts and epidemiologists are predicting another surge from now until October in certain parts of the country, particularly the southeast. The Delta variant is more contagious than the original virus and is spreading rapidly in the U.S. and around the world.

We sent notifications earlier this month to students, faculty, and staff who are not vaccinated, urging them to cooperate with this important health initiative. Our message remains the same:

- we want to operate as normally as possible this fall;
- the well-being of our residential community must be a high priority; and
- we will continually evaluate and update our campus protocols based on the emerging evidence.

If the current trend of COVID infections increases, we will require some form of mitigation for all members of campus. Vaccinations are the most effective and straightforward form of mitigation. Millions of people worldwide have been vaccinated and every major medical organization in the U.S. has affirmed that vaccines are very low risk relative to the possible effects of a COVID infection, for the individual, the family and the community.

Other forms of mitigation – including the use of masks indoors – are helpful but less effective and less convenient than vaccinations. Masks tend to impede normal social interactions and make some activities (choir, orchestra, athletics) more difficult.

We hope that the anticipated surge does not occur, and that the pandemic goes into remission. If so, we will all enjoy a splendid fall. But we must also prepare for the possibility that things will turn difficult again.

Please do your part to prepare for a safe and normal fall semester by getting the vaccine. Getting the vaccine now will limit any disruption to your class, work and activities schedule after the semester starts.

Thank you.

Steve Briggs