

**PRESIDENT'S REPORT TO
McMASTER UNIVERSITY'S BOARD OF GOVERNORS
JUNE 4, 2020**

Update on Responses to COVID-19 and Planning for the Fall Term

Since our last Board meeting in April, the University has continued to work through the range of issues created by the current pandemic, while also turning our attention to planning for the Fall. Our goal throughout has been to deliver on the academic and research mission of the University, while prioritizing the health, safety and well-being of all members of our community. In a number of my update letters I have referred to the way in which our University has pulled together to enable our students to complete their courses and programs, to ensure that our essential research can continue, and to support all members of our community through these challenging times. I continue to be impressed by the unselfish commitment of our faculty and staff as we plan for the future, uphold our mission, and steward McMaster's legacy of innovation, perseverance and excellence. I am grateful to all members of our community for their support and patience as we work through these difficult decisions, and remain deeply appreciative of the commitment of our Board of Governors.

I thought it would be helpful for members of our Board to receive an update on key developments since our last meeting, as well as with regard to planning for the Fall.

Learning Environment

We completed the Winter 2020 term on a virtual and online learning basis, including the remote delivery of exams alongside a range of alternate evaluation formats. The University's Spring term began on May 4 with all classes for both Spring and Summer sessions being offered in virtual teaching environments. We have actually experienced an increase in spring and summer course enrolment of 32% for domestic students and 48% for international students compared to 2019. Many spring and summer courses are at full capacity with faculty and staff working hard to ensure the best possible virtual learning experience for our students. The MacPherson Institute has developed a plan to facilitate the creation and delivery of remote learning, which includes the hiring of Educational Development Fellows (graduate students), and Student Course Designers and Developers (graduate/undergraduate students) to support instructors.

The School of Graduate Studies has been working hard to ensure that PhD defences have been able to take place in the virtual environment so that students can complete their programs at the expected time. Plans are underway to continue to offer the online option for thesis defences post-pandemic.

For those students who are graduating this Spring, online celebrations including videos, and messages of congratulations from the Chancellor, President, Dean, Instructors and Alumni have been prepared. Students will have the opportunity to celebrate virtually alongside their valedictorians and award winners, with in-person ceremonies to be scheduled as and when we are able to hold such events.

Student Enrolment

To engage and encourage incoming students, Student Affairs has been working hard to offer virtual tours, webinars, and one-on-one chats. We have also developed a new first year transition program called **Archway**, which aims to support every incoming first year undergraduate student by connecting them to an upper-year student mentor and a professional staff coach, as well as placing them in a cohort of other first year students based on their interests. The goal for Archway is to complement other services and offices on campus and support students with successful first year transition, building a sense of community and belonging, despite the virtual learning environment.

Planning for the Fall Term

In view of the need to provide certainty to faculty, staff and students, and particularly to incoming students and their families, we have expedited our planning for the fall term, particularly with regard to the first-year learning environment. As you will have seen from my May 25 letter we have made the decision that classes for the entire fall term will be online and that with very few exceptions, students will not need to be on campus to take their courses. For first year undergraduate students only those enrolled in a limited number of professional health programs, such as Nursing, will need to be on campus. We are encouraging faculty and staff to find alternate means to deliver or to redistribute courses so that work requiring access to labs or other types of facilities can be completed at a future time. To help ensure a high-quality virtual learning environment, we are investing significantly in the online experience to assist faculty in developing high quality online programs that continue to provide students with opportunities to interact with each other and their instructors. Since we are also extremely mindful of the stresses inherent in undertaking courses in this environment, we are also enhancing support for students with particular emphasis on student well-being, mental health, technical assistance, and ensuring accessibility.

Strategy and Support for Research

The University has launched a dedicated COVID-19 Research Fund to support a broad range of research intended to enable our society to deal effectively with pandemics in the immediate and longer term. To ensure that a diverse range of research is supported across the University, two funding streams have been developed. The first stream supports research with immediate impact that broadens our knowledge and understanding of the COVID-19 virus and provides the tools needed to fight it. Approximately \$1.5M in University funding is available to support Stream 1 awards. This amount is supplemented by the generous donations of members of the University community, including members of the Board of Governors. Thank you all for your support in this regard. The second stream targets research focused on longer-term outcomes examining the impact of COVID-19 on our economic, political, and societal health. Approximately \$1M in University funding is available to support Stream 2 awards.

In addition to our internal funding, McMaster researchers have significant participation in the multidisciplinary Ontario Together COVID-19 Rapid Research Fund. McMaster submitted 94 full proposals representing a variety of disciplines. Given the number of applications to the fund from across the province we expect that the success rate will be quite low but McMaster researchers have already been awarded funding for five pandemic studies in the first announcement of awards from the fund.

Although the ability to conduct research on campus has been severely restricted as part of the immediate response to COVID-19, it is important to make the point that many researchers have been able to continue to advance their work remotely and I applaud them for doing so. In line with the province's framework for reopening, the University is working through a gradual, phased return of on-campus and fieldwork research. Led by the Acting Vice-President (Research), the University has developed a process for researchers who need access to campus facilities to return to campus in a phased way that respects all health and safety and physical distancing requirements. An on-line platform has been created to enable researchers to submit plans for approval, including an explanation of why research must be conducted on-campus or in the field, along with information that will address public health requirements and enable the University to retain oversight of the numbers of individuals and their locations on campus.

To assist researchers who require access to the library collections to advance their research, the University Library has negotiated access to the 830,000 document digital collections of the HathiTrust. In addition to supporting faculty members, this access will benefit graduate students at all stages and will be especially useful to students completing their degrees this Spring/Summer.

International Engagement

The current crisis, with its associated restrictions on travel and in-person meetings has had a major impact on the way in which we maintain our focus on Global Engagement. We have suspended our international summer programs, which affects an estimated 360 international students and have also cancelled our Fall exchange programs, which had approximately 175 students initially registered. Our hope is to be in a position to accept applications for Spring 2021 but this will depend on travel restrictions at that time. In light of the ongoing uncertainty regarding international travel, world-wide interest in "Virtual Exchange" modalities has significantly increased. The Office of International Affairs is actively engaged in conversations with partners in various national and international networks to explore opportunities for participation in such virtual programs.

Updates to Staff and Supervisors

The University leadership is also keenly aware of the impact of decisions around campus use and program delivery on staff. Our advice continues to be that all employees who are not considered part of an essential service should continue to work at home, if they are able to do so. Human Resources Services continues to work closely with unions and other employee groups to provide information and updates, and is also regularly updating their guidance for supervisors. In addition, a dedicated webpage with resources for working remotely has been created, which includes guidance for supervisors leading remote teams, information about health and safety, and a range of resources intended to support employee health and well-being. A resilience toolkit has been developed, along with several new online workshops and sessions for employees across the campus.

Institutional Impact

As discussed at our last meeting, the impact of the current pandemic has far-reaching effects across our campus and community. The Board received a detailed presentation on financial impacts at our last meeting and modelling for a range of scenarios for 2020/21 continues. We will have a clearer picture once we pass the June 1 acceptance date for student enrolment but will

continue to reassess the situation and will update the Board as we move into the next academic year. We continue to work closely with our Minister and with the Council of Ontario Universities, the U15 and Universities Canada to make the case to both the federal and provincial governments regarding the overall impact on our sector and the operating and research support that will be needed over the coming months and years.

Future Planning

To support our community as we think through the many changes that COVID-19 has necessitated, the PVP group has put together the following principles to guide our decision-making in the immediate and medium-term:

- 1. For the 2020/21 academic year, we will continue to deliver on the academic and research mission of the University, while prioritizing the health, safety and well-being of all members of our community.*
- 2. In doing so, we will remain focused on supporting and enabling the success of our students, delivering a high-quality learning environment and overall student experience.*
- 3. Our goal is to welcome new and returning students back to campus as soon as this can be done safely and in accordance with Public Health guidance and government protocols. Priority will be given to those programs where physical access is necessary in order to complete academic requirements and enable students to complete their courses and graduate.*
- 4. We will maintain our focus on research excellence and on supporting the work of our researchers across all disciplines, as well as enabling and advancing our long history of creativity and innovation.*
- 5. We will continue to uphold our core University values, principles and policies, including our focus on inclusivity, accommodation and respect for one another, and our collegial decision-making processes. Any revisions or updating of policies will continue to be developed through the University's pre-existing governance processes.*
- 6. We will continue to make fiscally prudent decisions that support our ongoing stability and success as an institution, balancing risk with opportunity.*
- 7. We will continue to work together as a community to support our students, faculty and staff across the University and will ensure that information, plans and decisions are communicated clearly and promptly.*

Opportunities and Successes

As highlighted in my last report in April, despite all the difficult challenges we are currently dealing with as a community, there are positive elements that we should recognize and celebrate. These positive elements range from research successes to community-building activities and I thought it appropriate to end my report by offering a few examples of the ways in which McMaster has joined the fight against COVID-19 and continues to support our communities – locally, nationally and globally – in dealing with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Supports for McMaster's COVID Research

McMaster University researchers have been awarded funding for five pandemic studies in the first announcement by the Ontario government of COVID-19 Rapid Research Fund projects.

The University's largest grant of \$1.2 million is for a national study led by Donald Arnold, an Associate Professor of Medicine, on the use of plasma from recovered COVID-19 patients to treat others who are fighting the virus. The clinical trial to test effectiveness of the treatment will

enrol patients who are 16 or older with COVID-19 who have been admitted to hospital and require supplemental oxygen for the respiratory illness. It will involve more than 60 hospitals and universities across Canada, the Canadian Blood Services, Héma-Québec, along with three hospitals in New York City and the New York Blood Center.

A related study being led by Associate Professor of Medicine, Ishac Nazy, was awarded \$400,000 to determine whether immunity to COVID-19 is longstanding or if it wanes over time. The goal of the research project is to determine the makeup, concentration, strength and viral properties of anti-SARS-CoV-2 antibodies, in order to provide insights into the immune response of individuals infected with COVID-19. Working with Dr. Arnold, this research will use samples from recovered patients to test for the antibodies, see how long they last, and determine if they can bind and neutralize the virus.

A third study led by Nikhil Pai, Associate Professor of Pediatrics; Jeffrey Pernica, Associate Professor of Pediatrics, and Marek Smieja, Professor of Pathology and Molecular Medicine, with a grant of \$15,000, will work to improve COVID-19 detection in children and adults who lack respiratory symptoms, are considered asymptomatic, or are presumed to have “recovered” from past infection.

Co-principal investigators Audrey Lim and Anne Klassen, both Associate Professors of Pediatrics, will use a \$65,000 grant to lead the fourth research study looking at how complex pediatric patients fare with the move to virtual clinic settings from hospital visits. In addition, through St. Joseph’s Healthcare Hamilton (SJHH), Professor Marek Smieja is leading a fifth study, worth \$700,000, to increase Ontario’s COVID-19 testing capacity. The project will bring together the disease diagnostics and development group of SJHH with the Hamilton Regional Laboratory Medicine Program and other clinical laboratories across the province to quickly develop, validate, and deliver high-throughput, COVID-19 testing, with the goal of testing up to 6,000 samples per lab daily.

McMaster Research contributes to WHO Guidelines for COVID-19 Vaccine Testing

Claudia Emerson, a Philosophy Professor in the Faculty of Humanities, has been working as part of an international team to establish global guidelines for clinical trials where healthy human volunteers are given a test vaccine and then infected with COVID-19.

McMaster Engineers working on Medical Masks

Researchers in the Faculty of Engineering are rigorously testing surgical and N95 mask designs in innovative ways, in order to make more personal protective equipment available to health-care workers and the general public.

McMaster and Hamilton Health Sciences launch website for families of children affected by Diabetes during COVID-19

All families are affected by COVID-19, but this period is especially challenging for those whose children have a serious illness. To help support families affected by childhood diabetes, a team from McMaster University and Hamilton Health Sciences’ McMaster Children’s Hospital has launched a website that provides resources and information.

Humanities Professor works with East African community to provide COVID-19 Resources

Alpha Abebe, who teaches courses in the Faculty of Humanities and the Integrated Business and Humanities program, has mobilized an army of volunteers to translate COVID-19 resources for Ethiopian and Eritrean communities in Toronto and beyond.

Residence Use

McMaster has opened spaces in Les Prince residence for medical residents, fellows and newly arrived international graduate students to live safely in isolation while some of them help in the efforts against COVID-19 in the city.