INTRODUCTION

On March 13 as the COVID-19 crisis rapidly deepened, the University of Alberta suspended classes and most of its on-campus activities. Within a few days, instructors began delivering course instruction online; hundreds of scientific research labs and projects were shut down; residences were emptied as many students returned to their homes across Alberta and around the world; and, thousands of faculty and staff were setting up offices in their kitchens, spare bedrooms and basements. Soon, buildings across our campuses were closed to the public.

Gearing down the on-site operations of a multi-campus, research-intensive university was a huge undertaking, but the entire community of instructors, students and staff rose to the challenge: thousands of courses were completed online, spring and summer session picked up remotely, students unable to return home stayed in residence, university researchers safely contributed to the worldwide pursuit of new knowledge of the new virus, over 7,000 degrees were awarded to the class of 2020, and we welcomed both a new chancellor and a new president.

By early April, the university’s emergency response team, working closely with faculty deans, executive, the board of governors, general faculty council, and staff and student associations, turned its attention to the next huge undertaking: returning to campus.

BACK TO CAMPUS: VISION AND PRINCIPLES

Recognizing the high stakes associated with a diverse community of over 50,000 learners, faculty and staff during a pandemic, the university agreed to a vision and set of principles to serve as a guide in the return to our campuses, led by the following:

- The university will place the health and well-being of students, staff, and faculty above all other considerations.

- The University of Alberta will continue to provide the best possible learning experience for its students and maximize its research and service activities throughout the pandemic.

With this in mind, the university began developing its plan. Although things can change quickly in this extraordinary year, the following outlines what to expect based on what we currently know.
SAFETY WILL CONTINUE TO BE OUR TOP PRIORITY

The university’s top priority is the continuing health and safety of its students, staff, faculty, and visitors. This means a **phased and controlled return to campus**, a robust set of prevention measures that meet or exceed the requirements of public health officials, and the combined efforts of all members of the university community.

For the reduced number of students, instructors and staff who do come to campus this year, things will look and feel quite different. Everyone will be expected to do a basic health assessment each day before coming to campus. They will need to wear a mask in common areas inside buildings, such as hallways and elevators. They will need to get used to physically distancing themselves from peers and colleagues and not gathering in large groups. They will learn to follow new signs and guides designed to ease traffic flow without creating congestion. They will be required to wash hands frequently and sanitize their work and study areas, and they will have to be prepared to self-isolate if they experience any flu-like symptoms.

Physical barriers, such as those commonly seen in stores, may appear in areas where social distancing is not possible, and cleaning staff will maintain a rigorous schedule—especially for high touch surfaces.

All of the above is carefully detailed in a **general directive on safety** and an **e-learning course**, and supported by various public health activities and resources tailored to our campuses. The university’s **Public Health Response Team** will continue to regularly coordinate, support, and communicate any public health and safety measure updates for our campuses and community throughout the year.

MOST CLASSES WILL BE DELIVERED REMOTELY

On May 14, the university announced to its 40,000 students that the large majority of classes will be delivered remotely for the Fall 2020 academic term. This decision recognizes the likely presence of the coronavirus for the foreseeable future, including a potential second wave, and the impossibility of achieving a reasonable level of physical distancing among such large numbers normally on our dense campuses.

There are courses that cannot be delivered adequately online, and for that reason the university set up an exception process. All instructors across the university were invited to submit requests for in-person delivery to the dean of their faculty. The dean reviewed each request to determine whether the course is required to progress through or complete a degree program, whether the course can be taught safely in person, whether the
instructor could adapt delivery in the event of an outbreak, whether there was provision for those who could not attend in person, and, most importantly, whether it was possible to provide the course online.

Each dean forwarded the requests to a committee that included fellow academics as well as experts in facilities management, health and safety and course scheduling. The committee reviewed the requests and was able to approve approximately 300 courses with in-person learning experiences during Fall 2020.

The large majority of the approved in-person courses are labs. See the complete list here.

Students and instructors who are part of in-person instruction this fall will receive detailed information about the safety controls the university is putting in place as well as their personal responsibilities for keeping everyone safe.

RESEARCH ACTIVITY WILL CONTINUE TO EXPAND

In mid-March, after the province decided to close all but essential services, the university closed most of its on-campus research laboratories, except for COVID-19 research activities, animal care, and clinical studies that could not be stopped without jeopardizing patient safety.

On May 25, the university began a process to gradually resume research activities that had been shut down. To achieve this, the university developed various procedures for research groups and labs to assess their readiness, apply for permission to return, and commit to being able to shut down again within 48 hours if required to do so.

By the beginning of June, more than 400 research groups, including investigators, technicians and graduate students, were back on campus engaging in research. By September, we expect our on-campus research activity to be approaching regular levels.

Here are the tools and vital information used by those engaged in on-campus research:

- Procedures to Request a Return to Campus
- Return to Campus Plan Template
- Field Research Restrictions and Regulations

By no means does all research take place in a lab. Researchers are highly dependent on libraries and the specialized services performed by librarians. For this reason, as well as to meet the requirements of students, the university’s libraries have developed a plan to provide vital services while maintaining the safety of both staff and users.
STUDENTS WILL HAVE A HIGH-QUALITY UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE

The rapid switch to remote learning in March was a challenge for students and instructors alike. With the lessons learned from this period, the university has made it a priority to develop rich learning and engagement experiences regardless of the student’s physical location in the world.

A great deal is being asked of our instructors as they redevelop their course materials for remote delivery from the beginning to the end of the term. For this reason, the university will do everything possible to support instructors through this transition. Already, there are numerous examples of University of Alberta instructors showing leadership in the unprecedented pedagogical transformation now taking place around the globe.

To ease the transition for students, the university is developing a comprehensive online Fall 2020 Campus Life website. This hub will support both undergraduate and graduate students in developing online learning skills and networks, allowing them to connect and share their own experiences and best practices. Students can expect regular supportive guidance over the summer to help them prepare for this adapted higher learning experience.

University IT professionals have developed easy-to-follow technical specifications for students and are working to improve equipment, tools and services to help enhance and enrich teaching and learning.

RESIDENCES WILL BE OPEN

University residences have stayed open throughout the pandemic, with over 900 students remaining over the summer. Residences will be open this fall and, as in any other year, staff and coordinators will do everything they can to build a vibrant and inclusive residence community and comprehensive residence life programming.

As with the campus as a whole, the top priority will be safety: many special provisions will be in place. Rooms will be assigned strategically to ensure a critical mass of residents while maintaining health measures; dining services and movement within the facilities will be designed to facilitate physical distancing and hygienic best practices; access will be strictly controlled; and enhanced cleaning services will be in place. Residence Services will set aside special accommodations to manage any need for self-isolation, including capacity for international students who must self-isolate upon arrival in Canada.
THERE WILL BE LIFE ON CAMPUS

The university is committed to providing a robust and engaging learning experience for students both on and off campus this fall.

Students will have access to computer labs, libraries, and the services provided by the Office of the Dean of Students, the Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport and Recreation, and the Students’ Union. There will be access to sports and recreation facilities, student groups and intercollegiate sports. Many food service providers will be open.

Student supports, including health and wellness services, career and professional development programs, ombudservice, First Peoples’ House, and academic supports, will be available to all students remotely. In-person provision of these services will be available where possible. The University Health Centre and Pharmacy remain open for on-campus needs and will continue to provide new telehealth and prescription delivery services as well.

Although the Augustana Vikings, Golden Bears and Pandas Athletics, along with the Canada West and U Sport, have made the difficult decision to suspend some activities, plans to create opportunities focused on training and student-athlete development for the 2020/2021 season are underway. Meaningful training and competition opportunities will begin initially in a virtual delivery model and will transition to an in-person model, both to enhance the student-athlete experience and to contribute to campus life for University of Alberta students.

REMOTE WORK WILL CONTINUE

Since March, thousands of faculty and staff have managed their work remotely. To successfully manage health measures this fall, remote work will continue to be the first option for most employees until at least December 31, 2020. Here are highlights of helpful information for faculty and staff working from home:

- Information for faculty and staff about working remotely
- Information for supervisors about managing remote workers
- Mental, physical, and social health and wellbeing resources for employees and their families
- Transition to telephonic and e-delivery of Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) services
People and work units that are required to be on campus to successfully do their work continue to follow a careful return to campus process that includes learning all the enhanced safety protocols described above. Highlights of helpful information for faculty and staff returning to campus include:

- [Mandatory Returning to Campus eLearning module](#)
- [Information for employees about returning to campus](#)
- [Managing safe returns to campus: A guide for supervisors and managers](#)

**CONCLUSION**

Our university community displayed an astonishing capacity to pivot in a very short period this spring. It was not easy. While we learned that we can be effective by connecting through computers from our homes, we were also reminded that teaching, learning and sharing ideas is a very human enterprise that is best achieved when we are together, face-to-face. In our immediate future, our university will strive to deliver on both academic excellence and enriching human connection to the greatest extent possible.

In the year ahead, we hope the coronavirus will be controlled and that we will return to some form of normality, although it will likely be a “new normal,” as things may never be exactly the same. Until then, the University of Alberta, with the will and commitment of faculty, students and staff and with the encouragement of our community of alumni, donors and supporters around the world, continues to adapt to and carry out its mission of teaching, research and service in the changed environment that this pandemic allows.