



MONTANA UNIVERSITY SYSTEM  
OFFICE OF COMMISSIONER OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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To: Montana Board of Regents; Montana University System Chief Executive Officers;  
Montana Community College Presidents

From: Clayton T. Christian, Commissioner of Higher Education

Date: January 6, 2021

Subject: **COVID-19 UPDATE: Guidelines for Targeted Return Testing - Spring 2021 Semester**

As we approach the Spring 2021 Semester, campuses across the Montana University System will continue to employ a multi-layered response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Campuses should continue to communicate with students and employees about expectations for responsible behavior during winter break and the policies and protocols that will be in place throughout the spring semester. As more information becomes available, campuses should also update students and employees on vaccination procedures and timetables.

Of course, our urgent focus is on the “January return” of thousands of MUS students to our campus communities. In addition to reiterating the approach outlined in my December 17, 2020 memorandum, I **write today to announce that MUS campuses with substantial residential student populations will be able to conduct targeted return testing of asymptomatic students living in residence halls.** This testing, which will use the existing state inventory of rapid response BinaxNOW COVID-19 Ag Cards, is only possible because of our partnership with state leadership, including the Montana Department of Health and Human Services (DPHHS). The BinaxNOW tests are on hand, and are easy to distribute, store, and use on all campuses. They offer results within 15-30 minutes, and they are processed on site, without any significant laboratory or technological infrastructure.

Campuses should follow the basic targeted return testing parameters outlined below, even as they develop specific processes and plans that reflect different start dates, different student populations, and other unique considerations. Throughout their planning, campus leadership should coordinate with my office to confirm the number of tests available, ensure prompt delivery of BinaxNOW test cards to campus, and maintain proper reporting of results to local and state public health offices.

**January 2021 Targeted Return Testing Parameters**

1. Testing will take place on MUS campuses with substantial residence hall populations: Montana State University, the University of Montana, Montana Technological University, Montana State University – Billings, Montana State University – Northern, and the University of Montana – Western.
2. Testing will be completed within two weeks of the start of Spring 2021 classes on each campus.
3. **Campuses should ask all students in Group 1 to be tested.** Group 1 consists of students living in residence halls who are returning to campus from locations outside Montana.
4. **Campuses should encourage all students in Group 2 to be tested.** Group 2 consists of students living in residence halls who are not returning to campus from locations outside Montana.

5. **Pending test availability, campuses should make tests available to all students in Group 3.**

Group 3 includes all other students who are taking in-person classes on campus.

Additional testing may be conducted pending test availability and coordination with OCHE. Campuses will coordinate directly with Diedra Murray at OCHE ([dmurray@montana.edu](mailto:dmurray@montana.edu)) as testing and reporting plans are developed, including any requests for additions or changes to the group definitions outlined above.

Our targeted return testing is not meant to be a standalone approach – it is a supplement to the wide range of measures that comprise our comprehensive COVID-19 response plan. Importantly, our overall testing strategy this spring will be much like Fall 2020 in that our focus will remain on the rapid testing, diagnosis and isolation of symptomatic individuals, supplemented by rapid tracing and isolation of those who have had close contact with positive COVID-19 cases. Also like the fall, we will conduct daily situational assessments and remain flexible as new opportunities or challenges emerge. Most of all, our students and employees will continue to benefit from the coordination of our COVID-19 response across the Montana University System and our strong partnership with the Board of Regents, Governor’s Office, state and local public health authorities, and other leaders from across Montana.

Thank you for your work and leadership as we enter 2021 with strength, purpose, and optimism.



Clayton T. Christian  
Commissioner of Higher Education