



Published September 1st, 2021

## SMC begins fall semester with primarily in-person classes and strict COVID guidelines

By Vera Kochan

As far back as February, and well before the Delta variant of the coronavirus came roaring in with a vengeance, Saint Mary's College had already made plans to welcome students back to campus for the fall semester, which began on Aug. 30, with mostly in-person learning.

SMC gained confidence from the successful track record of safety protocols that were set in place and adhered to during the prior school year by offering classes online, in outdoor pavilions, and modified indoor classroom spaces where Plexiglass was installed. Additionally, the college implemented HyFlex technology that allowed faculty to teach in-person to some students while others joined the class remotely.

Looking ahead to the 2021-22 school year, SMC states that, "the health and well being of our campus community remains our highest priority. We continuously monitor public health guidance and best practices so that we might pivot effectively should conditions change on campus or in our region."

As such, the school has mandated a COVID-19 vaccine requirement for students coming to the campus this fall. All students must be fully vaccinated and provide verification to that effect or have an approved medical or religious exemption prior to arriving on campus. Any student who has submitted a deposit can choose to attend another college if they don't agree with the new policy, however SMC puts forth the theory that most other colleges and universities are following the same type of edict. The college is also requiring students, faculty, staff and visitors to wear facial coverings while on campus unless they are in their private residence or private office.

According to a recent SMC update, "The College will work with students who are unable to access approved vaccines prior to arrival in the fall, for example, those coming from geographical areas where vaccine access is limited. International students who can prove that they have been fully inoculated abroad with a COVID-19 vaccine that has been authorized for use by the World Health Organization will not need to be re-vaccinated upon arrival."

While SMC strongly recommends that faculty and staff get vaccinations, they have not yet made that a requirement for employees. Any students with approved exemptions will need to wear masks, maintain physical distancing according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines, and be required to complete weekly COVID testing. Students without proof of vaccination or a medical or religious exemption are given the option of enrolling in remote classes or they may take a leave of absence. They may not live in on-campus housing, participate in in-person classes, or have access to campus facilities.

SMC stresses, "We recommend that all members of our campus community follow good health practices, such as regular hand washing or sanitizing, maintaining some physical distance in large groups, and staying at home if you feel sick. If you feel more comfortable continuing to wear a mask, we encourage you to do so. Throughout the pandemic SMC has closely aligned its public health rules and guidelines with federal, state, and county guidance and will continue to do so if conditions change."

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