

# Trent University prepares for the return of students to campus

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On January 31, Trent returns to in-person learning. I look forward to the buzz of a busy campus, as students fill our lecture halls, our library, and our Athletics Centre.

Their migration back began in the first week of January, slowly but surely. In keeping with the recommendations of our Ministry, we decided to begin the semester online and are looking forward to our return to in-person learning.

Since COVID arrived two years ago, I have spent much of my time responding to seemingly endless e-mails and phone calls I receive from concerned students, staff, faculty, parents, and the general public. What is Trent doing? What are our plans for the future?

The messages that make their way to me point, with equal emphasis and intensity, in opposite directions. Not two opposite directions, but many more, as there are so many issues – vaccine mandates, testing, safety protocols, human rights issues, budget matters, a need to accommodate individuals with special needs, etc., etc. – and many different ways to deal with each.

I can tell you that fall 2021 has been a wonderful term at Trent. Despite the rise of the delta variant, we held 80% of our classes in person, had no COVID outbreaks, and experienced no significant transmission of COVID on our campuses. No transmission occurred during our in-person exams, but we pivoted online when Public Health asked us to do so.

Our successful fall term did not happen by accident. Rather, it was the product of the many precautions the University has taken to ensure the safety of our campuses. They included vaccine mandates (97% of our students, staff and employees are fully vaccinated); masking, distancing, cleaning and air purifying protocols; special accommodations, where possible, for individuals who have needed them; and the constant monitoring of our buildings and campuses.

We plan to maintain our vigilant approach to safety as we return to in-person teaching, learning, and research. Our protocols will include wastewater testing by our scientists, an extra layer of protection which has proved to be an invaluable instrument as we track signs of COVID on our campuses and colleges.

Some have asked me why we are returning to in-person classes. Many more have asked me to assure them that we *are*. It goes without saying that we are doing what we are doing because we believe, after extensive consultations with scientists, Public Health, and the government, that our campuses are safe and not high-risk environments.

More deeply, Trent's return to in-person classes reflects our commitment to in-person learning. An increase in our online offerings has been a positive side of COVID, but Trent is not an online university and remains committed to the educational value of in-person teaching and an in-person community.

Putting aside the mental health benefits of in-person education (benefits which are significant), we believe that we can best teach our students the social and communication skills that will ensure their success by teaching them *in person*. The best way to learn about working with others, problem solving, diversity, and critical thinking is not via a zoom screen, but by actively engaging a diverse community.

We will, of course, change our plans and directions if the state of the epidemic requires it. We have done so before and can do so again. One of the things we have learned from the pandemic is the need to be flexible and resilient when faced with adversity. I am pleased to say that our community has done so far more capably than I thought was possible two years ago.

**Guest column by: Leo Groarke, Ph.D., the president and vice-chancellor of Trent University.**