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March 8, 2021

Dear Post-Secondary Institution Presidents:

I am writing to you to acknowledge the important leadership the post-secondary sector has shown in BC's response to the COVID-19 pandemic over the past 12 months, and to support you with the critical goal of resuming safe on-campus teaching, learning and research in September 2021.

Your institutions worked in partnership with the BC Centre for Disease Control, WorkSafeBC, the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Training, and staff in my office to produce and update the "COVID-19 Go-Forward Guidelines for B.C.'s Post-Secondary Sector." Those Guidelines and your institutional health and safety plans helped the sector to be very successful in mitigating the spread of COVID-19. The quick adaptation to remote learning, while staying open and available for learners, played a major role in the success of B.C.'s pandemic response.

My office and our medical health officers share your concerns about the wellbeing of young adults who are disproportionately affected by the pandemic, including worsening mental health, increased financial instability and diminished future prospects. We also acknowledge this has been a difficult and stressful time for faculty and staff. It is imperative to get back on campus for everyone's health and well-being.

There are very good reasons to be confident that a return to on-campus instruction in the fall can be undertaken safely and successfully. Current projections of the COVID-19 vaccine supply in BC suggest that all vulnerable and high-risk groups should be immunized this spring, and the majority of the adult population by the summer. Young adults aged 18-24 should receive the vaccine no later than the end of July, but more likely sooner. The timing of immunization should not be a determinant of planning for a return to on-campus activities.

Given the expected timelines for immunization it is essential that we plan for a full return to in-person activities on campus in September 2021, including in-person instruction, with faculty and staff returning to campus sooner. Immunization will support what seems likely to become stable coexistence with COVID-19 as another manageable, seasonal ailment.

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New variants of the SARS CoV-2 virus will likely continue to emerge. We will respond to them through monitoring, re-formulation of tests and vaccines, and through other measures as needed depending on the characteristics of the variants. Targeted testing and contact tracing by health authorities will remain key supplements to immunization in rapidly controlling transmission. These activities will be part of normal, ongoing life with COVID-19.

We have also learned over the past year that when we implement effective safety plans, large sectors can operate safely. Reducing the opportunity for infectious contacts will continue to be an important strategy. As such, safety plans will remain important, with updates as required. My team looks forward to working with you to fine-tune plans for the prevention activities we have all become so familiar with: self-administered health checks; facilitating hand cleaning through access to soap and water or encouraging people to use hand sanitizers; use of masks; early detection and rapid testing of potential cases; isolation; and case and contact management.

The experience of the past year can help with a safe return to post-secondary campuses. Above and beyond immunization, infectious contacts in group settings at post-secondary institutions can be reduced through a variety of prevention and exposure control measures. Two-meter physical distancing has been my guidance for uncontrolled group settings. Such distancing is neither practical, nor necessary, in the controlled context of post-secondary instructional settings. I am very confident that the combination of immunization and continued application of the “COVID-19 Go-Forward Guidelines for B.C.’s Post-Secondary Sector” will support the safe and complete resumption of campus teaching, learning, and research.

We also believe student housing, dining and other on-campus student services will be able to return to normal or close-to-normal capacities by following revised protocols in the “COVID-19 Go-Forward Guidelines for B.C.’s Post-Secondary Sector.”

Based on what we have learned in the past year, and the important protection that immunization will provide, I, as well as the medical health officers in British Columbia, strongly support the resumption of on-campus activities in September 2021. Public health will also continue to work with post-secondary institutions to determine if measures are needed to keep activities inside and outside the classroom safe in the fall, such as public transportation, socializing outside of class, athletics, and arrival and quarantine of international students.

Thank you, again, for the important role you play in supporting the provincial COVID-19 response, and in helping British Columbians to realize the full experience and benefits of post-secondary education. I look forward to working with you to strengthen the collaboration between public health and post-secondary institutions for a full and safe return to on-campus instruction in September 2021. We all look forward to the rich campus interactions that will make learning and personal development so much more effective and supportive for students, faculty, and staff.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bonnie Henry', with a stylized, flowing script.

Bonnie Henry
MD, MPH, FRCPC
Provincial Health Officer

Cc Honourable Anne Kang, Minister of Advanced Education and Skills Training
 Shannon Baskerville, Deputy Minister of Advanced Education and Skills Training
 Max Blouw, President Research Universities' Council of BC
 Ruth Wittenberg President, BC Association of Institutes and Universities
 Colin Ewart, President BC Colleges
 Honourable Adrian Dix, Minister of Health
 Stephen Brown, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Health
 Chief Medical Health Officers, Regional Health Authorities
 Chief Medical Officer, First Nations Health Authority
 Deputy Provincial Health Officers