

COVID-19 Protocols

Comprehensive COVID-19 Prevention and Safety Plan Winter Term 2022



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Introduction

Throughout the pandemic, Acadia has taken a strong leadership role in implementing comprehensive COVID-19 safety protocols that have successfully allowed us to operate in-person classes and residences throughout the 2020-21 academic year. We continued to take this approach as we prepared for the 2021-22 academic year, and we successfully implemented a plan that was both comprehensive and precautionary, relying on a combination of specific measures to provide the safest possible community for living, working, and learning.

The success of Acadia's plan during the Fall Term 2021 was based upon communicating and engaging the community in six critical and important components in order to create a safe and healthy environment within this pandemic:

- high rate of community vaccination (well exceeding population immunity minimums)
- regular testing for all (weekly for vaccinated and twice weekly for unvaccinated)
- mask wearing indoors
- social distancing indoors especially where masks are not worn
- daily self-assessment of symptoms
- hand washing and sanitisation

As we start the Winter 2022 Term, the *Omicron* variant has changed the pandemic environment considerably. Under previous versions of COVID, managing infection and illness were inseparable. Under *Omicron* current public health information shows that the infection rate is higher but the severe illness rate is lower, causing public health policy to shift from focussing on a zero tolerance of infection to protecting those who are most at risk of severe illness. This means that as the level of infection increases, public health is directing its resources to those who are most at risk and actually sick.

The best protection from illness due to the *Omicron* variant is to be fully vaccinated, and if eligible, to have received a booster shot. Maintaining very high level of vaccination in our community remains essential to keeping the campus safe.

On December 21, the provincial government announced a pause in the workplace rapid testing program and as of December 27, public health will be re-directing rapid tests from lower risk settings into testing centres so that people who would normally get a PCR test (symptomatic, close contacts) but are at lower risk of severe disease (based on age, other health factors) can still receive a test. This means low risk workplaces, including universities and the NSCC, will no longer be able to receive a dedicated supply of rapid tests. While the workplace program will be revisited when cases stabilize, public health has stated that the likelihood of the workplace program re-starting is low and that even if it does, organizations will most likely have to procure their own supplies of test kits.

This change in testing policy removes one of the central pillars from our previously successful approach, namely "Know Your COVID Status," based upon the availability of free test kits enabling members of the Acadia community, whether vaccinated or not, to test on a regular basis.

Key Elements of Acadia's Comprehensive COVID-19 Prevention and Safety Plan for the Winter Term 2022

To address this new situation, Acadia has shifted its approach for the Winter Term in order to secure the highest levels of health and safety for our community. In-house testing capacity must now be directed towards the most at-risk members of our community. At risk members includes those who are unvaccinated or have a health condition that makes them more susceptible to suffering severe symptoms, those who live with at risk individuals, and residence students because of their close living conditions. The successful practices that kept the campus community safe during the Fall Term 2021 have resulted in a very high rate of vaccination in our community, but without the regular testing component we are more vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus, especially the highly transmissible *Omicron* variant.

Should an outbreak occur on campus, unvaccinated students are at higher risk of developing more severe symptoms. As we will not be able to rely on public health to undertake contact tracing the university needs to know each student's vaccination status in case they need to be contacted directly. Having accurate data on the epidemiology of the campus community and assurance of compliance with vaccination and testing requirements is necessary given the way in which the COVID virus has evolved.

Acadia will redeploy its resources away from testing towards managing the on-campus epidemiology and the impacts of illness due to the presence of COVID. We will hire a second Occupational Health nurse to assist our senior OH nurse in carrying out her responsibilities and to support the likelihood of increased infection on campus.

For the Winter Term Acadia will require all students on campus to be either fully vaccinated (by providing official proof of vaccination) or to test twice weekly and report results to the OH nurse as a precaution against the increased transmissibility of the *Omicron* variant.

The university will be speaking with employee groups in January to determine how they are affected by the changes in public health policy.

For the Winter Term, the major changes include:

- All registered students attending classes or accessing facilities on campus will now be required to be either fully vaccinated or to test and report twice a week.
- Fully vaccinated students will need to provide Proof of Vaccination (POV) to the university.
- Unvaccinated students will be able to apply for a vaccination exemption for valid medical/health reasons and will be assessed for possible exemption from the vaccine requirement.
- Unvaccinated students will be required to undertake twice weekly testing and to provide results to the university:
 - unvaccinated students who are formally exempted from vaccination by the university due to medical/health reasons¹ will be provided access to free rapid testing twice a week

1. Acadia University will use the list of exemptions approved by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Nova Scotia.

- unvaccinated students who are not formally exempted from vaccination by the university but who choose to remain unvaccinated will be provided with access to rapid testing twice a week and will be **charged a fee** (amount to be determined depending upon the price of the rapid test kits) for two test kits per week
- the university reserves the right to refuse access to campus for anyone who does not comply with this requirement.
- Residence students will be required to be fully vaccinated unless they are specifically exempted by the university for medical/health reasons, in which case they will be required to test at least twice weekly and provide evidence of such to the university.
 - all residence students will be required to undertake rapid testing upon arrival and during the first two weeks of the Winter Term.
- Acadia will hire an assistant OH nurse to support the work of our senior OH Nurse.

Vaccination and Student Pledge

For the Winter Term, the Student Pledge will be enhanced to be a more effective tool in managing the epidemiology of our student community (see more details below). This will continue to be a central component of our strategy, but with the change in public health testing policy, it is absolutely critical that the university knows exactly how many are vaccinated and unvaccinated, and who to contact in the likely case of an outbreak on campus.

Acadia will ensure that residence students are fully vaccinated or in the process of becoming fully vaccinated, and that those who are exempted for medical/health reasons are testing twice weekly. We will increase the enforcement of these rules to ensure that individuals are not circumventing the requirements. All students in residence will be required to provide proof of full vaccination or ongoing proof of twice-weekly testing. Students failing to comply will be required to leave residence.

Residence students will be required to complete the Student Pledge upon arrival and by January 10, 2022, at the latest. Non-exempted unvaccinated students will have until January 21, 2022, to get their first dose and February 25, 2022, to complete their second dose.

On-Campus Quarantine and Self-Isolation

As per our plan, members of the community are required to quarantine if they show symptoms of COVID-19 until such time as they have been tested and cleared by public health. Acadia continues to provide quarantine space in Chipman House for residence students who are in double rooms and require a private space to isolate.

For the Winter Term, Acadia will continue to keep Chipman House free for students (including off-campus students and employees if requested) who are quarantining or self-isolating. This has been an essential element of our ability to manage the pandemic and with the transmissibility of the *Omicron* variant, we expect more individuals to require use of this facility in the Winter Term.

If the Omicron variant starts putting pressure on the number of spaces we have for isolation in Chipman House, we will revise our approach so that only more severe symptomatic cases and high-risk students are isolated in Chipman. Other students may need to isolate in their own residence rooms.

On-Campus Vaccination Clinics

During the Fall Term, Acadia supported students, faculty and staff requiring access to vaccination by offering four clinics on campus, providing an additional 191 inoculations. COVID-19 vaccinations were complemented by eight flu shot clinics delivering 900 inoculations as well as the successful launch of the 'B for Kai' initiative seeing 121 students receiving vaccination protection from Meningitis B. Although this is a very different vaccine from COVID, it helps raise awareness about the importance of vaccination in combatting the spread of disease.

For the Winter Term, Acadia will continue to provide and/or facilitate access to COVID vaccination clinics for new and returning students arriving in January until they have received their full dose of vaccinations. We will also support access to booster shots as they are made available to age cohorts. All eligible students and employees are urged to get their booster shots as soon as they are eligible.

Regular Self-Assessment and Testing

For the Winter Term, Acadia will no longer be able to continue to promote testing as the key element of "Know Your COVID Status" and rapid testing will be directed towards at-risk students (as described above). All unvaccinated students be required to test twice weekly through the provision of rapid testing clinics. This is subject to the continued availability and supply of rapid testing kits, and any change will need to be addressed at the time.

With the change in provincial public health policy regarding testing as announced on December 21, Acadia has a supply of rapid test kits to last us through the Winter Term if we target that supply towards those most at risk. The university will continue to supply free tests to those vaccinated students who are high risk cases and unvaccinated students who are exempted by the university from vaccination due to medical/health reasons. Non-exempt unvaccinated students will be charged a fee for their required twice weekly testing; this fee will be reimbursed if the student subsequently gets fully vaccinated.

Mask Wearing

Acadia's Mask Policy requires all employees, students, and visitors to wear masks in all common spaces in all buildings on campus (including all public spaces and when moving around) with appropriate exceptions for employees in work locations and teaching spaces, and students in their private residence room. Students are required to wear masks in classrooms, labs, and exams, including when they are seated. Regular reminders have been provided and Safety and Security staff intervene to compel compliance as required.

For the Winter Term, Acadia will continue to require the wearing of masks in all indoor locations as per the current restrictions and exemptions, and these will be revisited when the province moves back to Phase 5 of the provincial reopening plan.

Physical Distancing

Physical distancing of 1 metre, as per the Post Secondary Education sectoral framework, has been required on campus whenever possible, including both indoors and outdoors. Masks must be worn whenever a distance of

1m cannot be maintained. All members of the community are required to always respect physical distancing. For the Winter Term, Acadia will continue its current physical distancing restrictions.

Contact Tracing

Acadia follows provincial guidelines regarding contact tracing. That said, on balance, the relationship created by Acadia's OH nurse along with RA's and Residence Life Staff, supported by members of the Safety and Security team has enabled an excellent dialogue on and off campus. This dialogue encourages robust sharing of information and has enhanced both Acadia's surveillance efforts and our ability to react quickly when a potential threat arises.

For the Winter Term, Acadia will continue with its proactive approach to contact tracing and associated isolation and quarantine measures. This approach has served us well both in preventing COVID in our community, and during the recent provincial outbreak in preventing spread and keeping cases to a minimum. We will continue to work with Public Health as the directives regarding personal responsibility for contact tracing evolve.

Enhanced Cleaning

Acadia continues to provide enhanced cleaning of facilities, though science has proven that hand-to-hand transmission is not as high as was thought during earlier phases of the pandemic. Acadia continues to provide access to hand sanitizer through dispensers and promotes regular hand washing and cleaning of surfaces.

Ventilation

Appropriate measures have been taken to ensure maximum fresh air exchange is maintained in public areas and teaching spaces. Acadia will continue our current approach and monitor air quality and ventilation on an ongoing basis and take action as and when required.

Student Pledge

The student pledge was a very valuable tool in the 2021 academic year and the 2021 Fall Term. However, it was not used to provide a statistical analysis of the epidemiology of our student community. Now that we have an effective way of providing proof of vaccination

(POV), we can use the Student Pledge both to reinforce our messaging about the need to be vaccinated, tested, and follow the university public health rules, and to determine the vaccination status of the community.

For the Winter Term, Acadia will be making completion of the Student Pledge mandatory for all registered students. This will provide us with a census of the entire student population and allow us to know the exact nature of the epidemiology of the campus community. All members of the Acadia student community will be required to abide by the pledge to follow the public health rules, procedures, and directives at all times, including following community public health policies when they are off campus (note that Acadia's revised student code of conduct provides for potential disciplinary action for inappropriate off-campus behaviour). Furthermore, all students stating that they are fully or partially vaccinated (Option A) will be required to upload their POV to confirm their vaccination status, and students who are not fully vaccinated (Option C) will be required to attend the on-campus, in-person rapid testing clinics twice a week and provide proof of testing to the university; unvaccinated students will be allowed to apply for an exemption based upon valid medical/health reasons, which will be determined by the university.

Students not following the requirements will have their registration suspended pending compliance and could potentially be deregistered from the university entirely.

All students will be required to complete the Student Pledge by January 14, 2022.

General Public Access to Campus

As of December 14, access to campus for the public has once again been restricted, including the athletics complex and chapel (the Harriet Irving Botanical Gardens and woodland trails remain accessible) and all university-sponsored events have been postponed, canceled, or moved online. Externally organized events that rent Acadia space (such as the Festival Theatre or Convocation Hall) have continued to be allowed at the discretion and risk of the event organizers.

For the Winter Term, Acadia will continue our current approach towards public access on campus. The

precautionary approach being taken will be continued as long as is deemed necessary to protect the health of our community, and Acadia reserves the right to maintain restrictions on campus that may exceed those in place off campus and for the province in general.

Employee Health and Wellness

All employees will return to work on campus (unless they have a university approved work-from-home agreement in place) but the university anticipates greater levels of infection and potential absenteeism due to the transmissibility of the *Omicron* variant. With the new directive from public health for Nova Scotians to be more self-reliant when dealing with symptoms and even when they test positive, employees with any symptoms will be assuming they have COVID and will want to stay away from campus. This may be the case for some time if the current wave persists. As a pro-active measure, we need to adapt to allow people to work from home when they are mildly symptomatic but fully capable of working.

For the start of the Winter Term, Acadia will monitor the state of the pandemic to determine if increased flexibility in work from home allowances are necessary in order to protect the health and safety of employees and the campus community, and at the same time deliver the services that are required to support the operations of the university and our students.

Start of Winter Term

For the Winter Term, Acadia will bring students back into residence as originally planned commencing January 6, 2022 (with the exception of incoming international students who will be arriving earlier in order to complete their quarantine period and some domestic students whose travel arrangements require them to return earlier) and the first two weeks of classes will be delivered online, with in-person classes starting on Monday, January 24. This decision was made in consultation with Senate Executive and the COVID Planning Task Force.

If the pandemic permits, a decision could be made in early January to allow in-person classes and or sections (such as labs) to start earlier where feasible. This will give professors certainty to plan for online classes in weeks 1 and 2 and Management time to assess the severity of the pandemic situation after the New Year.

If the situation requires, the period of online delivery may be extended beyond the January 24 date in consultation with Senate which meets on January 10, 2022.

Concluding Comments

In many ways the COVID virus appears to be mutating in the right direction with the *Omicron* variant (based on existing evidence which may change with time) being more transmissible but less severe as an illness. Being highly transmissible (about 3.5 times more than Delta) it has the disadvantage of infecting more people more quickly, but the advantage of quickly pushing the more dangerous Delta variant out of the picture. It also has the advantage of creating less impact on the public health system due to fewer severe cases and lower rates of hospitalization, ICU cases, and death. In this sense, *Omicron* is a game changer which has resulted in NS Public Health shifting its focus from managing the infection to managing the illness. This is a major policy change away from “zero tolerance” of the presence of COVID, to accepting levels of COVID in our communities and only addressing the cases of more severe illness and protecting the most vulnerable populations.

Acadia, and indeed all universities, are adapting to this new paradigm but very carefully as we continue to get more data and information about the actual health impacts of *Omicron*, not to mention what the next variant will be like. Because of our multi-layered and comprehensive approach, which has been tested by reality over the past four months, Acadia is well placed to adapt to this new situation which accepts that COVID will be amongst us, requires everyone to be on their guard as they take more personal responsibility for managing their own health and safety, and will be more reliant on the suite of public health measures necessary to manage, control, and contain the health impacts on the community.

This is part of the process of the virus moving from pandemic to endemic state, and these new measures will help to ensure that we are able to maintain Acadia's health and safety record that has been so successful in the previous stages of the pandemic.