

Oct. 18, 2022

On Oct. 4, the administration of Memorial University announced that the mask mandate in classrooms and labs was ending, effective immediately. Neither MUNFA nor MUNSU were consulted on this decision, despite the obvious interest both groups have in changes to university policies that affect our members' health and safety. Students have raised serious concerns with MUNSU, as well, about the fact that this announcement was delivered in the middle of the final day for students to receive any financial reimbursement for dropped courses.

Among the administration's stated reasons for dropping the mandate are that doing so "aligns with guidance from Public Health" and that federal travel-related restrictions will soon come to an end as well. However, the university failed to cite any locally specific data about case levels; wastewater testing; or air quality in campus rooms, any or all of which could provide insight into the level of risk involved in ending the mask mandate. The university says that it has conducted a ventilation assessment, but MUNFA had to file an access to information request to get even [somewhat detailed information](#); it is still unclear what the air quality is in classrooms while they are in use. There also remains very little information about the availability of the bivalent COVID-19 vaccine on campus, despite the fact that all adults over the age of 18 are now eligible to receive it.

It is troubling, as well, to see the university administration refer to wearing a mask as a "personal decision" — this framing undermines the necessity, not choice, of masking for many people as well as the social protection provided by widespread masking. We know that COVID is an airborne disease, and we know that it is still present in our community. Failing to provide classrooms with clean air (and the information to allow workers and students to feel comfortable that this is the case) and to ask people present on campus to wear a mask is a rejection of well-established scientific understandings of how COVID spreads. It leaves medically vulnerable community members with an impossible choice, between their safety and their need to participate in university activities. For faculty, this raises the question of how to fulfill their contractual duties. For students, this presents the possibility of falling behind in or even being forced to drop out of school.

MUNFA and MUNSU are dismayed by the university's decision to place this choice in front of its students and workers. Students and workers planned for this semester with the expectation that masks would be required at the very least in classrooms and labs. We call on the university's administration to display the civic leadership expected of an institution like MUNL; to put the safety and well-being of students and workers first; to extending the deadline for receiving reimbursement for dropped courses; and to commit to providing clear, evidence-backed reasons for its decisions.

If students require any assistance in acquiring accommodations for the Fall semester please contact your Director of Advocacy, Jawad Chowdhury, at advocacy@munsu.ca. MUNFA members can reach out to munfa@mun.ca with comments or concerns.

