May 28, 2021

To: The Board of Trustees, Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning; Governor Tate Reeves; Lieutenant Governor Delbert Hosemann; Speaker Philip Gunn, Mississippi House of Representatives; and Thomas E. Dobbs, III, State Health Officer, Mississippi State Department of Health[1]

We, the undersigned, request that the Board of Trustees of the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning[2] adopt a COVID-19 immunization requirement for all students returning to Mississippi public universities and college campuses in the Fall 2021.

We recognize that, at this time, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has granted Emergency Use Authorization for the available vaccines and that this may present challenges for an immunization requirement. However, leaders of other universities and colleges have announced plans to require COVID-19 immunization, conditional on the FDA granting full approval to vaccines. To date, as reported by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1,060 campuses and counting, including 487 public universities, have issued vaccination requirements for students and/or employees.[3] Such a measure is essential to protect the health and safety of all members of university communities (and their home counties), especially those who cannot receive a vaccine for medical reasons or who are immunocompromised (for whom the vaccine may be less effective).

Mississippi currently ranks 50th in the nation for the percentage of adults fully vaccinated against COVID-19 (28% as of May 27, 2021). Institutions of Higher Learning have a crucial leadership role to play in raising the vaccination rate to help our state and nation move toward herd immunity. While misinformation about the COVID-19 vaccine and other mitigation strategies have unfortunately spread in the United States and elsewhere, our institutions of higher learning and research ought to remain committed to decision-making that reflects and supports scientific knowledge. At the state level, Mississippi has set a precedent for such national leadership in the fight against infectious disease. For example, due to our rigorous K-12 childhood immunization program, our state leaders have ensured that over 99% of our school children are up-to-date on vaccines by Kindergarten. The success of this public health initiative is clear; there have been no reported cases of measles in Mississippi since 1992, "due to one of the highest immunization rates in the country." Furthermore, Universities in Mississippi already require immunization against infectious disease such as Measles/Rubella. Extending these requirements to COVID-19 immunization for those attending public universities and colleges, a requirement that would include any existing and/or appropriate exemptions, would help protect all members of our academic communities and help us return safely to in-person instruction while setting an example for all Mississippians and the nation.

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[1] At the request of signatories, our legislators and Dr. Dobbs were added to the addressees (5/29/21).
[2] In light of new information from IHL reported in *Mississippi Today* on July 2, 2021, we also urge individual College and University Administrators to act in the event that IHL does not (7/7/2021).
[3] This figure will be updated periodically to reflect the latest count.

Finally, until such immunization requirements are put in place, we request that the IHL and administrators review recent decisions to relax the face covering and social distancing requirements on some campuses. Given that, at the time of writing, only about 28% of Mississippi residents are fully vaccinated, this relaxation of precautions subjects our staff, faculty, students, and administrators to unnecessary risk. We must protect all members of the university community, especially those who cannot be vaccinated due to medical conditions and/or are immunocompromised. To protect our university communities, and to play a responsible leadership role, we thus request that university policies continue to implement all masking and social distancing guidelines until the majority of our population is fully immunized.

We ask that the public institutions of our state join science-driven, public health-oriented universities and colleges that are acting in the interest of national health.

James Chamberlain, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Mississippi State University
Andrea Spain, Associate Professor, Department of English, Mississippi State University
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