Return to **McMaster**

Oversight Committee Final Report

May 2021

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Acknowledgements from the Provost

2020/2021 has been one of the most uniquely challenging years on record at McMaster—our students adjusted to virtual learning, our instructors transitioned to remote teaching, our staff set up offices at home or continued to work on-site with new precautions and our researchers found innovative ways to continue impactful work. We all faced individual hardships and collectively grieved the loss of loved ones, opportunities and milestones. We deeply missed each other and our campus.

This past year has also been indelibly marked by the commitment, dedication and resilience of our community. We built new ways of working and connecting, collaborated across disciplines and departments, offered help when others were struggling and learned to be more vulnerable with each other. These lessons will not be lost as we move forward, and while we cannot know exactly how the pandemic will progress, we do know there will be brighter days ahead. Fall 2021 will not look quite like the fall terms we enjoyed before the pandemic. But we are optimistic that it will look very different from the year already behind us and that, while being mindful of potential paths the pandemic could take, there will be fewer restrictions required for Winter 2022.

Health and safety continue to be the top priorities in all of our back to campus planning, and I look forward to sharing more details with you as the pandemic evolves and decisions are made over the coming weeks and months. We are committed to excellence in everything we do and we are especially focused on delivering our core mission of high-quality teaching, research and student experiences.

I would like to sincerely thank everyone involved in the planning for our Return to McMaster, including the students, staff, faculty, researchers and external partners who participated in the committees and the over 2000 individuals who took time to provide their feedback through our consultation process. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the countless McMaster community members planning diligently behind the scenes in an ever-shifting landscape of unknowns. And finally, thank you to the entire McMaster community for your patience, flexibility and empathy as we work towards coming back together for meaningful experiences this fall. Whenever it is safe, we can't wait to see you again.

Sincerely,

Susan L. Tighe
Provost and Vice-President (Academic)
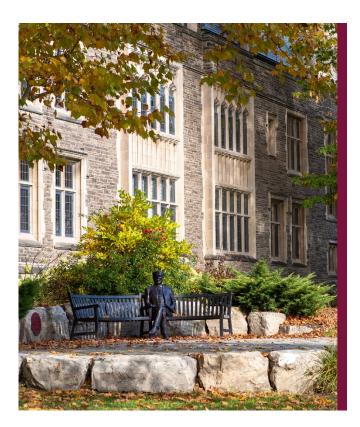
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Introduction

COVID-19 brought immediate changes to our lives with impacts on the entire McMaster community. This includes how we work, how we teach and learn, how we conduct research and how we operate as an institution. As we start to think about the transition to a post-pandemic world, we need to plan for a future with many unknowns. How does McMaster ensure excellence in the experience we offer students, deliver high quality teaching, advance research and enable an exceptional experience for all those who work at the university and contribute to its success?

As we look towards the fall of 2021, and the expected gradual return to campus as the community receives vaccinations and the pandemic eases, it is important that we pause to consider the many lessons learned from remote work, teaching and research over the past several months as well as the experience of those who remained on campus. These lessons can be both constructive and challenging and will help us reimagine the activities of the University to help create a more dynamic, supportive and resilient community.

This report summarizes the work completed by the Return to McMaster Group, and outlines key recommendations for University planning for Fall 2021 and beyond. It is still too early to predict exactly what the fall will look like, but these recommendations will contribute tremendously to our ability to have a safe and supportive campus for students, faculty, staff and researchers.

While it is impossible to know exactly how the pandemic will evolve, we are looking forward to September with tremendous optimism that much of our vibrant on-campus experience will be able to safely resume.

- Provost Susan L. Tighe in a recent letter to the McMaster community

Background

Provost Susan Tighe established the Return to McMaster Group in early February 2021 to bring together representatives from all areas of the University to guide our planning for the fall.

Figure 1: The Return to McMaster Group Structure

- **The Oversight Committee** includes senior academic and administrative leaders from across University departments and Faculties, students and Public Health representation. This committee provides strategic oversight and planning, developing the guiding principles and approaches for other committees as they work on scenario development.
- **The COVID-19 Expert Advisory Committee** includes McMaster researchers with expertise in the areas of protective equipment, wastewater testing, vaccine development and distribution, testing and the spread of infectious diseases, in addition to Public Health representation. This committee provides advice and state-of-the-art guidance to the Oversight Committee.
- **The Workplace and Employee Experience Working Committee** includes representatives from human resources, health and safety, administrative leaders within Faculties and administrative departments, faculty members and academic leaders. This committee will consider the needs and expectations of work activities as we plan for Fall 2021, as well as the needs of different employee groups and roles at McMaster.
- **The Teaching, Learning and Student Experience Working Committee** includes instructors from each Faculty as well as representatives from the MacPherson Institute, Student Affairs, Graduate Studies, undergraduate and graduate students and other relevant administrative units. This committee consults with students and instructors to identify teaching, learning and student experience priorities and best practices.
- **The Research and Innovation Working Committee** includes researchers from across McMaster. This committee identifies and recommends ways to help researchers adjust to new working models or opportunities within the identified scenarios.

Each committee is guided by the health, safety and well-being of both our University community and our neighbours in the broader Hamilton area, as well as McMaster's guiding framework for planning decisions:

1. For the 2021/22 academic year, we will continue to deliver on the academic and research mission of the University, while prioritizing the health, safety and well-being of all members of our community.

2. In doing so, we will remain focused on supporting and enabling the success of our students, delivering a high-quality learning environment and overall student experience.

3. Our goal is to welcome new and returning students back to campus as soon as this can be done safely and in accordance with Public Health guidance and government protocols. Priority will be given to those programs where physical access is necessary in order to complete academic requirements and enable students to complete their courses and graduate.

4. We will maintain our focus on research excellence and on supporting the work of our researchers across all disciplines, as well as enabling and advancing our long history of creativity and innovation.

5. We will continue to uphold our core University values, principles and policies, including our focus on inclusivity, accommodation and respect for one another, and our collegial decision-making processes. Any revisions or updating of policies will continue to be developed through the University's pre-existing governance processes.

6. We will continue to make fiscally prudent decisions that support our ongoing stability and success as an institution, balancing risk with opportunity.

7. We will continue to work together as a community to support our students, faculty and staff across the University and will ensure that information, plans and decisions are communicated clearly and promptly.

What we heard

Between February and April 2021, the Return to McMaster Committees met to discuss key challenges for returning to campus, and engaged with McMaster students, staff and faculty to inform their recommendations. Engagement activities included online surveys, focus groups and conversations. This section summarizes what we heard from students, staff and faculty into key themes.

Two consistent themes emerged from all of our engagement activities with community members:

1. **Concern for personal and community safety:** We were asked questions about vaccines, testing, and what the University plans to do to keep students, staff, instructors, researchers and their loved ones safe if they are expected to return. We also heard that our community wants clear messages and guidance from the University on expectations for those returning to campus.
2. **Engagement and Communications:** Staff, faculty and students want to see ongoing opportunities for input and engagement as the pandemic and vaccine rollout continue. A need for increased direct communication to all of our audiences has been identified, with less reliance on cascading important information. Faculty and staff identified the need for a fluid approach that can be adapted, along with opportunities for open dialogue within Faculties and departments. Employees want easier access to the information they need related to fall planning and returning to work, especially when working remotely.

Students

Students miss connecting with their instructors and peers
Consistent with the findings of the Virtual Learning Taskforce, students highlighted that they miss the sense of community and interacting with instructors and peers on campus. Specifically, they missed the organic nature of running into people, approaching an instructor at the end of class or unexpected insights gained from casual conversations.

Accessibility features should remain
Students indicated that the recorded lectures, video captioning and transcripts, posting of slides and online assignment submissions were all learning features that should continue. Additionally, graduate students highlighted an interest in continuing to have access to online conferences and events, and said they appreciated being able to join meetings remotely.

Students are experiencing challenges with mental health
Students shared that they have been struggling with heightened mental health concerns throughout the pandemic. Additionally, first-years feared that they will not be able to measure up to past second-year cohorts given their unique university transition, and they anticipate difficulty in making social connections with their peers once we return to campus.

Staff and faculty

Readiness

Staff and faculty are worried about a return to campus, especially in light of the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic's progression, vaccine rollout and unknown Public Health guidelines for the Fall 2021 semester. There is a consensus that the University's priority should be supporting the student experience and research activities, and that staff and faculty presence on campus should remain limited where possible. Those who have been working onsite over the past year expressed concern about increased occupancy and hope for a gradual return to ensure appropriate measures are in place. The community clearly expressed that this point in time represents an opportunity to redefine the McMaster experience—for students and employees.

We heard that academic and staff leaders are looking to McMaster to provide guidance on how to ensure a safe working environment for those who will return in-person this fall. They noted that additional resources may be required to support the safe reintegration of staff/faculty to physical campus space. They stressed that sharing this guidance must be prioritized to provide departments with enough time to engage in this tactical planning.

Flexibility and guiding principles

The community identified flexibility as a major focus and concern. Departments and Faculties have widely varying needs and requirements related to physical space, student activity and course requirements. Staff and faculty also want flexibility to balance the ongoing ambiguity around future public health measures as well as personal responsibilities (childcare, eldercare, required quarantine, etc.). Leaders need to be empowered to make the right decisions for their teams and space, while still using a consistent and equitable framework to inform decisions on flexible work arrangements that balance operational needs. While the fall is expected to be a period of transition, how we work has changed. Flexible or hybrid working arrangements will be a part of the future of work after COVID-19 and are required to ensure the University is able to attract and retain talented staff and faculty.

Accountability

Staff and faculty want clarity on the accountabilities for decision-making at the institutional, faculty/department, and individual levels. This includes decisions on the use of shared spaces, traffic flow and cleaning, and how each of these will be budgeted. Faculty and staff also expressed concerns about how compliance to public health guidelines (e.g., screening, masking and physical distancing) will continue to be managed, especially with an increased on-campus presence. They are looking for University-wide protocols that can be applied consistently to all Faculties, departments and buildings. Staff currently working onsite reflected positively on the enhanced cleaning and safety protocols but expressed a need for a greater visible leadership presence on campus.

Required resources

We heard that staff and faculty require dedicated resources to enable a safe return to campus. A continued suite of resources such as technology for remote work, guidelines on the use of physical space and mental health supports are needed. Updated guidance documents along with new policies and procedures are required to support leaders with questions related to work arrangements, accommodations and vacation/quarantine. A renewed focus on leadership development is required to help leaders manage their team's evolving needs,

including accommodations for individual circumstances, virtual team management, expectation setting and work reprioritization to alleviate stress and workload concerns.

Recommendations for return to campus planning

McMaster University has been working in a close and collaborative partnership with Hamilton Public Health. With regards to return to campus planning, McMaster has been advised by Public Health to assume that safety measures—such as mandatory masking indoors, upholding a social distance of two meters between people who do not live in the same household and active screening using the provincial screening tool—will continue to be in place into the fall.

The recommendations presented below have been created by each of the working committees and were informed by these assumptions and engagement with the McMaster community.

Teaching, Learning and Student Experience Committee recommendations

Recommendations for teaching and learning experiences

1. We recommend that the Oversight Committee adopt the *Principles for Fall 2021 Planning* to help guide decisions for academic return to campus planning.
2. We recommend that the University continue to develop and promote models and resources for teaching online/remotely, blended course instruction, and in-person teaching and learning. We recognize that for a number of health professional education programs, some in-person learning and teaching will be required that cannot be replaced with virtual modalities.
3. We recommend that the Teaching, Learning and Student Experience Committee in collaboration with MacPherson identify best practices for blended learning to share with instructors in preparation for fall.
4. We recommend that the University invests in resources for instructors and TAs regarding best practices for teaching and learning in the online and blended environments, including instructional panels, workshops and drop-in support sessions.
5. We recommend that Faculties identify and provide additional instructional supports needed for fall.
6. We recommend that the University determine what technologies, retrofits or resources are needed for classrooms to enable blended learning and provide those resources to support instructors and instructional staff (i.e., teaching assistants) for fall teaching.
7. We recommend that wherever possible, Faculties offer instructors flexibility to determine the mode of delivery for their courses, with the exception of some specific programs—for example, professional health programs and programs with hands-on experiential learning in labs, studios and other spaces. We recommend that the University provides safe spaces, according to public health recommendations, to teach and learn on campus.
8. We recommend that the University be explicit in contracts for sessional instructors and teaching assistants on whether they are likely to take place in the remote or in-person environment for transparency.
9. We recommend that the University continues to provide opportunities for students to participate in work-integrated learning, co-op and community-engaged learning in remote modalities, where possible, and are facilitated in alignment with the expectations of the workplace and public health guidelines.

Recommendations for social spaces

1. We recommend that the University creates and updates campus protocols that are particularly attentive to the number of students gathering and ensuring that distancing protocols can be maintained. The nature of these policies would apply to casual (i.e., social) and organized gatherings (i.e., extra-curriculars, office hours, study groups). We recommend that these protocols be consistent across campus regardless of location.
2. We recommend that the University provides spaces to gather on campus both indoors and outdoors that are clean and monitored for use. In the event that new outdoor gathering spaces get created, we recommend that these spaces are maximized.
3. We recommend that the University approach for return to campus planning fosters a culture of shared accountability, trust and transparency amongst staff, students, instructors, visitors and members of the broader Hamilton community.

Recommendations for bringing students back to campus in fall

1. We recommend that Faculties commit to communicating to students by the time of enrollment what the expectations will be for in-person attendance for their specific programs so that they may make informed decisions. For any students who are unable to physically come to campus, we recommend that the University commits to providing resources and support for instructors to offer learning material and assessments remotely wherever possible, with the exception of some health professional programs where assessments must occur in-person. If an alternative mode of instruction is not possible, we recommend the Faculty collaborate with the student to determine solutions, such as course substitution or arranging for the student to take the course in a future term.
2. We recommend that the University declare the mode of assessment for Fall 2021 coursework (i.e., whether it will occur on-campus or online) and clarify whether or not on-campus experiences will be assessed. In situations where students are not able to return to campus, alternative evaluation components will need to be defined with the exception of some health professional programs where assessments must occur in-person.
3. We recommend that the University explore the types of assessments that should occur in person or online and consider the use of online proctoring tools.
4. We recommend that the University promote and create additional student resources for academic skill development and time management in preparation for September.
5. We recommend that the University explores opportunities for scheduling students in cohorts or blocks, and other creative strategies to help manage student travel to and from campus.
6. We recommend that the University provide face coverings for anyone expected to return to campus. To anticipate the communication needs of students and staff who are deaf/Deaf and hard of hearing, we recommend that instructors, staff and supervisors are provided with clear masks, and that a repository of clear masks be made available from a central campus location for additional purposes.

Recommendations beyond pandemic planning

1. We recommend that the University adopts institutional definitions for the instruction modes "virtual", "online" and "in-person" in order to reduce confusion and create consistency between the operational and pedagogical use of these terms.
2. We recommend that the Faculties reflect on what worked well in the online/virtual environment, and that online/virtual teaching and service offerings continue where it is deemed appropriate.
3. We recommend that the University encourages application of the principles of Universal Design for Learning, and that instructors continue to be encouraged to provide lecture recordings, caption their videos, and share lecture slides.
4. We recommend that the University prioritizes the development of a Digital Learning Strategy during the implementation of the Teaching and Learning Strategy.
5. We recommend that the University continues to support inclusive, equitable and accessible learning spaces online and in-person on an ongoing basis.
6. We recommend that the University continues to offer online and remote opportunities to attend meetings and events.
7. We recommend that the University recognize and value the different modes of teaching through awards and celebrations.

Recommendations for on-going communication and community-building strategies

1. We recommend that communications and messaging include a focus on community and shared accountability between students, staff and instructors for fostering a safe return to campus experience. Additionally, we recommend that the communications materials created are accessible.
2. We recommend that the University facilitates ongoing opportunities for feedback with students as decisions are being made through town halls, social media polling and other strategies.
3. We recommend that the Provost task Faculties with facilitating an ongoing dialogue with their instructors, teaching assistants and staff regarding return to campus planning.
4. We recommend that the University considers hiring student safety ambassadors to help manage movement within campus spaces, distribute masks and provide other operational supports.
5. As part of the return to campus communications, we recommend that we encourage community members to get the vaccine and that the University work in conjunction with Public Health to facilitate access to vaccination. We also recognize the importance of individual choice and recommend that the University clarify that we will not be requiring individuals to be vaccinated. We also recommend that the University develop a safe and secure reporting mechanism for individuals on campus to self-report their vaccination status to keep the campus community informed.

Workplace and Employee Experience Committee recommendations

Short-term recommendations

1. Remain focused on the health and safety of the McMaster community, using the University's existing health and safety framework and institution-wide decisions that follow federal, provincial and local Public Health guidance.
    a. Continue reinforcement and updating of existing guidelines, supervisor guidance documents and physical space requirements that adhere to Public Health guidelines.
    b. Supervisors continue to update and/or create standard operating procedures and communicate expectations with their teams.
    c. Leverage our Joint Health and Safety Committees (JHSC) as well as our University health & safety professionals to support teams and departments as needed.
2. Provide a framework to outline institutional accountabilities vs. Faculty/department decisions with opportunities to review and update each term or as-needed based on changes to provincial guidelines. Frameworks to be updated to include compliance requirements and levels of authority needed for topics below:
    a. Capacity limits in physical spaces and social distancing requirements in individual work areas.
    b. Use and cleaning of shared spaces, classrooms, offices and research labs, and in areas where individuals have tested positive.
    c. Traffic flow/crowd control.
    d. Face covering requirements for all indoor spaces, as well as eye protection requirements where appropriate.
    e. Academic testing and assessment spaces and protocols.
    f. Changes to faculty, staff and student parking.
    g. Screening protocols and tools.
    h. Supporting staff and students with easy access to testing and vaccinations.
    i. Workspace modifications where required.
    j. Clarify financial responsibility for these additional measures.
3. Policy and procedure development and updates:
    a. Remote and/or Flexible Work guidelines, which should include clarity on transitioning to in-person activities as well as reference to home office set up. These materials should also help staff and faculty understand the evolving nature of the workplace and the needs of the University, and encourage ongoing review.
    b. Accommodation guidelines.
    c. Vacation guidance (including travel implications, quarantine requirements, etc.).
    d. Clear definitions of hybrid teaching/work, accessibility and in-person student services.
    e. Parking agreements/policies to support various flexible working arrangements.
    f. Reinforce current process to address health and safety concerns.

g. Some nuances will need to be identified for various employee groups or work locations. Noting our ongoing commitment to inclusive and service excellence, the differing impacts of COVID-19 on our staff and faculty must be recognized. Return to campus plans should be developed with a view to addressing issues of accessibility, equity and inclusion. Continued engagement with employees and various expert groups within our community on these matters is encouraged.

4. Design and implement a decision framework for leaders to support workplace planning, resource allocation and working arrangements that balance the needs of students, researchers, faculty and staff. Provide information sessions to assist leaders with this tool.

5. Plan to formally announce the areas and departments that are expected to continue working remotely in fall to enable us to focus on the health and safety of those on campus. These decisions should be made at the Dean or AVP level—no later than July 1st—to provide as much notice as possible to employees.

6. Update the Supervisor's Guide to manage evolving workplace and employee needs; support continued flexibility and sensitivity to individual circumstances; and place a heightened focus on the wellness and mental health of current and future employees.

   a. Promote current health and well-being resources and leverage the work of the McMaster Okanagan Mental Health and Well-Being Task Force, employee resource groups and other equity support networks to ensure employee mental health is appropriately considered and supported.

   b. Consider opportunities to redefine the blurred lines between work and home—encourage use of vacation time, limit evening use of email, agree to meeting-free times, etc.

7. A commitment to continue virtual/online meeting format for administrative meetings to ensure on-campus resources (physical space) can be allocated to in-person learning or research activities.

   a. Consider a centralized, public calendar or communication of key meeting dates/times for advance planning across all Faculties/departments for significant events across the organization (board/committee meetings, etc.).

   b. Communicate an in-person meeting protocol to ensure those who need to can meet and collaborate when safe to do so.

   c. Continue to follow risk-informed decision-making processes on international travel for meetings or conferences while taking into consideration Government of Canada travel advisories.

8. Provide forums for cross-Faculty/department learning and collaboration, specific to remote work learnings.

9. Enhance staff and faculty communications to focus on community-building and connection, including:

   a. Regular University-wide town halls led by President and Vice-President leaders.

   b. Central online location for all information, tools and documents related to "Return to McMaster".

   c. Regular email updates sent to the entire University community.

   d. A variety of communication mediums to reach individuals in different work environments.

   e. Review of campus email lists to ensure access to all employee groups. Develop guidelines to appropriately use these lists.

   f. Use videos to share information on safety protocols in place.

   g. Encourage Faculties and departments to share videos of various work areas to help staff and faculty know what to expect when they return to campus.

10. Care should be taken to ensure faculty and staff have ample time to plan for the fall.
    a. Supervisors to help re-align workload for those assigned to planning for return to campus activities in each Faculty/department, and ensure these individuals have appropriate resources and capacity to manage work required. Consider re-balancing priorities across teams or dedicate an individual(s) to planning for the complexities of the transition back to campus or new team working arrangements.
    b. It is recommended that many of the activities above be well coordinated across the University due to the anticipated amount of change, and to ensure required services and supports are accessible for individuals working remotely and onsite. Each of these activities should continue to be monitored and evaluated on an on-going basis. Therefore, the Return to McMaster Group and working committees should remain in place to support recommendations' implementation, ongoing evaluation and sustainment of best practices.

Medium-term recommendations

1. Design and implement workshops and mentoring programs to focus on emerging leadership competencies:
   a. Managing a diverse workforce
   b. Virtual relationship building
   c. Workload management and prioritization
   d. Resilience and adaptability
3. Consider opportunities to retrofit meeting rooms to enable individuals to join and effectively collaborate both remotely and in-person.
4. Conduct an annual University-wide follow-up feedback form and/or focus groups to evaluate working arrangements, comfort levels, mental health, current working environments and any equity barriers to remote work.
5. Share aggregate feedback collected with Faculties and departments to inform decisions and future planning.

Long-term recommendations

1. Review and update developed frameworks, guidance documents and policies to reflect evolving needs of departments and Faculties as well as Public Health requirements.
2. Evaluation and prioritization of physical space and work areas to determine best use and value to McMaster staff/faculty and consider repurposing for other uses.
   a. Competitive talent landscape highlights the need to consider employee expectations of physical space and work environment.
   b. If existing work environments do not enhance productivity or employee experience, consider reconfiguration or reallocation based on working arrangements, preferences, etc.
3. Adapt some physical workspaces to support/enhance collaboration, innovation and flexibility.
   a. Shift some traditional office space to a more team-focused environment to promote communication, creativity and flexibility for employees.

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      b. Determine what technology or physical modifications are required to ensure workspaces enable blended working arrangements, and address equity barriers to remote work.

      c. Managers and leaders to consider scheduling required for shared spaces.

4. Consider new employment models and evaluate remote work opportunities to ensure McMaster is well-positioned as a global leader to retain and attract diverse talent based on labour market trends and expectations.

Research and Innovation Committee recommendations

Immediate to short-term recommendations (April to August/September 2021)

1. Revisit criteria for Human Participant research, particularly restrictions for elderly populations now that many have been or soon will be vaccinated. These original (Phase 1 and 2) restrictions were made based on threats to the healthcare system and risks to groups that were considered among the most vulnerable population; these threats/risks should be reduced with full vaccine roll out.

2. Revisit criteria for fieldwork, particularly restrictions that limit shared vehicle travel and accommodations, while maintaining a high level of safety. This is a significant impediment for field research, resulting in the cancellation of many projects. Having field courses and projects blocked for two years in a row is highly problematic.

3. Seek advice from McMaster experts on protective equipment/measures to eliminate risks to allow for cohort travel for fieldwork and on-campus research.

4. Identify common spaces that can be used by research teams to increase research productivity through innovative brainstorming, while respecting social distancing guidelines.

      a. Consider indoor space that is not centrally controlled, i.e., Deans' Board Rooms, a floor or several rooms in MUSC.

      b. Consider outdoor space that allows researchers and their teams to congregate to brainstorm.

      c. Add these spaces to the approval system within the portal and dashboard to ensure capacity standards are met.

Next steps

The context and recommendations in this report are intended to provide overarching guidance to units, departments and Faculties to inform their planning for the Fall 2021, and later the Winter 2022, semesters. We recognize, however, that there is still much work to be done to determine the details around how we will safely and gradually bring our campus community back to McMaster.

Using this report's recommendations as a foundation, the Return to McMaster group and other key University planning committees will be examining, among other topics:

- Vaccination and testing on campus
- Space design, use and capacity
- Parking and transportation
- Food service and eating on campus
- Student services and student life activities
- Workplace best practices

These details will be released throughout the spring and summer 2021 as they are developed. Given the dynamic nature of the pandemic, we are focused on making decisions that are as flexible as possible while also balancing the need for more concrete plans. Though we're optimistic that Ontario's stay-at-home order will lift well before the fall, we're also planning with the flexibility to reduce in-person activity if necessary to accommodate Public Health measures.

McMaster's COVID-19 website will be the hub for the most up-to-date information on our COVID-19 response and Return to McMaster planning. Many other forms of communications to the community will also be rolled out throughout the spring and summer as further decisions are announced.

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