



We Are Back!

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I haven't written a blog post for a long time. Call it COVID malaise, or something. This seems like the right time to begin again.

Tomorrow marks our return to the Knapp-Sanders building. Not our return to work. Everyone has been working incredibly hard during the pandemic, and some of our colleagues never stopped working in the building. In fact, we have been working harder, and under more challenging conditions, than at any time in our history. Faculty and staff have done an amazing job, and we have had our most productive year in terms of reaching public officials.

I have often said that our mission generally has not changed from our earliest days as the Institute of Government. Albert Coates would readily recognize our mission as his original mission. Not surprisingly, he also would notice that how we carry out that mission has changed in dramatic ways. That change accelerated this past year as we shifted to remote work and remote learning. Faculty and staff have been flexible, creative, and resilient in responding to the changing circumstances of the pandemic. Importantly, you have been respectful and supportive of one another during this stressful time. We have cared for one another as One School, and that has



allowed us to thrive.

We need to continue being respectful and supportive of one another. We need to continue caring for one another. In that way, nothing has changed.



In our private lives we have very different experiences and comfort levels in how we interact with other people around COVID. In recent weeks I have rarely encountered anyone wearing a mask where I have been living in Montgomery County. In the [Donut Dinette](#), the grocery store or the ABC store—where I have been doing my level best to keep the economy moving throughout the pandemic. The same was true a few weeks ago in Wilmington at the city and county managers conference. Last week at Wrightsville Beach I didn't see anyone wearing masks in restaurants or in [Boombalatti's ice cream store](#). (By the way, I highly recommend a hot fudge sundae with coconut ice cream. It is so good, and it will make everything seem better.)

Right or wrong, I have transitioned to not wearing a mask in my private life. I will wear a mask when I return to our building, however. A good talk with Aimee helped to clarify my thinking on the whole mask issue in returning to Knapp-Sanders. She's very good by the way, and not just about masks.

The campus policy requires masks in University buildings under most circumstances, and I intend to follow the policy. I don't completely agree with it, and frankly that doesn't matter. I need to recognize that not everyone is where I am in terms of their comfort in being around other people, and that's true even if they are vaccinated. Frankly that's probably true for some people even if everyone is vaccinated and wearing masks. I don't feel confident in my own assessment about



the risk of COVID. The pandemic has highlighted how differently each of us thinks about risk. We have spent more than a year conditioning people that masks are important, and so it is understandable if not everyone can just flip a switch and be comfortable without masks.



We need to continue bringing grace and patience to our interactions with our colleagues. Throughout the pandemic we have succeeded because we have focused on supporting one another. There already have been questions about how to interpret the campus policy on wearing masks and its exceptions. We will work through them together, and we will use our best judgment to come up with answers. We also will adjust as the campus inevitably changes the policy throughout the semester. There will be challenges with our clients, and we will work through those too. We need to support one another, not judge one another, and trust that everyone is doing their best.

A lot of it boils down to simple courtesy. It is better not to make assumptions about a person's preferences. All of us need to get used to asking people in respectful ways if they are comfortable. This strikes me as a good habit as we work to become an even more inclusive environment for everyone across many different issues. If all it takes is wearing a mask to make some of our colleagues feel comfortable and supported, let's wear masks.