Dear Badger community,

These past three weeks have been heavy with pain and struggle for our community, especially those who identify as Black or BIPOC. As I mentioned in late May, our students, faculty and staff have a storied history of confronting injustices and leading the drive for necessary change. As a university we will remain engaged in the dialogue around the Black Lives Matter movement, racial equity, and justice and are committed to being part of the solution.

But the past three months have been difficult for other reasons, as well, with many people feeling isolated and anxious amid a global pandemic. It is against this backdrop that I come to you today with some brighter news. After much deliberation and input from public health experts and all corners of campus, we can announce our plans to welcome students back to campus this fall as scheduled on Sept. 2, with many modifications to protect the health and safety of our campus community. We intend to offer our full curriculum, with many of our courses delivered in person until the Thanksgiving recess.

For a full description of our plans as they currently exist, please see our “Smart Restart” website. This memo summarizes only some of these plans that are likely to be of broad interest; I encourage everybody to read through the parts of this website relevant to you. The website will be updated frequently as our plans evolve, so I encourage you to visit it regularly. In particular, more information will be coming soon for graduate, professional and international students.

After Thanksgiving, we will switch to a virtual format for all courses for the fall semester’s final nine days of instruction plus exams. This was a particularly difficult decision, as we recognize the strong desire to return to something close to normal. We believe this is the prudent choice given the likelihood that students leaving and returning to Madison over the Thanksgiving recess would increase the risk for infections on our campus. Those who cannot easily go home or who cannot study or work remotely at home will be able to stay in Madison and complete their fall semester work here.
COVID-19 remains an acute global threat, one we will continue to take extremely seriously as we work to protect our students, faculty and staff. The health and safety steps we are announcing today are rigorous, thorough and backed by science. We believe they will go far in minimizing the risk to our campus community while allowing our students to return to many of the traditions and experiences that make a Badger education so valued.

Testing is key to identifying infection and preventing it from spreading, and we will follow a three-part testing plan. First, there will be drop-in testing centers on campus, which will be free and available to anyone in the campus community. Second, we will be doing surveillance testing of the entire campus. This means that some will be asked to voluntarily join cohorts that will be tested on a regular basis to monitor whether the virus is spreading. Third, there will be targeted testing for certain groups for whom we have a special duty of care. For instance, all students and staff in the residence halls will be tested regularly.

For students living on campus who test positive or may have been exposed to the virus, we will provide dedicated rooms with private bathrooms for quarantining or self-isolation. The university will employ contact tracers trained in conjunction with Public Health Madison & Dane County to help identify those who may have come into contact with anyone testing positive on the UW–Madison campus.

Testing, while essential, is just one piece of keeping everyone safe. We will require everyone on campus to adhere to strict guidelines. This includes asking people to wear face coverings whenever they are in public inside spaces. It also includes physical distancing, hand-washing, and monitoring for coronavirus symptoms. The Badger community has always looked out for each other. This fall, we will be asking for even greater levels of cooperation, care and thoughtfulness in our campus interactions. This past spring, I saw how our students and staff approached every challenge with grace, strength and resilience. I am confident we will rise to these new challenges, too.

Instruction will be different as well. Many classes and discussion sections will be in person, but in larger classrooms than in the past to allow us to provide physical distancing between students. Because we have somewhat fewer larger classrooms on campus, students and faculty can expect changes to class schedules so we can ensure that classes are held in classrooms that allow for physical distancing. This may mean some classes need to take place in the evening or even on a Saturday. We will require all students to wear face coverings during class and we will have cleaning supplies for people to use in the classroom.

Larger class lectures (all those with more than 100 students and some with enrollments between 50 and 100) will be held online to ensure the safety of students and faculty, though we will still try to support small discussion/problem-set sessions in person for those students able to attend. Of course, some students will be unable or unwilling to be on campus this fall. We will provide selected courses in every undergraduate major in a distance format to help these students make progress toward their degrees.

Every effort will also be made to address program needs at the graduate and professional school level. However, the curriculum in some professional school programs may require hands-on training that simply cannot be converted to a virtual format. Students should work with their program coordinators to address individual concerns.

We intend to operate all of our residence halls in the fall, though with enhanced safety protocols for shared spaces and an overall reduction in density. Most rooms will have two
residents. Dining facilities will operate differently, with more grab-and-go food options and more distanced tables.

Similarly, we expect offices to be open and many employees to be back on campus but we will be operating in different ways. Workspaces will be rearranged to ensure physical distancing, there will be regular cleaning of workspaces, and there will be more use of telework and staggered hours to reduce the number of employees in shared workspaces.

I know that today’s announcement leaves a number of questions unanswered. I assure you we are working hard to implement all of these changes and address the unanswered questions. I ask for your continued patience and flexibility as we negotiate new terrain. My pledge to you is that we will continue to make decisions based on the best available information and as transparently as possible while keeping the health and safety of the Badger community our top priority. As more details are developed, we will share them in the coming weeks. If you have a specific question, please email us at askbucky@uwmad.wisc.edu or call Campus and Visitor Relations at 608-263-2400.

Finally, let me end on a note of personal gratitude. The upheaval caused by COVID-19 has been hard on everyone, from students and their families to our faculty and staff. We want everything to return to normal, but as this memo indicates, things will be different in this coming year. I appreciate your commitment to our university community and to the behaviors that will help keep people healthy. We will get through this strange time, and we may even learn some things that create new opportunities for the campus. I continue to look ahead with great optimism and enthusiasm.

Thank you, and On, Wisconsin!