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UVI Facing 'Major Loss' as Vaccine Mandate Deadline Arrives With Most Students and 137 Employees Out of Compliance

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UVI's Albert A. Sheen Campus entrance on St. Croix By. VI CONSORTIUM

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As of Wednesday, of the 2,000 students receiving their higher education at the University of the Virgin Islands, only 418 had either received the first or second dose of a Covid-19 vaccine as mandated by the university, with another thirty-eight students out of approximately sixty-seven requests receiving exemptions because of medical reasons.

The grim numbers place the university in a difficult spot. Its board made the controversial decision to mandate Covid-19 vaccination for all students and staff on June 19, and has since been fielding swift backlash from almost all corners. It also appears the university knew that it would be faced with pushback. When it first issued a release of the June 19 board meeting, the university made no mention of the controversial decision; the announcement came [almost two weeks later](#).

But the sting of losing a majority of its students if the mandate holds was not the only bad news for UVI. The institution was set to lose roughly 137 of its 550 employees, or 25 percent who as of Monday had decided not to take a Covid-19 vaccine.

The numbers were provided to the Consortium between Monday and Wednesday by UVI President Dr. David Hall and the institution's public relations arm, respectively. The contentious policy has no leeway. If students choose not to get vaccinated and are denied exemption on religious or medical grounds, they must find "other means", which Mr. Hall clarified Thursday afternoon were UVI online options, or another university to complete their education. The selfsame scenario goes for staff.

The deadline for students to get vaccinated was Monday; staff received a two-week extension, which was set to end by next week.

During an interview Monday with Mr. Hall, the president held steadfast to and defended the board's June 19 decision.

"The reason for the mandatory vaccination is that scientific evidence, leading experts, national and local data indicate that vaccinations are the safest path to taking care of people," Mr. Hall said. "Yes, mask wearing, periodic testing has its benefits, and when there was no vaccine that's what we used at the university... But the reality is all of those things are very, very vulnerable because you can test me today but I can tomorrow contract Covid and unless you're going to test me tomorrow, then I'm going to sit in a class with twenty individuals and I am passing that on to all twenty of those individuals. Even if I'm wearing a mask it still can be contracted, and so what the board wanted to do, again based on hard evidence and science, was to create a system that was the safest."

He then reminded that patients at the territory's hospitals as well as those who have died from Covid-related causes were unvaccinated. Mr. Hall also pointed to the mainland, where hospitalizations and deaths have been higher in states where vaccination rates are lower. "All of that influenced the board to say let's do the safest thing, let's do the most scientifically valid thing than trying to appease more people but yet making everybody still vulnerable," he said.

The UVI president said he was hoping that more employees would choose to comply with the mandatory vaccination policy. "The thing I can say is that there are more people vaccinated because of the mandate than there would have been otherwise," he added.

Mr. Hall, who on August 1 marked his 12th year as president of the institution, conceded that the policy could result in a loss for the university.

"We lose and they lose. There will probably be employees who will no longer be with us. I am not happy about that... I'm sure I will look at that [employees] list and there will be some very valuable people who we're going to lose. But if you have a principle, and you have a policy and you believe it's the right thing, then you have to accept the fact that you pay a price for that belief," Mr. Hall said.

He added that if the percentage remains at 75 percent vaccinated for employees or goes up to 80 percent, "then yes, 20 percent of our workforce is a major loss, but we can't stop the university from operating or we can't abandon the principle because of that, because therefore it's like saying we just give up — it doesn't matter that people are being hospitalized and that they are dying because they are not vaccinated."

He added, "Free will is an important value, but when you are a part of a community, we all put limits on our free will for the greater good. I'd like to drive 100 miles an hour because that's my free will, but none of us would say, 'that's acceptable, Dr. Hall,' because you are endangering the lives of all the other people who are driving 20 miles an hour. And I could give example after example where we forego our unlimited free will because we are a part of a community and we need to do what is in the best interest of the whole, not just what's my best interest."

UVI students on Monday on St. Croix and St. Thomas [held protests](#) against the mandatory vaccine policy. Students have contended that they should be given a choice to either vaccinate or test weekly. Their reasons for shunning vaccination vary; some said they needed more time before they could fully trust the available vaccines, and others didn't necessarily believe the vaccines were safe. Others, still, simply wanted to maintain their ability to choose.

Asked whether the university would reconsider the mandatory vaccine policy, Mr. Hall said he could not speak on the board's behalf, but said his personal opinion is that UVI should stay the current course. On the students, he stated, "I am hoping that they will become enlightened and I am hoping they will comply, and if they don't then they will have to resort to attaining their education through some of those other means."

Giving an indication on the board's thinking, Mr. Hall said since the decision to mandate Covid-19 vaccination, the board has met with the group of students who have been organizing against the policy, as well as with UVI's staff council which proposed a resolution asking the board to change the policy. However, after hearing the arguments from both groups the board did not change its position, he said. Mr. Hall added that while those events took place some weeks ago, "I don't foresee the board changing its position but that's just my opinion — that's not speaking on behalf of the board."

The majority student population at UVI is of the age range that is most likely to recover from Covid-19. However, the university's staff is more vulnerable. The Consortium did not receive vaccination percentage details from UVI for its staff prior to the mandate, however, Mr. Hall said the numbers were increased as a result of it. Part of the thinking that led to the mandatory vaccine policy was the staff's vulnerability, he said, though other options were considered during an hourlong discussion that included an epidemiologist as well as data from universities around the country and local statistics from the V.I. Dept. of Health.

"We have a staff population that is made up of individuals of every age range and who have all sorts of underlying illnesses just like the general population," Mr. Hall said. "And this 75 percent of people complying is a product of the mandate — that's not what the number was before the mandate. So you got a large percentage of our staff and faculty who would have been unvaccinated, who would have had underlying health conditions, etc., and now we're saying to them we want you to teach and we want you to engage with students who for the large part are not going to be vaccinated. That vulnerability is a great one."

He added, "I'm saying this for the record, I would prefer losing 20 percent of my staff than having 20 percent of them die, or having 5 percent of them die, or having 1 percent of them die because

of Covid, and that's what we're dealing with here, folks."

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