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Dr. Hall: No Crisis at UVI; Students May Choose Online Courses if They Refuse Vaccination

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Aerial view of UVI's Albert A. Sheen Campus on St. Croix By. Ohana Photography

University of the Virgin Islands President Dr. David Hall said Thursday that while the university could lose a quarter of its staff because of its Covid-19 vaccine mandate policy, there was no crisis at the institution. He further stated that though UVI's online courses program wasn't a popular offering before the coronavirus pandemic, students who refuse to adhere to the university's mandatory vaccine policy could utilize that option.

"It's really three different blocks, one is what we would call an online course that is a part of our standard curricular. Second, we have the hybrid courses and then third we have the online degree programs which operate very differently because those are shorter terms and asynchronous.

Students have all of those three options available if they don't want to comply," Mr. Hall said.

He added, "We still want them to comply. I had my convocation address to the new students today and I encourage them if they're not vaccinated to get vaccinated. But if in final analysis they still don't want to do it, then those other avenues are available."

Speaking on the number of students who participated in the online programs prior to the pandemic, Mr. Hall said, "Clearly those were exceptions," meaning they were not very popular or even encouraged by the institution. In 2020, however, UVI as well as many other higher learning institutions around the country went 100 percent virtual as governments were still learning the true impacts of Covid-19.

"We had no option. There was no vaccine, there was nothing you could do, and because no educational institution really understood the impact that Covid would have, we were forced to do that.



"It worked... We graduated our regular class and we did the same thing in the fall, and then in the Spring we even started allowing some students to come back on campus," Mr. Hall said.

He added, "So online education can work but it's not the best form of education. If we didn't believe that then we wouldn't have two campuses. We would just have one building and we would teach everything online. I'm not here to criticize universities who operate that way, but that's not UVI. Our preferred way of educating students and developing the leaders in this territory is to have students be on the campus taking courses in-person, and more importantly engaging with students, faculty, etc."

Asked about registration percentages for the online programs, Mr. Hall said because the process was still ongoing, there was little information to provide as of Thursday. However, [based on earlier data](#) that suggested a majority of students were unwilling to get vaccinated, those students, Mr. Hall stated, would most likely participate in an online course offering at UVI.

Asked whether he feared those students might choose another university, Mr. Hall stated, "I'm sure some will. That's an option that students can pursue. But we will not know that until we get through the entire registration period and we can see what courses students are actually enrolled in, and what's the format of those. He said registration would remain open through Monday.

On the employees who choose not to get vaccinated and the impact this would have on the university, Dr. Hall gave the impression that the university would mitigate any fallout without much stress.

"Easy. Anytime in an institution we have 10-15 people on vacation. An institution can operate without having 100 percent of people here all the time," he said. Pressed on whether over 100 employees being separated from UVI would interrupt operations, Mr. Hall added, "It's only 25 percent of the population, and before the grace period is over I think that number will go up."

He added, "My point is you don't have 100 percent of people working all the time. So the easy answer is, for this period when we don't know if they will comply or not, we will find short-term assistance. Once we know they are not going to comply, then we will go out and hire other people." Mr. Hall said the vast majority of UVI courses would not be interrupted.

"There is no crisis here," he said. "There's a challenge but there is no crisis. And if there was I would let you know.... For those who decide to leave, we will find other people."

The UVI president gave no sense of compromise on the vaccine policy. "Why would you compromise on risking people's lives," he stated. He agreed that not all universities in the country held the vaccine mandate policy, but said, "Whether they are or not, we have a responsibility for the individuals who are part of this community and what we should do that's in their best interest. And in a territory where the vaccinations rates are one of the lowest in the Caribbean, I think we should all be sensitive to the fact of what can we do to get more people to be vaccinated."

The U.S. Virgin Islands has some of the highest vaccination rates in the Caribbean, though compared to the U.S. mainland the territory it is among the lowest. And relative to Covid-19 policies of universities on the mainland, those policies vary widely. Some institutions require that students living on campus be vaccinated, while others require that both the student body and staff be vaccinated. Others have no such policy at all.

Indiana University, a prominent institution, is requiring its more than 100,000 students and employees to get vaccinated, and the Supreme Court on Thursday [upheld the policy](#) after it was challenged.

Meanwhile, another distinguished Indiana institution, Purdue University, is strongly encouraging vaccination for students and employees but avoiding mandates.

Relative to the court challenge that the Supreme Court rejected, the students argued they had a constitutionally protected right to “bodily integrity” that was violated by the mandate. However, lower courts stressed that the Indiana University policy included exemptions for religious and medical reasons, and said the university had wide latitude under public health.

“A university will have trouble operating when each student fears that everyone else may be spreading disease,” Judge Frank Easterbrook wrote in a ruling earlier this month for the Seventh U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals (via the Wall Street Journal). “Few people want to return to remote education—and we do not think that the Constitution forces the distance-learning approach on a university that believes vaccination (or masks and frequent testing of the unvaccinated) will make in-person operations safe enough.”