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## Message from Dr. Petillo 12/11/20

The Coronavirus Planning Team  
*Sacred Heart University*

John J. Petillo  
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MESSAGE FROM DR. PETILLO 12/11/20

*Dear members of the Sacred Heart University community,*

*In next Tuesday's coronavirus update, we will share our plans for the opening of school for the spring semester. That will include what we hope the opening will look like, what kind of testing will be needed for your return and more. Of course, all plans are subject to change based on the status of the virus.*

*For today, please read the message below from Dr. Petillo that summarizes the fall semester.*

*Have a great weekend,  
The Coronavirus Planning Team*

Dear students, faculty and staff,

Well, it certainly has been an unusual year. They say that every cloud has a silver lining. The silver lining for me in all that we have fought through this semester is YOU. This year has reinforced in a big way what I already knew about you—you care about others and SHU's mission and values; you are resilient and adaptable; you are creative and find new ways to overcome challenges; you are hard-working and determined in the face of adversity; you are Pioneers in every sense of the word. And, when I say YOU, I am talking about every single student, faculty and staff member.

If it had been a normal year, I would talk about things like our new relationship with the Discovery Museum, the new programs we have developed, the many exciting grants that faculty members have won and even the UB acquisition that came and went. But this year was not business as usual, and, while I am very proud of these great things you accomplished, I am even prouder of what you did while also keeping "business as usual" running smoothly. So, let's talk about that ...

Last spring, Sacred Heart led the way in responding to the pandemic. We were among the first to bring our study abroad students home and pivot to all-online learning. This was only possible because of you and your Pioneer spirit. Supported by our incredible technology team, trainers and academic leaders, our students and staff did everything necessary to make that change with just one day to prepare.

As soon as the semester ended, the work began preparing for the fall. The coronavirus planning team, which had been in place since the beginning of February, grew to include several task forces to tackle the many initiatives needed to ensure a successful on-ground fall semester. Out of those task forces came SHU-Flex, the Pioneer Promise, the new coronavirus signage all over campus, the testing program, contact tracing, isolation and quarantine management, cleaning protocols, the advanced filtering program for buildings, safe mask-free zones and much more.

I don't mean to imply that we did everything perfectly, because we didn't. There were times that we had to learn quickly and make changes on the fly. Because of your patience and your help, we were able to continually adjust. And we learned from our mistakes.

We made the decision early on to communicate frequently. There were times when we were sending communications seven days a week. But that allowed us not only to keep you informed, but to quickly

get your feedback and make any necessary adjustments. In the past 10 months, we have received thousands of emails from you—mostly through our [coronaviruscontactus@sacredheart.edu](mailto:coronaviruscontactus@sacredheart.edu) mailbox. We did our best to respond to those emails within 36 to 48 hours. Your feedback was critical as we navigated through the challenges we were facing. We appreciate your suggestions and support. It is critical to evaluating our operational plans and adjusting as needed. We ask that you continue to share your feedback with us through those channels.

We started out following the testing guidelines that were provided by the state, but we quickly realized that those were too conservative for our needs, and we needed to ramp up the testing program. We did that by finding new testing partners in Physician1/Broad Institute and SalivaDirect. We were one of the first universities to use SalivaDirect, which allowed us to provide a less invasive testing option and to receive results a little more quickly. Midway through the semester, we were regularly testing 50 percent of our undergraduates, including those living off campus, and we were able to expand the program to include commuting graduate students, faculty and staff.

Our contact tracing program was also innovative, which helped to make it effective. Among our innovations was engaging former police officers who were prepared to ask the right questions to determine who was and wasn't a close contact.

Our dashboard was updated daily with the most recent information regarding active cases, testing and more. Throughout the semester, your input and critiques allowed us to regularly tweak and adjust the dashboard reporting to make it more impactful and effective.

On the side of the chapel, the words from Matthew's Gospel remind us to "visit the sick," so we designed our isolation and quarantine facilities in a way that reflects our mission. We housed students at the guest house on West Campus, the Trumbull Marriott and other University-owned housing. When cases rose and more space was needed, we found other outside partners to help. We provided transportation and a concierge service for food, laundry and other needs and did our best to offer live concerts and other entertainment. We also instituted daily check-ins to make sure students in isolation or quarantine were managing emotionally as well as physically. While you may have been temporarily separated from us, we wanted you to know that you remained an essential part of our community.

There were other programs that we implemented along the way, such as the Scent Tents that received national news coverage and invited you to stop and sniff the flowers to test your sense of smell, and the Silent Witness program and [covidconcern@sacredheart.edu](mailto:covidconcern@sacredheart.edu) mailbox that allowed you to report COVID violations after you requested a way to be part of creating a safe environment.

Throughout the semester, we adjusted in all areas based on your feedback and our own data. One area where we were extremely successful was classroom and workplace safety. ***Our contact tracing shows no evidence of transmission in classrooms or offices.*** And, we were fortunate to have no hospitalizations. This is good news and sets us up nicely for another successful semester in the spring.

All this did not happen without great financial cost to the University. We committed to meeting this challenge through a combination of targeted cost reductions in some areas and significant sacrifices in others.

In closing, I go back to what I said at the start of this message—I am grateful for each and every one of you.

- Students, you followed the Pioneer promise and were hugely responsible for the success we had this semester and for the length of time we remained on ground
- Faculty, you adapted to new technology so that SHU-Flex could work. You were patient with our students and helped them through the challenges of the semester
- Staff, you took care of the safety and well-being of our students, and I know most of you worked incredibly long hours as you handled your additional COVID-related tasks along with your regular work

We have proven that we can handle a crisis, and we are well prepared for 2021. As I write this, a team of nursing and health professions students, faculty and staff are preparing to help disseminate the COVID-19 vaccine, and we are exploring the possibility of becoming a regional mass vaccination site. That story was featured on [FOX61](#) yesterday. We continue to be Pioneers. Thank you all.

John J. Petillo, Ph.D.  
President

This message was sent to the following groups: !Campuswide-Students,!Campuswide-Employees