

A Milestone in Concordia's History: Concordia's Mandatory Masking Mandate

In the throes of a pandemic, Concordia has had the responsibility of keeping students safe. It opted for mandatory procedural masks on campus. Was this an effective choice? How are students abiding?

By Andrew Wilcox

The fall of 2021 was a first in Concordia University of Montreal's history: A semester of teaching in the midst of a raging pandemic. The institution faced many challenges in the face of an onslaught of an invisible enemy – the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the COVID-19 disease. The first challenge was to keep students safe and healthy from this highly contagious virus while allowing them to return to campus. Along with other mandates, it opted for mandatory procedural masking. After one whole semester of students returning to campus, we wonder: "Has masking been effective in keeping students safe and healthy?" As a student regularly on campus taking in-person classes, I provide a first-hand perspective and an answer to this question.

Let's first set the stage. In March of 2020, [the WHO issued a global pandemic for the COVID-19 disease](#) and the world suddenly went into lockdown. All nonessential businesses and services closed or went into a remote work model. Universities were considered nonessential, and they shifted to a remote teaching model. This was in response to a novel coronavirus threatening human life: lack of human immunity, high transmission rates, a significant death rate, and [long-term complications from "long-COVID"](#). Not to mention, those who got the worst of it suffer a terrible death through slow [suffocation as the lungs drown themselves](#). It is envisioned as one of the deadliest viruses in human history. We are right to be concerned about student safety.

A year and a half later, in the fall of 2021 universities began to resume their in-person activities. Teaching activities resumed with a hybrid teaching model - a mix of in-person and remote

activities. The return to in-person came with public health safety mandates to reduce transmission: hand sanitation, physical distancing, and mandatory procedural masks on campus.

With the stage set, let's have a closer look at the mandatory masking mandate on Concordia University's campus. Masking has been a general point of contention. After one full semester of this mandate, we might be wondering, "Has it been effective?" "How has it been enforced?" "How have the students handled it?" Before we get to answer these questions, let us start with reviewing some of the scientific research on masking effectiveness for reducing the spread of COVID-19.

The effectiveness of masking on campus for the reduction of COVID-19 transmission is backed by scientific evidence. Rebmann et al. in their [September 2021 article](#) found that out of 378 close contacts of university students, unmasked close contact led to a 40% increase of COVID transmission when compared to masked contact. Further, [a 2020 study](#) by Wang et al. found that close quarters use of masks reduced spread of COVID-19 by 79% when used by all household members. This research shows that masking is highly effective in reducing COVID-19 transmission and it is no wonder why the university adopted it as a masking mandate.

What does a return to campus look like for students? When entering any major building on campus, there are security personnel, sanitizing stations, and free procedural masks. The security is there to ensure students and all campus visitors are wearing proper masks and sanitizing their hands on arrival. They seem to be effective, and I've been asked more than once to sanitize my hands right after I just sanitized them a few steps away.

The institution has also required students to complete a 'mandatory' COVID-19 training, which consists of a short video and a quiz. They notified students through a small portion of their regular update emails to students. In my experience, this hasn't been enforced nor have students paid much attention to it (who reads Concordia emails anyway, right?). I've heard on the official Concordia Discord students asking about the training. Some were unaware that it was required and some not caring about it—and asking such questions as "is it worth taking the time to do?"

Concordia's health mandate and [return-to-campus plan](#) asks students to avoid coming to campus if experiencing any symptoms and to maintain two meters distance from all others in high traffic areas. Students must always wear masks in buildings and there's no physical distancing requirement in classrooms whilst seated. Masks may be removed by instructors more than two meters from students, or by students with two meters distance in eating areas. Students are also "expected to get fully vaccinated", but this is not mandatory. Later in the term, the university announced mandatory vaccine passports for any non-course or academic related activity.

How are students abiding by these mandates? As a Concordia student myself, I have spent my fair share of time in student spaces. I've seen students in class improperly wearing masks. The most common issue I've noticed is not wearing a mask over the nose or not bending the strip over the bridge of their nose to provide a better seal. Students often remove their masks to drink even within 1-2 metres of others. I've seen students in the library not wearing masks at all or wearing them under their noses (masks aren't effective if they don't cover your nose and you're breathing through your nose).

The Hall building 7th floor is a study and eating space, or what the university terms a "break area"—a designated area where students are allowed to eat. What's more, the People's Potato serves free food there several times a week, so there's usually a good number of students during midday. Due to the high campus population, these areas are usually populated with many students. Anyone visiting this break area may see many not wearing masks and sitting shoulder to shoulder. In my experience, about 50% of students aren't properly wearing masks in break or study areas, even when within 1 meter of others. This is very concerning.

The [break area guidelines](#) as per the university are:

- Procedural masks may be removed while eating or drinking.
- Individuals must keep two metres from others.
- Wear a procedure mask unless you are eating or drinking.

They are posted on the many signs around the break areas. Few of these directives are followed by students, and I have not seen them enforced in Hall 7th floor break areas. Security is commonly seen patrolling the library but they are rarely seen in Hall 7th floor.

There appears to be a polarization between students who adhere to the masking mandate and those who could care less for it. For instance, on Concordia's official Discord server, one student says, "I'm ngl [not gonna lie] who cares if your mask is off when you're not near people?" Another replies, "if you make exceptions to the rules people stop taking it seriously." We see one who takes the mandate as lax, and one who takes it seriously and conscientiously. On Concordia's official Reddit, a student posts a question: "Am I allowed to remove my mask when I take a dump in a stall?" This is obviously meant to be a sarcastic remark but shows that some students see masking as a joke or are tired of having to wear a mask all the time. To this joke, one student replies: "Bruh this can't be a question coming from a university student." This is perhaps a little joke during a difficult time, but COVID-19 is no laughing matter.

For more student perspective, I interviewed Andrea, a Concordia undergraduate student. She says, "face masks do work", but that many students don't wear their face mask properly. In general, she notes that most people appear to be wearing a mask all the time. When asked if she thought Concordia was upholding the masking mandate effectively, she replies, "I honestly don't think they are." Yet, her general sentiment towards masking is: "I feel safe."

One issue is perhaps that students are not aware of the specific regulations, so they might feel free to remove their masks when at a distance. As a concerned student, I contacted the Webster Library after noticing many people not wearing masks or wearing them improperly in the library. I first notified them that I could see several students not wearing masks, and some are within two meters of each other. Second, I asked how the library is enforcing the masking mandate. The response I got was in the case of feeling unsafe was to "approach the Ask Us desk [... and] inform library staff and they will react immediately." If staff are not available I should instead contact security. Finally, to the question as how they are enforcing the masking mandate is with "security guards patrolling the library premises to ensure all students are wearing masks, even while seated."

While the email was respectful and kind, it didn't help me much. Given how I've seen students wearing masks, I would be required to file a complaint every five minutes or so. There are just too many students not wearing masks properly for this to be effective. I have seen security patrolling several times but have seen only once security asking someone to properly wear their mask.

Despite all this seeming failure to comply and effectively uphold the masking mandate, how effective has it been for avoiding the spread of COVID-19 on campus?

On September 23rd, 2021, the university sent out an email to all students, faculty, and staff. They stated that "there are 22 reported cases of COVID-19 among people who may have been on campus during the contagious period of the virus. There is no evidence of on-campus transmission at this time." That being, 22 students have been on campus with the disease, but it has not spread on-campus.

On December 2nd, 2021, I contacted Concordia's Environmental Health and Safety (EHS) department for an update of the number of on-campus transmissions. The response I got from an Occupational Health and Infection Control Advisor was very encouraging:

"Based on Concordia's case management team's and public health investigations, no on-campus transmission has been diagnosed this term.

This was only possible by the involvement of all Concordia members in respecting the COVID-19 safety guidelines, and by following the COVID-19 procedures for suspected or confirmed cases."

This is great news.

To attest further to the masking mandate's effectiveness, we can look at [Concordia's dashboard of COVID cases](#). The dashboard details the number of positive cases during the past week,

cumulative cases since the start of the term and the start of the year, and a comparison to cases per 10,000 between Montreal and the Concordia community.

Location	Cases since start of Fall 2021 term	Cases since start of 2021*	Cases per 10,000	Reported on-campus transmission*	Population**	Source
Concordia University	66	90	14.4	0	Approx. 51,253+	COVID-19 dashboard
McGill University	119	220	Approx. 56	≥ 6	Approx. 39,267+	COVID-19 Case Tracker
Montreal Metropolitan Area	Approx. 28,946	Approx. 107,584	78.6	N/A	Approx. 4.1 million	Données COVID-19 au Québec INSPO

*Stats as of November 28th, 2021.

**For McGill and Concordia, does not include faculty and staff.

These are very good rates for Concordia. This shows that whatever Concordia is doing is highly effective in preventing the transmission of COVID-19. The combined use of masks, hand sanitation, social distancing, a blend of remote and in-person teaching, and other methods have been successful in completely preventing the on-campus spread of COVID-19. Despite many students not strictly obeying the mandates, Concordia has done well.

Overall, it has been a tough year and Concordia has acted fast in the face of a highly contagious and deadly disease. Every student may not like the guidelines, but despite some obvious student non-adherence to the rules and ineffective advice from the library, Concordia has done well for itself regarding the masking mandate. There have been no reported cases of on-campus transmission for an entire year. This is something to be proud of.