TO: Boston University Faculty
FROM: Jean Morrison, University Provost and Chief Academic Officer
DATE: August 24, 2020
SUBJECT: Decision Regarding Notification of Positive COVID-19 Test Status

In recent weeks, we have received requests from faculty who would like to be automatically notified in the event that a student in one of their classes tests positive for COVID-19. We have spent a great deal of time considering this request, reviewing the relevant data, looking at best practices at other institutions, reviewing privacy law, and considering what is best for our community.

It is clear from this comprehensive review that the health of our community – faculty, staff, and students – is best served by ensuring the strict privacy of everyone's test status. Therefore, we have decided that we will not share individual-level information about positive test results with other members of our community. The only exceptions are individuals who are identified as a close contact through the University’s contact tracing process and those who need to know in order to sanitize a particular area or assist the recovery of an individual who has tested positive (e.g., moving a residential student to isolation and delivering food/supplies). Faculty will not be notified if a student in their class has tested positive unless they are deemed to be a close contact through the contact tracing effort. In addition, the University will not share information about individual test results with leaders of schools or colleges. We will continue to publish University-wide testing data through our public dashboard.

As you all know, one of the key aspects of our public health guidelines is the process of contact tracing that occurs after a positive test result. The efficacy of contact tracing is entirely dependent on the accuracy of the data shared by the individual who has tested positive. If students do not feel their privacy is protected, they may be less likely to fully and honestly participate in contact tracing, putting us all at higher risk. While I understand the desire to seek out this information about your students, an effective contact tracing process requires a level of trust that we feel cannot be maintained if students know their testing status will be revealed to faculty or staff.

I know this decision will be a disappointment to some of you, but I hope that you understand that we have made this decision with the ultimate goal of keeping all faculty, staff, and students as safe as possible.