The below QnA was generated from the UIS Listening Session on June 25, 2021, regarding the Student Vaccine Requirement. Answers were provided by Dr. Vidya Sundareshan, interim chief of the Division of Infectious Diseases at SIU School of Medicine, or other sources as cited.

Q. Are the available COVID-19 vaccines safe since they're not yet FDA approved and are considered emergency use?

A. Yes, they are very safe. All of the COVID-19 vaccines, including those using mRNA, were created with technology that already existed in response to prior virus outbreaks, and the process to create and vet these vaccines has been rigorous. Each vaccine went through all four required phases of the vaccine development process, and, most importantly, no corners we cut. This vaccine has been heavily studied, and we have more than enough data available for FDA approval. Now, we are essentially waiting on the completion of paperwork to convert it from emergency-use status to full approval.

Q. If I already had COVID-19, why should I still get vaccinated?

A. Natural antibodies appear to last only a few months, sometimes a little longer if the affected individual had a strong response (became very sick). Antibodies from vaccines last at least a year, and they provide better protection from variants, such as the highly contagious Delta variant, than natural antibodies.

Q. Why should younger people be vaccinated?

A. Many of the newer cases we are seeing are school-aged populations who are not vaccinated. Though a younger person has a lower risk of severe symptoms if they contract COVID-19, they are still susceptible to becoming seriously ill and/or suffering from lingering, potentially debilitating side effects that can affect their quality of life.

   By becoming vaccinated, you are also making a commitment to the health of your community — peers, coworkers, family, friends, etc. — by contributing to herd immunity through vaccination. An increased number

of vaccinated community members decreases the likelihood of outbreaks AND the possibilities for variants. The Delta variant, which is now spreading through the U.S., is considered at least 60% more transmissible than prior variants, is greatly affecting communities with lower vaccination rates, infecting higher numbers of younger individuals and causing more serious illness.

Q. Has anyone been hospitalized from a reaction to a vaccine?

A. A very small percentage of the vaccinated population has reported severe adverse reactions requiring hospitalization. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is using a self-reporting app (VAERS) to track side effects. The most commonly reported side effects are redness at the injection sight, soreness in the arm, fatigue, etc., which are very mild compared to symptoms of COVID-19.

   It is important to note that VAERS data does not indicate a direct correlation to a vaccine. From its website: "VAERS accepts reports from anyone. Patients, parents, caregivers and healthcare providers are encouraged to report adverse events after vaccination to VAERS even if it is not clear that the vaccine caused the adverse event."

Q. Have people gotten COVID-19 after getting the vaccine?

A. Yes, there have been some breakthrough cases. Typically, people who contract COVID-19 after being fully vaccinated were immunocompromised from other conditions. However, many of these cases were low- or asymptomatic, recovered quickly and typically were not hospitalized. Additionally, research is showing that vaccinated individuals who contract COVID-19 typically do not carry a large enough viral load to pass along the virus to others.