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VCU students speak about COVID-19 and class modalities on Jan. 26 at the student walk out organized by Walkout VCU. Photo by Isaiah Mamo.

'IT'S JUST UNACCEPTABLE'

VCU RESCINDS VACCINE MANDATE FOLLOWING EXECUTIVE ORDER, ATTORNEY GENERAL OPINION

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VCU ENDED ITS POLICY REQUIRING FACULTY and students to receive the COVID-19 and booster vaccine on Jan. 31, according to the ONE VCU Together Website.

"Our high vaccination rates and ongoing mitigation efforts – combined with the recent legal opinion from the Attorney General for the Commonwealth that COVID-19 vaccines cannot be required for students – has led VCU to end requiring student vaccinations and boosters for the spring semester," according to an email from ONE VCU Together.

VCU decided to lift the vaccination requirement on students seven days after Attorney General Jason Miyares gave a legal opinion about the requirement at the request of Gov. Glenn Youngkin.

"I conclude that, absent specific authority conferred by the General Assembly, public institutions of higher education in Virginia may not require vaccination against COVID-19 as a general condition of students' enrollment or in-person attendance," the opinion states.

Before ending the vaccination policy for students, the university ended the policy for faculty, following the executive order issued by Youngkin.

The executive order, signed by Youngkin on Jan. 15, lifted vaccine mandates for state employees and the requirement of disclosing of COVID-19 vaccination information to employers. As a state institution, VCU falls under this order.

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> **Gian Tigreros,**
> Junior theater technical production student

Some students have expressed their frustration about the new policies. Walkout VCU, a student run organization, has been advocating for all classes to offer a hybrid option during the spring semester. The organization has a petition on change.org that currently has 1,110 signatures as of Feb. 1 at 9:30 p.m.

Gian Tigreros, a junior studying theater technical production and an organizer of Walkout VCU, said VCU changing its vaccination policy is one of many reasons they are asking for hybrid options.

"I disagree with the court's opinion and VCU's decision to follow it. It's simply an opinion and sure, VCU can follow it and can put us all at risk. We are going to fight against it," Tigreros said. "Or VCU could do the right thing and they can continue to require students and faculty to be vaccinated."

Walkout VCU organized a student walk out on Jan. 26, before Miyares' opinion was released, to voice its concerns over the university's COVID-19 response. Around 30 students gathered and walked around campus with signs that read: the students of VCU request that the admin offer a hybrid option for all spring 2022 classes.

At the walk out, Tigreros said they are concerned for their own health and are frustrated with VCU's COVID-19 policies in light of the Omicron variant.

"When so many students are asking for a hybrid option and they're just not listening to us. It's just unacceptable," Tigreros said. "This is our school, we're paying tuition. It's not like we just don't want to go to class, it's for our health."

Bo Belotti, a senior who attended the walkout said he disagreed with Governor Youngkin's COVID-19 response.

"I think that he's putting out really divisive plans that hyper-politicize public health issues that never needed to be political," Belotti said. "I think it's a grave mistake on the American political sphere to have ever made it like a political game or a political talking point."

VCU spokesperson Michael Porter said decisions on class operations are made by the Public Health Response team, when asked about his thoughts on students advocating for hybrid classes.

"The PHRT considers the prevalence of COVID-19 on campus and in the community, the availability of testing, available hospital space in the region and the availability of space on campus for student isolation and quarantine," Porter stated.

VCU still encourages its students and faculty to get vaccinated and receive their boosters according to the ONE VCU Together website.

The university will continue voluntary testing for free for all employees and students. Masks will still be required indoors, according to the website.

Art studio receives grant to raise vaccine awareness within Richmond community

Richmond's Studio Two Three recently received a grant to raise COVID-19 vaccine awareness through art. Photo by Lily Doshi