

EDUCATION

What will a fall semester during a pandemic look like at Delaware's universities?

Lindsay Weber Delaware News Journal

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As Delaware's two largest universities plan to reopen in-person for the fall semester, the schools are grappling to uphold their commitment to keeping students safe as the coronavirus pandemic surges across the United States.

Though the colleges can issue guideline after guideline, the responsibility largely falls on students to practice safe social distancing measures and prevent an outbreak on campus.

The biggest question: Can they do it?

Student life in a pandemic

Brandon Wright, a sophomore engineering major at Delaware State University, will be a resident assistant this fall. It is up to him to acclimate new students to a freshman experience that will look much different than his own.

“I don't know how I could really ease other people's concerns when I'm concerned myself, to be honest,” Wright said.

One of Wright's biggest concerns is that students will fail to adequately socially distance. He doesn't trust that college-age students will be able to resist the temptation of socializing once reunited on campus for the first time since March.

Delaware State's Fall semester: Hoping to rely on mass COVID-19 testing, Delaware State University releases plans to reopen

Wright isn't the only one.

Emma Gogol is a junior political science major at the University of Delaware. She is living in Newark for the summer, and said she is already seeing student parties across town that do not adhere to social distancing measures. She isn't confident that the university can prevent students from unsafely socializing.

"The university can only control so much," Gogol said.

Ayoluuwa Fisher, a senior nursing major at Delaware State, is also seeing her peers fail to adhere to social distancing measures.

"[Students] still do go out and they do travel," Fisher said. "So if they're doing that now, when they get back to school, they might get together in large groups."

In Delaware, the 18-34 age group now accounts for the highest percentage of coronavirus cases statewide. Experts speculate that with states reopening, more young people are choosing to leave home to socialize, while older people continue to stay home to avoid catching the virus.

Though young people are less at risk for death and severe illness from COVID-19, a rise in cases among young people poses a problem when those young people transmit the virus to vulnerable populations. In the context of Delaware colleges, this may mean students transmitting the virus to staff, professors, or other residents of Newark or Dover.

Tricia Wachtendorf, a sociology professor and director of the University of Delaware's Disaster Research Center, which specializes in social behavior during disasters, said the key to a safe fall semester will be altered social norms that must be reinforced regularly and often, rather than a system that relies on punishing students who break the rules.

Return to campus: University of Delaware to resume on-campus classes in fall

This guidance is in line with other schools that have established a "social contract" for their incoming students.

Princeton University, for example, has asked that students voluntarily agree not to host off-campus guests in their campus residence and to not hold any sort of mass social events.

Preventing an outbreak

Still, some are sounding the alarm that no amount of contracts or rules will be enough to prevent a mass outbreak on campuses across the country. Several public health researchers

wrote in a recent op-ed that even with preventative measures in place, college campuses create “fertile conditions” for COVID-19 to spread.

“There are only so many factors that anyone can control at one time,” said Jennifer Horney, founding director of the University of Delaware’s epidemiology department. “We can put in place a lot of preventative measures ... but there's still a lot of moving parts.”

A cause for concern for colleges in the fall, she said, is widespread community transmission of COVID-19 on campus.

On the other hand, if there are cases that can be traced back to specific events, universities may be able to manage the spread.

“With any disease, obviously a cluster is a concern, but in a sense from an epidemiology perspective, I would be less concerned about a cluster where we knew exactly the shared exposure that everyone had, [rather] than more general widespread community transmission,” Horney said.

Horney pointed out that Delaware is seeing lower rates of community transmission than many other states seeing large spikes, which may put Delaware’s universities in a better position to manage the spread of coronavirus.

Delaware's pandemic: Tracking coronavirus cases in Delaware

The University of Delaware has said they plan to proactively test and contact trace coronavirus cases on campus, but have not yet released details.

Delaware State University, alternatively, is partnering with the nonprofit Testing For America to test students on campus weekly.

Though students shoulder a large responsibility to prevent outbreaks, colleges must also try to deliver on their promise of a safe and successful semester.

“We won't see the same forgiveness in the fall that we saw this summer,” Wachtendorf said. “There will be immense pressure on schools to get it right.”

“During a new or a new-ish disaster, people can be very forgiving of organizations for having to pivot,” she added. “We saw considerable empathy for teachers and professors having to suddenly move everything online. ... Come fall, the expectations will be much higher.”

For professors, that pressure may mean appearing resilient for their students even when they

“I have to be somewhat more performative in terms of keeping a happy face when I may not be feeling so great,” said Lindsay Hoffman, a communications professor at the University of Delaware. “It’s hard emotionally for professors, too.”

Neither Delaware State University nor University of Delaware will discount tuition in light of the pandemic.

UD will freeze tuition however, meaning it will not increase during the 2020-2021 academic year. Still, students will be paying full price for the coming semester, putting added pressure on professors and administrators to give students the experience they are paying for.

Wright, a DSU student, said that his learning suffered due to the abrupt transition to online teaching in mid-March, but he understands why the school was under-prepared.

"I'm pretty sure nobody ever put in a contingency plan for a pandemic," he said.

He has higher hopes for this coming semester that classes will go smoothly and the school will be ready.

"I think [the semester] will turn out pretty well as long as everybody complies," Wright said. "The administration seems to be doing a good job on their part, so the rest of it really comes down to the students."

Gogol, too, hopes that professors will be more prepared than they were in the fall, even if that means a switch to remote instruction.

"Now that we have that time to plan if we have to do online classes, I want them to be revamped," Gogol said. "I'm not just here to get good grades, I actually want to make the most of my time here academically."

Neither Gogol, Wright nor Fisher are planning to take a leave of absence next semester, instead choosing to ride out what will undoubtedly be an unusual fall for students across the state. They all said they plan to stick to seeing their close friends and avoid contact with too many other students.

“It was really lonely last semester,” Gogol said. “Even if it's from six feet away, it will be nice to see my friends not through a screen.”

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